Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall

with Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, "Introduction to the Symposium on Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall"; Paul A. Macdonald, Jr., "In Defense of Aquinas's Adam: Original Justice, the Fall, and Evolution"; Julie Loveland Swanstrom, "Aquinas on Sin, Essence, and Change: Applying the Reasoning on Women to Evolution in Aquinas"; Hans Madueme, "The Theological Problem with Evolution"; Austin M. Freeman, "The Author of the Epic: Tolkien, Evolution, and God's Story"; and Jack Mulder, Jr., "Original Sin, Racism, and Epistemologies of Ignorance."

THE AUTHOR OF THE EPIC: TOLKIEN, EVOLUTION, AND GOD'S STORY

by Austin M. Freeman

Abstract. I argue that, because God is the author of history and has a purpose for his creation, evolution has a plot and can be analyzed with tools drawn from literary criticism. This necessitates engagement with the "epic of evolution" genre of scientific literature. I survey several prominent versions of the epic and distinguish between a purely naturalistic epic of evolution and a goal-oriented Christian epic of evolution (CEE). In dealing with CEE, I use the thought of J. R. R. Tolkien, along with Kevin Vanhoozer and Dorothy Sayers, to discuss the ways in which we can theologically legitimate speaking of God as the "author" of evolutionary history.

Keywords: author; epic of evolution; evolution; Lord of the Rings; narrative; Tolkien; Kevin J. Vanhoozer

In this article, I argue that evolution has a plot.[1] This plot is not a poststructuralist imposition onto reality, but an element of reality itself. Engaging with the idea of the "epic of evolution," I distinguish between a naturalistic epic of evolution (NEE) and a theistic, specifically Christian epic of evolution (CEE). After a survey of the genre of evolutionary epic, I offer a way in which a Christian version of such an epic can legitimately be grounded. I assert that, per Vanhoozer, Tolkien, Sayers, and others, God may be viewed as the Author of reality: God interacts with the world not in a zero-sum game, as a subject among other subjects, but on a higher noncompetitive level. As such, the story of the world unfolds in a causally closed system, as a good story does, and yet certain events

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may act as points of disclosure that reveal the shape of plot more than others.[2] A felicitous event, an unlikely outcome, may lead to highly significant developments that open up the world to new possibilities and manifestations of meaning. By attending to the way in which reality displays such meaning, we gain insight into the plot of the world's story. The book of nature may be read and analyzed with tools similar to that of literary criticism.

The Epic of Evolution: A Survey

The term "epic of evolution" was introduced by sociobiologist E. O. Wilson (1978). Megill (2016) notes that the concept actually precedes Wilson, and offers the following three features as its chief characteristics:

(1) A fixation on looking at human beings in terms of their connection to biological factors, and in many instances also in terms of their connection to the evolution of the physical universe going back to its beginnings.
(2) An aspiration toward offering, not the whole story of the world and of human beings, but the outlines of that story, or at least a set of theoretical propositions on the basis of which one might construct such a story, or story outline.
(3) An insistence on seeing the projected narrative of the world and of human beings as unified and coherent such that, even when that narrative seems to rupture, the basic determining factors continue to operate and the events of the narrative continue to constitute a process, and not simply a collection of discontinuous happenings (Megill 2016, 24).

We might summarize the evolutionary epic as concerned with origins, epochs, and continuity. I would add to this a certain willingness to deploy poetic or affective language on behalf of scientific description. This last factor arises from a recognition that the impulse toward meaning-making is a natural and even desirable element in human experience.

Megill's definition proffers nothing ostensibly hostile to religious faith. Indeed, many Christians and other theists have adopted versions of the epic of evolution. The major difference, however, between the CEE and the purely NEE lies in NEE's rejection of any objective teleology. By definition, the actual chain of evolutionary events in the world has neither purpose nor direction.[3] As a result, NEE must necessarily mean a particular sort of story told by humans, and not any sort of objective process. CEE, on the other hand, may refer either to the story as told by humans (CEE-H) *or* to the events themselves, the "story" as God directs it

(CEE-G). This becomes evident when we skim through some of the versions of the epic on offer.[4]

Megill traces the first of these epics to Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. Chambers himself asserts that his book is to his knowledge "the first attempt to connect the natural sciences into a history of creation" ([1844] 1887, 284). He divides his history into periods corresponding to geological eras, beginning with the nebular hypothesis and concluding with Victorian anthropology. Chambers, a deist, concludes his work by identifying the plot devices of natural law and progress as the motive for the fulfillment of humanity's destiny. He also offers a sort of theodicy based on the constancy of natural law, with the added conclusion that God prioritizes the species over the individual ([1844] 1887, 265–83).

