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Introduction

When we compare the lives of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) with that of J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), we find that, although they lived in totally different historical periods and in countries culturally and geographically far removed from each other (one in Italy, the other in England), their lives as well as their writings bear several striking similarities. Both were fervent Catholics, both had personally experienced combat and war (about which they violently protested as being useless and wasteful), both expressed their views in literary works heavily tinged with philosophy and, with certain reservations in Tolkien's case, theology, and both wrote epics destined to influence not only their own culture, but that of the whole world.¹ Dante's masterpiece was *The Divine Comedy*, a story in which he expressed, in a mixture of realism with moral-allegorical elements, his political, social, and religious views. Tolkien, when referring to his masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, preferred the word "applicability" rather than allegory: he was not specifically writing about real people and actual events in the world; rather he wanted the reader to make comparisons as he or she chose. At the same time, we see in Tolkien the same preoccupations as in Dante: a steady focus on man's spiritual condition in the world.²

In this essay, I would like to compare Dante's principal work with that of Tolkien, particularly their ideas of evil. There are many questions: how does Dante's medieval view of sin and evil differ from Tolkien's more modern view? Why did they think as they did? What influenced them? And how did their thinking about evil affect their ideas about good and about God, the supreme good?

Dante: *The Divine Comedy*

As in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Divine Comedy* is presented in the form of a journey.³ The pilgrim is Dante himself, who hopes to profit from his experiences and to return to earth and share what he has learned with others. One evening he finds himself in a Dark Forest, a symbol of his wayward life as a youth when he strayed from the true path.⁴ Just when he is beginning his journey he is accosted by three beasts: a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf, animals that stand for Dante's vicious habits, which prevent his reform and keep him from growing closer to God.⁵ The ravening wolf is Incontinence, (self-indulgence, or the unruly passions, such as lust and gluttony); the raging lion is Violence; the swift and stealthy leopard is Fraud (which would include deceit, lying, flattery, and so on (Grandgent p. 2, N. 4)).⁶ These animals also symbolize the three major sins in Hell: incontinence, violence, and fraud. Here at the beginning of his journey, we immediately see Dante's strong reliance on allegory, his journey representing that of each soul through life as it makes its way either to eternal life in Heaven or in Hell.⁷

As to which way he should go, he meets the virtuous Roman poet, Virgil (70-19 B.C.), who has been sent to guide him by three women: Mary, the mother of Jesus, Beatrice, the young woman with whom in real life Dante had fallen in love and whom he hopes to see in Heaven, and St. Lucy (the symbol of illuminating grace).⁸

Allegorically, Virgil represents Reason, the faculty that helps the intellect distinguish between good and evil, and that prepares for divine Revelation concerning God. Mankind, Dante suggests, can avoid evil and find

the path to goodness by following his Reason. Virgil also represents the Roman Empire.⁹

In order to escape the she-wolf, Virgil advises Dante to follow him along a longer path that will take him through Hell and Purgatory and, eventually, to the gates of Heaven. As they move along, Dante sees various personages in Hell: some historical, some mythological, some, like Adam, Cain and Moses, taken from the Bible, and still others, Dante's contemporaries. As might be expected, the greater their sins, the deeper they are plunged into Hell, each sinner being punished by the particular way they sinned during their lifetime.¹⁰

The learning experience is a painful one. Sometimes Virgil scolds Dante, telling him that his sympathy for certain souls who suffer as they do is a mark of disrespect for God's justice. At other times, Dante is so overcome with emotion that he faints, having recognized certain sins as those he himself has committed and for which he too may be punished.

Eventually, he and Virgil cross the Cocytus, the last of Hell's four rivers. And there they see, with his body frozen in the deepest pit of Hell, Satan himself, the very representative of sin, and guilty of betraying God. He has three heads, a reversal of the Triune God from whom he still foolishly tries to wrest power. What is significant here is that Virgil makes Dante look at Satan directly in the face, which is to say, Dante must come to know evil as it truly is, just as he must see how utterly stupid Satan is, not only in trying to oppose God but also in his ignorance that evil is self-destructive. Dante also learns that evil comes the will, whether because the will decides not to do what God wants (as in the case of Lucifer), a lack of control of the will (as in Adam), or both.¹¹

As he travels through the underworld, Dante learns, and in learning, grows, gradually coming to realize the enormity of sin and how it offends the goodness of God. In this way, he achieves a full disdain for sin and a realization of God's justice. At the same time, seeing the punishment of the lost souls in Hell helps him to steel his will lest he commit the same sins once he returns to real life again.