Gillian Beer has masterfully shown how Darwin's *Origin* (1859) itself draws upon mythological tools, especially the popular motifs of growth and transformation ([1983] 2009, 97). She outlines how *Origin* recasts several mythical tropes in light of evolutionary theory:

> Darwinian theory takes up elements from older orders and particularly from recurrent mythic themes such as transformation and metamorphosis. It retains the idea of … the Great Mother, in its figuring of Nature. It rearranges the elements of creation myths, for example substituting the ocean for the garden but retaining the idea of the 'single progenitor'—though now an uncouth progenitor hard to acknowledge as kin. It foregrounds the concept of kin—and aroused many of the same dreads as fairy-tale in its insistence on the obligations of kinship, and the interdependence between beauty and beast. (Beer [1983] 2009, 7)

In Beer's view, Darwin's "romantic materialism" can be linked with a "profound imaginative longing" common to his contemporaries. The concrete particular ruled by incessant change takes ideological precedence over the immutable abstract. This epic is also a tragedy, however, ruled by an "irretrievable loss" so profound that even the memory of former states dissolves away ([1983] 2009, 37).

Alfred Russel Wallace, simultaneous discoverer of natural selection alongside Darwin, advocates for a decidedly non-Christian yet ultimately supernatural and providentialist understanding of a great sweep of progress akin to the epic of evolution. The ultimate purpose of cosmic and natural history is here "the development of mankind for an enduring spiritual existence" (Wallace 1911, 299). His account highlights three elements: "human exceptionalism, humanity's cosmic significance, and an overarching hierarchy of angelic orders arranged to carry out a divine plan" (Flannery 2020, 17). For Wallace, the endless variety of the natural world exists to excite wonder, admiration, and curiosity, important bases for our mental development.

Roman Catholic priest and scientist Teilhard de Chardin argues (1930s [1955]) that all matter has a mental or spiritual component (a "within") that drives its ever-increasing organization. He crafts a story beginning with geological time and moving through the origin of life and its expansion into the birth of thought and the creation of the "noosphere" or world of thought. This noosphere will create a sort of super-organism (the Omega Point), which in theological terms corresponds to a point of final deification, in which the universe is fully united with the Alpha and Omega, Jesus Christ.

E. O. Wilson ([1978] 2004) is the first to actually coin the term "epic of evolution." He admits that human beings are meaning-makers, and that the religious—what Wilson, like Tolkien, names the mythopoeic—impulse is an inescapable part of our biology. As such, he says, scientific materialism needs not to quash this impulse, which is impossible, but to harness and direct it toward creating a myth founded upon the way the world actually works. Wilson writes:

> The core of scientific materialism is the evolutionary epic. Let me repeat its minimum claims: that the laws of the physical sciences are consistent with those of the biological and social sciences and can be linked in chains of causal explanation; that life and mind have a physical basis; that the world as we know it has evolved from earlier worlds obedient to the same laws; and that the visible universe today is everywhere subject to these materialist explanations. The epic can be indefinitely strengthened up and down the line, but its most sweeping assertions cannot be proved with finality. What I am suggesting, in the end, is that the evolutionary epic is probably the best myth we will ever have. (Wilson [1978] 2004, 201)

The evolutionary picture revealed by science has not been accepted by the world at large because it lacks advocates who can present it in mythological terms, with all the beauty and dignity that religion provides and that the human mind needs, he says.

In large part advocates of the evolutionary epic have followed Wilson. Religious naturalists take up the gauntlet Wilson throws down, and craft accounts of natural history that embrace mythological frameworks and attempt to engraft a sense of the "sacred" to biology and to evolutionary history. Loyal Rue accepts Wilson's dictum that humans need myths, and in his later work seeks "to participate in the important work of constructing a new wisdom tradition that couples an evolutionary cosmology to an ecocentric morality" (2000, xiii). He summarizes the story in stages: energy to matter, galaxies, stars, heavy atoms, planets, molecules, cells, species, ecosystems, thought, and culture. "This epic of evolution is the biggest of all pictures, the narrative context for all our thinking about who we are, where we have come from, and how we should live. It is the ultimate account of how things are, and is therefore the essential foundation for discourse about which things matter" (2000, xii). Rue determines that

this object of ultimate concern for life is simply living. Humans construct meaning (including religious meaning) as a survival strategy, either for the individual or for the tribe (2000, 100).

Goodenough, heavily influenced by Rue, also divides the epic into several chronological stages (1998, xix–xx). For each of these, she substitutes a religious naturalist form of a traditional theological doctrine. The principles of chemistry and the unlikely origins of life stand in for miracle, for instance. Speciation provides various senses of distinctiveness, with the understanding that I am special and unique. Goodenough also endorses the three principles of gratitude, reverence, and the credo of continuation of the whole system.

Chaisson, an astrophysicist, likewise divides his epic into several epochs: particle, galaxy, star, planet, chemical, biological, cultural, and the forthcoming "ethical" epoch. For him, change is the fundamental principle. Yet, Chaisson claims that "sentient life discovers a meaning, a relevance to cosmic evolution, an underlying motive for universal change" (2005, 441). When we become smart enough to consider ourselves, we find "quite literally … that we are more than products of the Universe, more than life in the cosmos. We are agents of the Universe—animated, cultural instruments commissioned by the Universe to study itself" (2005, 442).

More recent theists of varying stripes have also embraced the epic of evolution (Hefner 2012; Curran 2016; Wagner 2019). Aside from Teilhard de Chardin, the Roman Catholic theologian John Haught is probably the foremost exponent, but other scholars have taken up the concept and adapted it to Christian purposes (cf. 2009). Indeed, Christians need not reject the evolutionary epic, merely a purposeless version of it (NEE). For a Christian committed to the doctrine of creation, the history of evolution is the storyline of God's book of nature (CEE-G).[5] CEE-H, our own varying accounts of this story, must then involve recognizing and articulating the plot of the universe in a legitimate way. And the only way to do that is to accept that this plot has an Author. Meaning is inescapably personal; it arises only from minds and persons. The only way to get meaning out of evolution is to accept that there is someone somewhere who means something by it. The world is the creative work of the divine Author, redolent with purpose.

If we are serious about this claim, then we can use not only the tools of the hard sciences, but also those of narrative analysis and even literary criticism in order to find that meaning. These tools are, in fact, the best suited to uphold not only the causal integrity of the natural world (and therefore of the natural sciences), but also the insistence that God is doing something in the universe, as will become clear below. Let us, then, ask of the evolutionary epic the sort of questions that literary critics ask about narrative.[6]

The Authorial Analogy: Tolkien, Vanhoozer, Sayers, and the Universe as Literature

In what follows, I confine myself only to CEE, in both senses. Non-theists will not and need not follow my reasoning; this is not an apologetic argument. I am, furthermore, fully aware that we are moving into some very deep scholarly waters, the confluence of many different streams of academic discussions—on science and religion, narrative, divine action, and divine providence and concurrence, to name a few. The broadest category is that of divine action within the world, and this is the area in which the most specific engagement with the sciences usually occurs.[7] Within the ambit of divine action we find the more specific doctrine of providence, which theologians divide into three categories: God *governs* or guides the world, *sustains* it in existence from moment to moment, and *concurs* with the free actions of agents within it.[8] All three elements of providence can raise questions about causality, but God's concurrence, or what in other discussions is called double agency, is particularly thorny.[9] This essay will approach the problem by way of narrative theory, subsuming all these categories under the ruling paradigm of divine authorship.[10]

The following treatment will focus on J. R. R. Tolkien in order to circumscribe the issue rather sharply, and will buttress Tolkien's writing with the theological work of Kevin Vanhoozer.[11] For Tolkien, our creative impulses, not least our impulses to craft stories, stem from the *imago Dei*—we make because we are in the image of the Maker, as he puts it in his poem "Mythopoeia" (Tolkien [1964] 2001).[12] He is fascinated by the abundant and intricate correspondences between human creative processes and the insights they can provide into God's own creative work.[13] Tolkien deploys the image of authorship as his primary paradigm for God's relationship to the world—what Vanhoozer in his own work labels the *analogia auctoris*.[14] Such an analogy introduces a distinction between a subsidiary ("subcreated") world *inside* the text and the primary world *outside* of the text, and thus offers a good parallel to the God who exists outside of creation and the finite, ontologically inferior creatures who exist within it.

Inside and Outside

Vanhoozer explains a few such similarities. "As Author, God is not limited by his created work … Neither is the Author's time that of the text's: one authorial day is like a character's thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8). Further, the Author can open the text to any page, flip back and forth at will. Finally, the divine playwright has the freedom to write himself into the drama of human history: God's Word and Spirit are in created time but not of it" (2010, 323). Vanhoozer thus concludes, "The rubric of authorship enables us better to conceive (1) the absolute distinction between Creator and

creation; (2) the triune God whose being is a being-in-communicative action; and (3) God's relation to the world, and to Scripture, in terms of an 'economy of communication'" (2010, 26).