Once Dante has come to see the ugliness of sin, he is ready to emerge from the deepest part of Hell into a world lit by the stars. This light and his emergence into a new world gives him a sense of hope as he realizes that he need not give in to sin and that if he does avoid it, a better life and a better future can be had.

The physical structure of Purgatory differs from that of Hell. Hell is like a cone inverted downwards, its lowest point reaching the center of the earth; Purgatory's structure is a conically shaped mountain rising in the midst of the sea in a reverse direction—upwards towards heaven, the mountain suggesting the personal effort Dante must exert in order to save his soul and come closer to God. Like Hell, there are concentric circles and within each circle are those who, although their sins were not as great as those in Hell,

are nevertheless now being punished for misbehaving on earth.¹² However, the souls here, unlike those in Hell, who curse God for what has befallen them, accept their punishments as their just due. They are also hopeful, knowing that after temporary suffering they will enter into eternal life in heaven, a life Adam once knew when he lived in Eden. By journeying through Purgatory, hopefully, Dante's soul will be even more fully cleansed and made ready for heaven.

An important section follows here, in Canto 8. When Dante emerged from Hell, he saw a constellation of stars in the South Pole, an indication that he was entering a new kind of world, Purgatory. Symbolically, they represent the four cardinal or moral virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance, virtues that regulate the moral life of every person, not just the Christian. Significantly, later in the day the four stars disappear and in their place he sees three others shining brilliantly in the sky. Also, when he sees the stars, an evil serpent appears and then quickly disappears. Allegorically, the three stars represent the theological virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity. Dante's point is that the moral virtues are necessary to develop a good will. But they alone cannot overcome evil; to do so one must also rely on the theological virtues given by God. In terms of Dante's journey now through Purgatory, they are the graces he needs in order to purify his heart of all sin.

Eventually, Virgil and Dante pass through the seventh and last circle of Purgatory. When he arrives at the gates of Heaven, Virgil departs, human reasoning being unable to understand heavenly realities and thus lead him further.¹³ In his place a woman dressed in white, Dante's beloved Beatrice, appears. She is the one who will tell him about the basic truths at the heart of existence (such as, the nature of the Fall, why Jesus became man, God as the goal of all Creation, and so on, and step by step lead him through Paradise and to his final end, God Himself.

Tolkien: *The Lord of the Rings*

With some of Dante's ideas of evil in mind, let us now examine Tolkien's work to see what he thought, beginning with a simple synopsis of the story.

In his book, *The Silmarillion* (1977), Tolkien outlines the history of Middle-earth. By means of the angelic-like, immortal Valar, Eru (the One) created Middle-earth, men, and elves. After doing this, the Valar lived in the Blessed Realm. However, according to one tradition, some of the Valar, led by Morgoth, wanted more power, and so they rebelled against Eru.

During these early years (in the First Age), one of the leading elves, Feanor, made three great jewels, the Silmarilli. Soon afterwards, Morgoth stole the jewels and took them to Middle-earth. Because of this, Feanor and the elves who had followed him to Middle-earth declared war on Morgoth. After a losing start, the elves

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were eventually victorious; however, it was a precarious victory, for Morgoth still had some power.

Sometime later (around the year 500 of the Second Age), another rebellious Valar, Sauron, became active on Middle-earth and grew in power and strength. Then (around 1500) he and some of the elves skilled in crafts and metalwork forged some magic rings. Having learned from them how to do this, Sauron then made one powerful, albeit evil, Ring able to control all the others. In fact, so powerful was this Ring that Sauron realized he could use it to control and enslave all of Middle-earth.¹⁴

After this, fighting again broke out, this time between the men of Middle-earth, the Numenoreans, who had once fought with the Valar against Sauron, and Sauron himself. Sauron then fled to Mordor, in the southeastern part of Middle-earth, which he made into a stronghold.