For Vanhoozer, as for Tolkien (1993, 322), God's authorial presence is both transcendent and immanent, since He authors the world in at least three ways: "God authors the created order as a whole from the 'outside' [transcendence] … God authors history from within by speaking and acting [immanence] … God authors Scripture by speaking and acting in, with, and through human authors who embody his voice at diverse times and places and in diverse manners" (2010, 349). This "outsideness," this transcendence of the world of the text, is in fact the precondition for God's authorial immanence. "'Outsideness' names the asymmetrical, nonreciprocal boundary that distinguishes author from hero and that is consequently an aspect of their relationship. As such, it stands in for transcendence and immanence alike. [It] is a necessary condition for the particular dialogue that characterizes the author-hero relation. Specifically, the author is outside the hero with respect to space, time, and the meaning of the whole" (2010, 325).

We can apply this inside/outside distinction to causality. Inside the text, any good story proceeds as an orderly sequence of cause and effect, with each event proceeding logically and almost inevitably from the previous event. A good story follows laws, whether the laws of characterization or of narrative. One can trace the entire narrative shape of *The Lord of the Rings* back to the creation of the universe and not find a single instance in which Tolkien appears, or a single place in which the answer to the question "Why did this happen?" is simply, "The author did it." For example: how is the Ring destroyed? Gollum falls into the fire with it. Why does Gollum do that? Because he took it from Frodo. Why did he take it from Frodo? Because Frodo exercised mercy and left him alive. We can trace that causal chain, uninterrupted, back to page one. Why does Gandalf fail to appear when the hobbits leave the Shire? Because he has been captured by Saruman. Why is Minas Tirith rescued from siege? Because the Rohirrim and Aragorn's reinforcements arrive.

The answer to all of these questions are simultaneously never and always "because Tolkien wanted it that way." *Within* the world of the story, there is a causal integrity to everything such that an appeal to authorial intervention is unnecessary; this is what we might call "inside causality." But *outside* the story, the author is always and everywhere directing events toward a desired conclusion.[15] Tolkien is on one level always absent, while on another level he is always present.[16] Why does Gandalf fail to appear when the hobbits leave the Shire? Because Tolkien needed the hobbits to have some adventures and some real peril before reaching Rivendell, and this would have been impossible if they had been protected by the Wizard. This we can label "outside causality." As with the debates between

divine sovereignty and human free will, one gets into trouble when one equivocates on the level of causality under discussion.[17]

We should be cautious, of course, of beginning to read the book of nature as an allegory. The logic of events inside the story have their own causal integrity, and we should resist the temptation to reduce explanatory scope to one level or the other. Tolkien was famously frustrated with readers trying to figure out what *The Lord of the Rings* was "really" about (e.g., 1981, 267, though there are multiple examples). Tolkien's friend Dorothy Sayers echoes him: "To persist in asking, as so many of us do, 'What did you mean by this book?' is to invite bafflement: the book itself is what the writer means" ([1941] 1956, 127). Nature, and CEE-G, carry their own meanings, and do not require "outside" causal reasoning as a sort of magic decoder ring, but this does not entail that we cannot discern an "outside" structure to their events, nor it does not mean that the Author can give no insight into His works.

But how might God do this? More than this, how are we, as limited and fallible human agents, to understand the meaning of the book of nature as a whole if we are stuck somewhere inside it? We are ourselves characters in CEE-G, so how could we have access to outside causality of any sort?

Finding the Plot

Sayers offers one possible response. We can speak of a particular book as "complete," or of a writer's "complete works." But she acknowledges that we cannot, as yet, do so of God's work in nature. "We consider God as a living author, whose span of activity extends infinitely beyond our racial memory in both directions. We never see His great work finished." But she nevertheless insists that we can discern a structure to the whole, if we are keen. "Here and there we seem to recognize something which looks like the end of a chapter or the last page of a volume; or an episode presents itself to us as having a kind of completeness and unity in itself" (Sayers [1941] 1956, 65). Is the K-Pg boundary a chapter break, we wonder?[18] Sayers continues the analogy. "We are thus considering the temporal universe as one of those great serial works of which instalments appear from time to time, all related to a central idea whose completeness is not yet manifest to the reader. Within the framework of its diversity are many minor and partial unities—of plot, of episode, and of character" (Sayers [1941] 1956, 65–66). Here, we might draw parallel with those epochs demarcated by Chaisson, de Chardin, and others: the emergence of life, of consciousness, of technology, and so on, bear real markers of progress and of qualitative distinction from what has gone before.[19]

This is all subjective, however, and while it might provide good grist for CEE-H, it still leaves CEE-G mysterious. We need some legitimate basis for "aesthetic consummation—the process by which authors confer

wholeness, and therefore meaning, on the lives of their heroes" (Vanhoozer 2010, 326). Tolkien provides such a basis through an appeal to miracles. Tolkien defines a miracle as the production of a reality "which could not be deduced even from a complete knowledge of the previous past, but which being real become[s] part of the effective past for all subsequent time" (1981, 234). But, for our present purposes, we will restrict ourselves to the literal sense of the New Testament word *semeion*, a sign. Whether supernatural in a radical sense or "only" a marked way of divine communication not itself requiring special divine manipulation of the laws of nature, Tolkien situates these signs in relation to their source, and as a means of revealing the shape of the plot of history. Miracle is for him a method by which God shines light onto the tapestry of nature, and gives observers otherwise lacking in proper perspective a hint as to what it depicts.

"Behold," he writes, "it is by the chinks in the wall that light comes through, whereby men become aware of the light and therein perceive the wall and how it stands. The veil is woven, and each thread goes an appointed course, tracing a design; yet the tissue is not impenetrable, or the design would not be guessed; and if the design were not guessed, the veil would not be perceived, and all would dwell in darkness" (Tolkien 1987a, 48). God's activity here does not cut the thread or throw down the wall; instead, it illuminates them. Our perception of God's presence in general—not simply through miracle—accomplishes much the same thing.

Tolkien specifically emphasizes a particular form of miracle, which he calls a "eucatastrophe," or good catastrophe. He defines this as a "sudden joyous 'turn' … a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur."[20] When the Eagles arrive at the climax of *The Hobbit*, for example, the reader's heart exults at the simultaneous shock and narrative fittingness of the surprise.[21] Such a reversal "does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (Tolkien 2014, 75). Tolkien speaks very highly indeed of such instances, offering the possibility that they can evoke a desire that "for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through" (2014, 76).

Such a moment affects us the way it does, Tolkien argues, because it is "a sudden glimpse of Truth." He deliberately contrasts this sensation of relief against the stifling mechanism of pure nature. "Your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back. It perceives—if the story has literary 'truth' on the second plane … that this is indeed how

things really do work in the Great World for which our nature is made." It is the role of the Resurrection (as "Primary Miracle") and of the other signs to provide "not only that sudden glimpse of the truth behind the apparent Anankê of our world, but a glimpse that is actually a ray of light through the very chinks of the universe about us" (Tolkien 1981, 109–10). Now, not all eucatastrophes are miracles, and not all miracles are eucatastrophes, but where the two overlap, we find important plot points in CEE-G.[22]

The Resurrection, both primary miracle and primary eucatastrophe, resultantly throws the plot of CEE-G into its proper light. For Tolkien, it is in a sense the climax of the universe (2014, 77–79).[23] Sayers too writes, "There is one episode [of history] in particular to which Christianity draws [the reader's] attention. The leading part in this was played, it is alleged, by the Author, who presents it as a brief epitome of the plan of the whole work. If we ask, 'What kind of play is this that we are acting?' the answer put forward is: 'Well, it is this kind of play'" ([1941] 1956, 127). Evolutionary events find their meaning in reference to this central plot point.

Here is where NEE and CEE differ substantially: the rise of *Homo sapiens* and their cultural developments are not happenstance but purposeful, and they aim toward the accomplishment of this particular purpose. In a lesser vein, we can look backward from inside the text of history and begin to discern telling features of the plot through their relation to its climax. Vanhoozer appeals to Pannenberg's historicism to demonstrate much the same thing (2009, 264).

But what of our other objection? There seems no way for Frodo, for instance, to find out that he is a character in a story written by J. R. R. Tolkien, and thus to access any sort of outside causality. He would only ever seem to know causality from the inside.[24] Tolkien, however, relates how an author can cross the boundary between the inside and outside of a text. In a discussion between an Elf and a human woman on the subject of God's redemption of the fallen world, Tolkien writes (1993, 322): "'How could Eru enter into the thing that He has made, and than which He is beyond measure greater? Can the singer enter into his tale or the designer into his picture?' 'He is already in it, as well as outside,' said Finrod. 'But indeed the "in-dwelling" and the "out-living" are not in the same mode …. even if He in Himself were to enter in, He must still remain also as He is: the Author without.'" Vanhoozer calls this an authorial incarnation (Vanhoozer 2010, 356, 489).