Even later (in 3430 of the Second Age), a great battle was waged against Sauron by an alliance of elves and men. It was during this battle that Sauron's body was slain and when Isildur, a noble Numenorean, cut the Ring from Sauron's dead hand and foolishly kept it for his own use.

In *The Hobbit*, we learn what then happened to the Ring. When Isildur was killed trying to escape from some orcs (creatures made by Sauron to counteract the elves) by swimming across the Anduin River, a hobbit by the name of Deagol, eventually found the Ring. However, his cousin, Smeagol (Gollum), killed him and took possession of it. Many years later Bilbo happened to find this Ring when he entered a tunnel used by Gollum. After some exciting adventures in which he acted heroically, Bilbo returned to the Shire, still in possession of the Ring.

The Lord of the Rings begins around the time Bilbo gives the Ring to Frodo, though very reluctantly, since its mere possession has begun to work its corruptive power in his heart. Gandalf, a wizard, then tells Frodo that having the Ring is no mere accident—he was *meant* to have it. This, of course, is one indication that a higher, benevolent Power is at work trying to save not only the Shire but all of Middle-earth as well. At the same time, Frodo is free to accept or reject the responsibility of bearing the Ring, that is, he has a free will and can make a choice. Gandalf also tells him about the origin and the power of the Ring and that Sauron knows it is now in the Shire. In order to protect his fellow hobbits, Frodo leaves soon afterwards for Rivendell where, thanks to the help of a mysterious man named Strider (Aragorn) and some elves, he eventually arrives safely, having had some harrowing experiences, once with evil barrow-wights, and once with the nine Black Riders, servants of Sauron, during which he was wounded.

At a Council at Rivendell, Gandalf reveals that the chief wizard of his order, Saruman, has also been corrupted by a desire for the Ring, and that he has

suggested to Gandalf that he join him in getting it. Once it is theirs, they can defeat Sauron and eventually establish a good kingdom on Middle-earth. However, Gandalf refuses, saying that evil means cannot be used to bring about a good end. The Council also decides that the best course is to destroy the Ring at Mount Doom. Frodo then agrees to take the Ring there and do this.

As Frodo and his friends travel along, they experience at times the power of evil, but also that of good. An instance where good works in their favor can be seen when, at one point, Frodo decides to go alone in order to reflect on the next step they should take—whether to help defend Gondor, or to continue straightway to Mount Doom. Seeing Frodo leave the camp, Boromir, one of the Company, follows him and tries to force the Ring from him, believing that it should be used to defeat Sauron's forces at Gondor. Frodo manages to escape Boromir by putting on the Ring, but soon afterwards the camp where Merry and Pippin are staying as they wait for Frodo to return is attacked by orcs. Boromir, having by this time returned, sees the orcs, tries valiantly to defend the two hobbits, but is eventually killed.

Later, Aragorn reflects on this. He sees the orc attack as something providential, for it gave Boromir the chance to compensate for his greed by sacrificing his life for the hobbits.

Another example of how good can sometimes come from evil can be seen when the orcs capture Merry and Pippin after Boromir has been killed. Managing to escape, they make their way to a large forest where the Ents, the “giant shepherds of the trees,” live. When the Ents learn how Saruman is cutting down trees at the edge of their forest (Fangorn), they march to his stronghold at Isengard and overthrow him. Again, it can be seen how certain unforeseen happenings seem to be “arranged” by a higher, benevolent power so that good can come from a potentially bad situation. Still another example is seen when Frodo is tempted to keep the Ring rather than throw it into Mount Doom. Just then Gollum bites off Frodo's finger to get the Ring; however, having become unbalanced, he falls into the volcano, thus destroying Sauron's power forever. Still another example of how Providence guides the hobbits can be seen at the end of the novel, when Gandalf tells the hobbits that he will not return with them to the Shire to rid it of the evil elements that have entered it, since they are capable to doing this themselves, their entire journey being a kind of preparation for this.