In short, the author can write himself into the story as a character, and say and do things that the characters can understand.[25] We, then, as characters inside of God's story, now have access to another level of meaning outside of the story, which we can use to thicken our interpretation of the world. There is here a bridge to a mode of knowledge,

otherwise inaccessible, between the inside and outside causality of our narrative.

This is the key insight that revelation gives us. Namely, in Christ we know the point of the story. We know who the main character is: the Son of God. We know the climax of the narrative: the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. The Author has told us (cf. Vanhoozer 2010, 302–303). Based on this form of revelation, and on the actions and history of this character, we receive a privileged account of the whole work. This includes the very fact of concurrent providence itself, and the mode by which God works in, through, and under the activities of His creation. What would otherwise be merely a supposal is, subsequent to divine revelation, a certainty. God writes Himself into the story, proves His identity, shares His plan, and as a result allows His characters to reason consistently about plot and purpose.

As a result, CEE-H can read natural history in light of the biblical picture. We can, from this perspective, apply criteria of truth, goodness, and beauty to natural events on the assumption that they are an intended part of God's plan (CEE-G).[26] The book of nature and the book of revelation are ultimately the same story, remember. When one asks why the mechanism of the eye emerged, it is just as permissible to say that it is because God wanted us to be able to experience beauty in that particular way (outside causality) as it is to give an evolutionary account of the development of the cornea (inside causality).[27]

Toward an Aesthetic Theodicy?

Vanhoozer, however, raises a possible objection to the divine Author's ever-present direction. "If Shakespeare determines all that happens in the world of the text, is he not responsible, not only for Duncan's death, but for all the murders, rapes, and pillaging in the story?" (Vanhoozer 2010, 308). Is God the Author of evil? Briefly, we can use the authorial analogy to suggest a possible theodicy based on narrative fulfillment and aesthetic consummation.

In the creation myth of Middle-earth, Tolkien's Eru declares to His angelic court that in the Music of creation "no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined." He even explains that the Satan figure Melkor's attempts to thwart the divine plan are in fact a part of the plan itself, taken up and channeled into something good. "And thou, Melkor, wilt discover all the secret thoughts of thy mind, and wilt perceive that they are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory" (Tolkien [1977] 1999, 17). Tolkien provides a narrative example of this.

> And Ilúvatar spoke to Ulmo [angelic regent of water], and said: 'Seest thou not how here in this little realm in the Deeps of Time Melkor hath made war upon thy province? He hath bethought him of bitter cold immoderate, and yet hath not destroyed the beauty of thy fountains, nor of thy clear pools. Behold the snow, and the cunning work of frost! Melkor hath devised heats and fire without restraint, and hath not dried up thy desire nor utterly quelled the music of the sea. Behold rather the height and glory of the clouds, and the everchanging mists; and listen to the fall of rain upon the Earth! And in these clouds thou art drawn nearer to Manwë [angelic regent of air], thy friend, whom thou lovest'. (Tolkien [1977] 1999, 19)

Here, because of special divine revelation, Tolkien's creatures find that all universal events serve an overarching musical theme of beauty, order, and goodness—one that does not exclude but triumphs over evil. In mythological form, Tolkien suggests that God uses evil actions in the way an author uses sources of conflict: as engines for plot development, to create a somehow more beautiful story.

Tolkien highlights the difference between what makes for a satisfying story and what makes for comfortable characters. On the stairs of Cirith Ungol before Shelob's lair, Sam and Frodo have a conversation about stories.

> We [only] hear about those [heroes] as just went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same—like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?' 'I wonder,' said Frodo. 'But I don't know. And that's the way of a real tale. Take any one that you're fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don't know. And you don't want them to.' 'No, sir, of course not. Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours. (Tolkien [1954] 1987b, 321)

In his letters, Tolkien emphasizes this difference between life and literature. We have a sort of pleasure in imagining ourselves on those stairs with Sam and Frodo, though if we actually found ourselves there, we would wish to be anywhere else. "But if lit. teaches us anything at all, it is this: that we have in us an eternal element, free from care and fear, which can survey the things that in 'life' we call evil with serenity (that is not without appreciating their quality, but without any disturbance of our spiritual equilibrium)." He directly connects this analogy to theology. "Not in the same way, but in some such way, we shall all doubtless survey our own story when we know it (and a great deal more of the Whole Story)" (1981, 106–107). Without pursuing this approach any further, it seems worthwhile to

note Tolkien's directly literary take on an Irenean soul-making theodicy and its clear implications for CEE based on inside- versus outside-the-text reasoning.