Dante: The Influence of the Bible, Sin, the Church, Medieval Torture, the Scholastics

A study of *The Divine Comedy* shows that Dante's presentation of evil is at times the same as Tolkien's and at times different. Here we would like to examine the reasons for this by taking a look at the way they

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were influenced by two basic sources, the Bible and some of the social practices at the time.

Both Dante and Tolkien rely heavily on the Bible, but their respective use, emphasis, and understanding of particular aspects of the Bible is sometimes different. First of all, Dante tends to interpret passages of the Bible more literally than Tolkien, just as he is closer in spirit to the Old than the New Testament. Passages that condemn sin are taken at face value, such as Psalm 5:5: “You hate all who do evil; you destroy all who lie. The deceitful and bloodthirsty man the Lord detests.” Or, again, in Psalm 11: “The Lord tests the just and the wicked; the lover of violence he hates. He sends a scorching fire and brimstone on the wicked; he send a scorching wind as their lot.” In Dante’s Hell we see these words enacted literally: those placed there suffer from fire and from the wind that drives the fires of Hell.

Both of them also take with utmost seriousness the ideas expressed in Ephesians (6:12), 1 Peter 5:8, and the Book of Revelation (12:1-17) that evil is a cosmic power roaming the world to devour and destroy whatever is good. However, Tolkien stresses the power of this force much more than Dante, this being in line with his conviction that all forms of power are evil. (Cf. Mingardi.) While not excluding other forms of evil, he prefers to limit his examination to this so that he can study it more closely.

Related to this is the fact that Tolkien limits his portrayal of evil to relatively few creatures, such as the Black Riders, the orcs, the Balrog, the barrow-wights, Gollum, and Grima, Saruman’s agent and spy. In proportion to these, much more importance is given to the leading evil powers: Morgoth, Sauron and Saruman. Dante, differs, giving only scant attention to Satan (Canto XXXIV). His main focus is on sin, whether types of sin or individual sins, which, of course, makes his work more diversified, since sin exists in many different forms. One surmises that the nature of *The Divine Comedy* leads him to do this. He had strong personal dislikes and one way to express this was to show how his enemies are suffering from their particular sin either in Hell or Purgatory.¹⁵ Several points can be made about this.

First, here one can see the influence of the Medieval Church, which—most likely to compel the faithful to avoid sin by making them fear its effects, but also to maintain control over them—put a great deal of emphasis on sin and types of sins, like the Seven Deadly Sins, or whether sins were mortal (serious and leading to spiritual death) or venial (less serious); and the punishment due to sin because it offended God’s holiness. Here too we see how the Scholastics—Dante particularly liked Thomas Aquinas—with their minute distinctions and love of syllogistic reasoning—had a strong influence. Dante’s love of categorizing and his way of distinguishing between greater and lesser virtues and sins, as he does in *The Divine Comedy*, surely relates to this.

Second, besides adding his own imaginative punishments for the damned, Dante borrowed from various cruel forms of medieval torture and imprisonment. (J.C., “Dante’s Inferno: Creative and Cruel,” 1-3.) Some of his descriptions of Hell echo closely the prison conditions of his time, where it could be possible for someone to be chained to a wall and to endure the filth and his smell of his own bodily waste (*Inferno*, Canto XVIII).

Third, one must also take in account what “sin” meant at the time and how severe punishments were meted out for particular offences. This helps to explain why Dante put those who commit suicide into Hell: the opinion at the time being that despair was among the worst of sins since it was a refusal of God’s mercy and forgiveness. (This was also Augustine’s opinion.) Heretics, who were burned, sometimes in public, are also there, and among them are Mohammed (570-632 A.D.) and his son Ali. Dante felt they were a source of division in the world and could easily lead Muslim believers to attack and destroy the Church. Fortunetellers are also severely punished, for it was felt at the time that this was a form of blasphemy because only God knew the future. Besides all this, it was lawful for relatives of an offended party to take vengeance on the offender. Considering all this, one realizes that people at the time held different ethical standards than society today.

In addition to this, we also know that in medieval times life was precarious. Sickness and plagues could readily wipe out an entire village. Wars (one lasting a hundred years) were not uncommon. And the life span was much shorter than today, death often claiming mothers and children at birth. Who better to blame for all this than the devil, who was thought to be “just around the corner?”

All this helps us to understand why Dante writes so realistically about such cruel tortures and punishments and why his Hell, the devil’s abode, is such a horrible place.

Tolkien: The Influence of the Bible and Psychology

When we examine Tolkien’s use of the Bible, an obvious fact is that, besides developments in the Church and in Catholic thought (whereby human nature and frailty came to be better understood), he was able to profit from many years of Scripture study by innumerable scholars who were able to interpret and assess various biblical passages more accurately and, in doing so, to come to a better knowledge of good and evil. They were at the same time able to see God not so much as One who judges and condemns, but as a being who loves what He has created and who shows mercy to those who, for various reasons, fail.

One clear instance of this occurs in *The Lord of the Rings*. At one point (just before he treacherously leads Frodo and Sam through the tunnel where the giant

spider Shelob lives), Gollum is treated kindly by Frodo. This causes Gollum to have a dialog with his other, “good,” self, Smeagol, the name he had before murdering his cousin, Deagol, and taking the Ring for himself. Frodo’s kindness tempts Gollum to desist in his plan to have Shelob eat them (which would allow Gollum to regain the Ring). Unfortunately, however, when Sam berates Gollum soon after this, accusing him of spying on him and Frodo, the moment passes, and the evil part of his nature once again takes over. Tolkien’s point here, of course, is that Frodo’s act of mercy is more praiseworthy than Sam’s more judgmental scolding.

Another instance where Tolkien relies more on the New Testament is in his depiction of the Christ-like Frodo. Like Jesus, he accepts responsibility for others. And, like Jesus who, in giving up his life, saved the world, Frodo, in destroying the power of the Ring, saves Middle-earth. Frodo’s leaving for the Blessed Realm is also quite similar to Jesus’s ascension to heaven. Galadriel also has characteristics that recall Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

One must also consider the fact that Tolkien was very much influenced by modern developments in anthropology and psychology, developments that led to a more sympathetic understanding of the human psyche. Thus, ways of thought and behavior that were formerly considered to be a matter of choice, now came to be seen, at least partially, as hereditary, which, of course, lessened personal culpability. To use the example of suicide, modern science has come to see that one who takes his or her life could very well have inherited certain genes that caused that person to become depressive. In any case, one feels that centuries of study of human nature allowed Tolkien to evaluate man in a more positive light than Dante did.

Dante: The Influence of Philosophy and Theology

Here a word about the influence of St. Augustine, whose influence was deeply felt not only in the Middle Age, may be in order.

As is well known, a certain fifth-century thinker by the name of Pelagius believed that when Adam sinned he merely set a bad example; Original Sin did not “originate” in him. Furthermore, Adam’s sin was confined only to him, for “Adam neither injured nor deprived us of anything.” And so because mankind is fundamentally good and does not have an inherent propensity to sin, it does not need grace. If man acts rightly, human nature and free will are enough to keep on the right path and lead him to heaven (*Collier’s Encyclopedia*, vol. 18, 536). Augustine attacked this idea. In his famous book, *Confessions* (c. 398-99 A.D.), he expresses the idea that, although man has a free will, human nature became corrupted when Adam fell; he fell away from God and thus suffered a loss of wholeness. As a consequence, he suffers the evil of a less ample

existence. Thus “good is not extinguished by vice but simply diminished” (*Collier’s Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 222, 223, 224). Humanity, then, actually shares in Adam’s sin; it “inherits” the guilt and other consequences (a weakened will, sickness and death) that Adam incurred when he sinned. And because man is inherently sinful and cannot do anything that is non-sinful, grace is needed.

If some favored Pelagius’s optimistic view of human nature, there were also many who felt that Augustine’s stricter opinion was more accurate. This became the official position of the Church, for it saw that Augustine’s theory coincided with St. Paul’s opinion about the weakness of the will. (Romans 7:14-25).

Bearing in mind that the *Inferno* was only one part of Dante’s *Commedia* and that the other two parts show people who merit or will merit Heaven because of their virtue, Dante strongly leans towards Augustine’s ideas, this being at least one explanation for the emphasis he put on sin and human weakness.