Conclusion

Now that we have examined a theologically grounded approach to CEE-H based on the notion of God as author, we can briefly set it against NEE by way of evaluation. First, we must note that not only the epic of evolution but evolutionary theory as a whole is "first a form of imaginative history" (Beer 2009, 6). This is unsurprising and perhaps inevitable. "Because of its preoccupation with time and with change evolutionary theory has inherent affinities with the problems and processes of narrative" (Beer 2009, 5). Hefner likewise acknowledges that all forms of the epic of evolution arise from questions of meaning and ultimacy (Hefner 2009, 4). Because of this, "The evolutionary epic is not science; it is scientifically informed myth" (Hefner 2009, 4). This is not a derogatory statement. We cannot discard the narrative element in human experience. Instead, as Landau posits, we should "treat narratives even more seriously than before. Rather than avoid them, scientists might use them as they are used in literature, as a means of discovery and experimentation" (1984, 268). Hefner asks the obvious follow-up question. "What drives myth and the ineradicable human tendency to engage in myth? It is the refusal to give up on the insistence that the natural world and our lives in the world have meaning and purpose" (Hefner 2009, 5).

J. R. R. Tolkien offers an imaginative view of the relationship between mythology and reality in this same vein. Countering Müller's claim that mythology is a disease of language, Tolkien sees myth as metaphysically rooted in creation, as a primary mode by which we are intended to experience the world God has created. Better, says Tolkien, to call language a disease of mythology ([1947] 2014, 41). Tolkien (and Sayers and Vanhoozer along with him) advocates for a way of reading history for knowledge of its Author.

Like the ray of light on the tapestry, discussions of outside causality offer a philosophically and theologically legitimate way of overlaying a level of *meaning* atop observable phenomena. God validates the claims of Christ and the Christian Scriptures through the resurrection, setting this particular account of existence (the words of Christ and His disciples) apart as a privileged and indeed authorially derived one. This means that while particular ascriptions of meaning are of course open to dispute and discussion, the act of ascription itself is legitimated. Once we conceive of God as the author of the universe and frame our understandings according to the inside- versus outside-the-text paradigm, the Christian may affirm

that the epic of evolution can indeed have a plot that is not merely a subjective, reader-response projection, but a true account of the text of history.

This is in marked contrast to NEE, which instead creates or projects subjective meanings onto evolutionary history. Apart from such subjective ascription, there can be no central characters, no unity of plot or design, no subtext, no goal or climax or resolution. So be it, say NEE advocates; this is merely to state the truth of reality. But for those like Tolkien, at least, the epic of evolution might fit our innate mythopoeic impulse like a lock to a golden key.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the reviewers and editors of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, whose keen criticisms have substantially contributed to this article.

2. This analogy will be more fully unpacked below, but we ought to bear in mind that God and not the human author is the central term in this analogy. Human authorship, with its limitations, processes, revisions, and so on, is the lesser reflection of God's greater authorial activity, and not the other way around. For more on the process of authorship, see Vanhoozer ([1998] 2009).

3. From another angle, convergent evolution raises interesting questions about evolution and teleology apart from theology. See, for instance, McGhee (2016) or the work of Simon Conway Morris (e.g. 2015).

4. We might, rather than naturalistic and Christian, distinguish between naturalistic and theistic, but the second part of the article relies specifically on Christian dogmatic assumptions.

5. For the ways in which the metaphor of creation as book develops through church history, see Tanzella-Nitti (2005).

6. This is similar to the approach taken by Landau (1984, 1991), who notes that scientific narratives of human origins partake of structuralist tropes and then asks what the humanities can do for the scientific study of evolution. We differ, however, in that Landau is concerned with the human element in scientific knowledge, while I examine a narrative element built into the cosmos itself.

7. Russell, Murphey, and Peacocke (2000, 3–13) give an extensive overview of divine action, both in general theological terms and as applied directly to theology and science. Collins (2009) deals directly with evolution and divine action. A smattering of other resources: Morris (1988); Tracey (1990); Plantinga (2006); Shults, Murphy, and Russell (2009; especially Barbour's essay); and Kirkpatrick (2014). Gordon Kaufman, who regularly appears as an interlocutor on the subject of narrative theology and divine action, has also advocated for the epic of evolution in particular (1997).

8. Fergusson (2018) is an excellent recent treatment of divine providence. Elliott (2015) offers a historical analysis of the doctrine.