Dante was also strongly influenced by Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), the Scholastic thinker who synthesized the ideas of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) with the dogmas of the Church. According to Aquinas, evil in itself cannot properly be said to exist. Not being completely real in itself, it is dependent on good for its existence. Thus heretics need orthodoxy as an objective norm against which they find reasons for their existence, just as hypocrites need truth for their existence. Thomas’s idea is especially applicable to Lucifer, who rebelled against God. Had Lucifer nothing to rebel against, of course, he would have had no reason to fight God and the good angels.

Tolkien: The Influence of Philosophy and Theology, and His Originality

Like Dante, Tolkien follows the ideas of St. Augustine and Aquinas quite closely. He too believed that nothing starts out evil but by the free choice of created beings turn into evil. Morgoth, Sauron, Saruman, Gollum—all were created good by Eru. But, having fallen under the enticement of the Ring, they eventually became its slaves.

Another Augustinian idea, that evil needs good to exist, is illustrated in the story of the Ring. Lying on the ground in Gollum’s tunnel, it can do nothing of itself, but once someone begins to wear it, it begins to control the bearer’s will. It is for this reason that Gandalf and Galadriel refuse to wear it, knowing that its mere possession corrupts the one who has it. In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien follows this idea. Of itself, the Ring is simply a thing, although full of latent power. But it longs for someone to wear it so that it can ensnare that person and begin to work its evil power. It makes the wearer less an individual, which is to say, the individual begins to lose his identify and turn more and more, as is

the case with the Black Riders, into a shade or shadow. "In relation to the individual, then, possessing the Ring means that the individual loses sense of who he is and what he truly wants" (Chance 30).

A further example of Tolkien's use of an idea shared by Augustine and Aquinas is the idea that evil often turns into good. We see this several times in the story of the Ring, perhaps the clearest example being when Gollum forcibly takes the Ring from Frodo and falls into Mount Doom, thus destroying the Ring and, with it, Sauron's power forever.

Still another idea propounded by Augustine was that evil has its origin outside the heart; however, if allowed to enter, it corrupts. Tolkien changes this somewhat, since we see that merely having the Ring is enough to begin the process of corruption, but, basically, he follows Augustine's idea that evil comes from outside.

Besides, of course, the creation of Middle-earth, with all its diverse characters and happenings, what is most original in Tolkien's concept of evil is his idea that a created being, Sauron, can make a spiritual reality, a Ring so powerful that it can corrupt everything that an almighty, benevolent power, Eru, has created. That Eru would allow him to ruin everything He has made is another matter; most likely he would not. But this is to read into the story the lessons of the Book of Revelation, which has a happy ending, God controlling and eventually destroying evil.

As has been pointed out, there is no dearth of positive elements in his story: Providence seems to help the Company as they carry out their mission, sending various personages to help them and giving support in various other ways (through the *lembas*, through powerful magic words, a magic rope, and so on); at times evil is turned to good, and so on. But Tolkien refuses to leave us feeling comfortable.

Tolkien's epic, where Gandalf, Elrond, Galadriel, Bilbo, Frodo—physically and spiritually wounded—leave for the Blessed Realm, leaves ambiguous the answer to the question, which has proved victorious, good or evil? We are also aware of the fact that in the history of the Ring, Sauron was once defeated (for example, in 1693 of the First Age), only to rise later (in 3429 of the same Age) to harass the inhabitants of Middle-earth again. The Ring destroyed his power, but what would prevent him from rising again in another form at another time?

When we speak about Sauron and the Ring, the key word is "spiritual." In our world humans can, of course, create material things, although even here they are limited, since they must rely on other material things to do so. (One can only make bread when certain ingredients are available.) Sauron's Ring is similar in the sense that he relies on the craftsmanship of the elves, and one can imagine that he used fire and other metals to make the Ring. Nevertheless, by doing so he

has made something that is spiritual and that has almost unlimited power to do evil.