9. For more on double agency in a specifically narrative context, see McLain (1990).

10. Not to be confused with postliberal narrative theology, as advocated by such figures as Lindbeck, Frei, and Hauerwas. A large bibliography on narrative theology can be found in Lucie-Smith (2007, 165–66). For an introduction to literary theories of scripture see Brown (2007).

11. For theological engagement on Tolkien and evolution, specifically situated within the context of late Victorian evolutionary social theory, see Mitchell (2011). Vanhoozer (1990, 283) cites Sayers specifically in this context but is familiar with Tolkien's theory.

12. See Vanhoozer: "we author because God first authored us" (2010, 318).

13. Tolkien did not feel the need to justify his assumptions about reasoning from human activity to divine activity. This essay will take its validity for granted.

14. Fant (2010) offers a theological approach to narrative based on the archetypal structure of restoration stories, but this approach will not be directly applicable here.

15. For God's relationship to evil on this account, see below.
16. Notably, this is also how one author described Tolkien's "God" character, Eru (Tolkien 1981, 253). This account, perhaps not without accident, is similar to the "double agency" advocated by Tolkien's friend Austin Farrer (1967) in various places—especially in the insistence that God is not an agent among other agents and on the same causal level as His creatures. This is not to broach the thorny subject of the sense in which God concurs with human sin, though Tolkien can write the following: "Free Will is derivative, and is only operative within provided circumstances; but in order that it may exist, it is necessary that the Author should guarantee it, whatever betides : sc. when it is 'against His Will', as we say, at any rate as it appears on a finite view. He does not stop or make 'unreal' sinful acts and their consequences" (Tolkien 1981, 195).
17. Vanhoozer notes that the Bible introduces a third level of causality, the supernaturally demonic or angelic: "The Bible distinguishes at least three 'agent-perspectives' on the theodramatic action. Sometimes a biblical author will focus on human action, at other times on demonic forces, but at all times in all places they all communicate, at least indirectly, the overarching agency of the Author. The story of Joseph's betrayal by his brothers is a case in point" (2010, 348).
18. Formerly known as the KT Boundary, this is a geological stratum that is believed to mark the mass extinction of the non-avian dinosaurs around 66 million years ago.
19. This is not to claim either that human history is *nothing but* progress, nor is it to claim that God is not telling other stories elsewhere, beyond our observation. Indeed, this is a plot point in Lewis's Ransom trilogy (especially 1938 and 1943) as well as the central element in Tolkien's own mythology of Elves and cosmic gods.
20. There is surely some overlap here with Lewis's (1955) concept of *sehnsucht* or joyful longing, the centerpiece and title of his autobiography.
21. John Beatty characterizes the essence of narrative as the turning point—the contingent event that depends upon other contingent events in a web of possibilities, ending up in a single unique state of affairs (2016). Eucatastrophe likewise depends for its impact on this combination of contingency and satisfaction. On another note, the Eagles are not mundane birds but the special servants of Manwë the chief Vala.
22. One could extend the argument past miracles strictly considered and into any other fortuitous or felicitous occurrence: a ray of light falls on the beautiful woman seated at the bench—is she my destined wife? Clearly, there are large opportunities for abuse here. Much more work would need to be done in order to distinguish divine communication from human projection.
23. Of course, we must leave room for another climax, the *parousia* and final arrival of the kingdom, but this is also in a way simply the completed outworking of the Resurrection itself.
24. Gandalf, of course, hints to Frodo that he was "meant" to find the Ring, and that there are powers at work beyond those of Sauron, orchestrating events (Tolkien [1954] 1987a, 65). But Gandalf is also an angel, and in a sense this bit of natural theology is therefore actually revelation. We should also note that Tolkien's God, Eru Ilúvatar, is a character authored by Tolkien, and thus "inside" the text.
25. Some of the more creative comic book authors will actually do this—Jack Kirby and Stan Lee inserted themselves into *Fantastic Four*, and Grant Morrison spent a whole career doing this in *The Invisibles* and at DC Comics. Morrison's work on *Multiversity*, for example, creatively blurs the separation between the inside and the outside of the text, and casts the comic book reader as the villain of the narrative.
26. Any such answers are often sure to be provisional, barring direct statements from Scripture. But this is no different than attempting to get inside the mind of the author of any ordinary literary work. Some motives are quite transparent; others are pure fiction, imposed on the text from outside by readers attempting to mold the narrative in ways contrary to the author's intent.
27. See Wallace (1911, 335, 337).

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