Of course, a large part of this is scriptural, Lucifer being the first of many who, in their pride, desired to be like God and to have equal power. Tolkien's idea that the mere desire to have the Ring, that is, the mere desire to have power, is also biblical, since sin occurs not in the act itself, but in the initial desire. But he goes further by investing in this Ring a spiritual power. In itself it symbolizes the desire for power, while at the same time being in itself an evil thing that corrupts. This is where Tolkien is original.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, both writers see evil as something real and absolute; it truly exists. However, their way of showing this differs. Especially in the *Inferno*, Dante dwells more extensively on the causes and effects of evil, including the way sinful behavior wreaks havoc on the natural environment. His method is to portray the dark side of human nature in gruesome detail, enforcing it with horrible images (such as the two sinners who spend their time gnawing on each other's head (Canto XXXII), or the episode in Canto XXV (most likely borrowed from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*) where a thief who has been transformed into a serpent attacks another thief and abuses him sexually, with the result that both are mutated into a creature neither serpent nor human being). Through such images we are constantly reminded of "man's inveterate deviation from the path of God" (Grandgent, *The Portable Dante* xxiii).

Tolkien's portrait of certain parts of Middle-earth, such as the wasteland around Mordor, is as vivid and horrifying as the *Inferno*. However, although he periodically shows how evil grips certain characters in the story, such as the hobbits, representatives of humans—we see some of this, for example, when Frodo resists handing over the Ring to Gandalf, or when Boromir tries to wrest it from Frodo—he does not dwell on it as much. His focus is more on evil itself, its power and the way it manifests itself in beings more "super-natural," such as Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman. Thus, in contradistinction to Dante, we see how at times the characters act with mercy towards those who have done evil. (Frodo shows pity for Gollum and Grima, as Gandalf does for Saruman).

In the final analysis, neither Dante nor Tolkien had any illusions about the utter perversity of evil. Good and evil, they realized, were like two different magnets: Satan, not wanting individuals to exist as individuals, trying to make them as he is, totally evil; God, the source of good and love, drawing those who do good closer to union with one another and with Himself.¹⁶

Notes

¹ As Tom Shippey points out, *The Lord of the Rings* “contains almost no direct religious references at all” (xxxii). But, of course, we are free to imagine connections between the text and religion. One can imagine, for example, that Frodo’s journey to Mount Doom is similar to Christ’s journey to Golgatha.

² The critic, R. Montano, writes explicitly that Dante’s work was not strictly allegorical. Rather, “[h]e was concerned with the concrete problems of the world, with persons, with Florence and Italy, with ways to restore the Empire . . . Dante’s vision is essentially a profound and consistent vision of history rivaling St. Augustine’s and Vico’s; and a vision is not speculative theology. For Dante, God operates through history and in contemplation of the historical process His will can be seen and understood . . . This emphasis on secular history and politics as an essential foundation of God’s kingdom is the most important characteristic of Dante’s vision” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., Vol. 14, 521).

³ Unlike Dante, who makes a journey in order to get something, or find something—Beatrice and, ultimately, God—Frodo must give up something, the Ring.

⁴ Dante dates his experiences in the Dark Forest as occurring on the night of April 7, 1300, and the dawn of April 8, 1300, Good Friday. But the actual writing of the epic took place later: Hell, in 1312; Purgatory, in 1315; and Paradise between 1316 and 1321.

⁵ Harold Bloom writes about Dante’s character faults. “Dante was brazen, aggressive, prideful, and audacious beyond all poets, before or after” (78). Dante himself alludes to his faults several times in the poem, indicating his clear awareness of the weaknesses of his own character.

⁶ These animals also symbolize the three major sins in Hell: incontinence, violence, and fraud. Dante’s point is that if bad habits are allowed to continue, they can readily turn into sins.

⁷ “Allegorically the *Commedia* is “the history of Dante’s own soul, the journey of his mind to God, serving as a prime example for every reader and helping him to rediscover the ‘straight way’ of a moral life that leads to perfection” (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Vol. 16, 1024.)

⁸ Virgil is one of several other guides as Dante makes his way from Hell to Paradise. Another is Nessus, who guides them across the Phlegethon River in Hell. Still another is Sordello, a Christian who meets them in Purgatory. Having met Sordello, Virgil soon gives way to him, the meaning being

that a pagan cannot guide the soul as well as a Christian can. Virgil is a good guide when journeying through Hell, however, he is disadvantaged in Purgatory since this higher realm involves the redemption of the soul, about which Virgil can offer no advice since he lacks faith.

Beatrice Portinari was born in 1266, only several months after Dante, and died in 1290. Dante loved her from the time he was nine years old. Later, in 1287, she married a banker, Simone dei Bardi. Dante himself married another woman, Gemma dei Donati, in 1298; he had three sons and a daughter by her. In the poem Beatrice takes on various roles: at one time she represents Theology, at another, Revelation, Wisdom personified, or even a type of Christ. At the same time, whenever Dante writes about her, he manages to keep before our eyes her reality as a real person.

⁹ Dante firmly believed that the Church, with her duty to take care of the spiritual life of man, must work hand in hand with the State, which is responsible for establishing good laws in order to bring about a just and moral society. While their sphere of operation differs, they are, or should be, interdependent. He also felt that the social disorders of Italy, where various factions were fighting for supremacy—Guelphs (the new business and commercial class) against Ghibellines (the feudal nobility), and Whites (a later group aligned with the Guelphs) against Blacks (aligned with the Ghibellines)—were caused, basically, because the Church was involving itself too much in the social problems of society, just as the State was interfering in matters that should have been left to the Church. But, in what appears to be a contradiction, Dante at times begged certain rulers, like Henry VII (Emperor 1309-1313), to come to Italy and to correct some of the erroneous steps being taken by the Roman Curia. His hope was to have the Emperor purify the Church and then step back to let the Church function according to her divine mission.

¹⁰ “The punishments in the *Inferno* follow the law of *contrapasso* (“counter penalty”)—that is, the punishment is commensurate with the fault.” (Mandelbaum, *Inferno*, Canto III, p. 349, Note 52-69.) Diviners, astrologers, and magicians, for example, because they tried to predict the future, are punished by having their heads turned backwards; usurers, who demanded high interest from loans, are condemned to stare eternally at money; the lustful are tormented by continual stormy weather, just as in life they failed to keep their passions under control, and so on.

¹¹ This is but one instance of Dante’s heavy reliance on Scripture. Here, of course, he uses Paul’s idea as seen in Romans 7:14-25, where he writes about the

weakness of the will and the necessity of grace for salvation.

¹² Dante also writes about the Church's belief in the efficacy of prayers for the deceased. When living people, for instance, pray for the soul of a deceased person in Purgatory, such prayers are able to mitigate the suffering. Unfortunately, many abuses arose from this idea, like the practice of offering money to the clergy so that the sufferings of "the poor souls in Purgatory" might be lessened.

¹³ "Because, as a pagan, Virgil did not worship God, he is not allowed entry to His city" (Mandelaum, *Inferno*, Canto 1, p. 347, Note 125-26).

¹⁴ "The Ring works its power—illustrating the nature of the novel as a work about power—because more than anything it wishes to return to its maker-master and therefore wants to be put on (to make the wearer naturally invisible but supernaturally visible to the Eye of Sauron). In relation to the individual, then, possessing the Ring means that the individual loses sense of who he is and what he truly wants" (Chance 30). To put this in other words one might say that the Ring seeks to rid the owner or wearing of the Ring to loose his power or, as Jane Chance say, to fill him with an "illusion of power" so that it can assert its own over him (31).

¹⁵ Dante's chief enemy was Boniface VIII, a devious Pope who ruled the Church between 1294-1303). It was he who, through the Black Guelfs, banished Dante, then allied to the Whites, from his birthplace, Florence, in 1302. Dante, forbidden even to visit the city under pain of death, never returned. (Cf. *Inferno*, Cantos XIX and XXVII)

¹⁶ The Scholastics accepted Aristotle's teaching that "the principle of Love unifies all things, alternating with Hate, which keeps things discrete and separate" (Mandelbaum, *Inferno*, Canto V, 363, Note 41-3).

In the same way "the perfection of the spirit and the body lies in their unity. Consequently, only after the Judgment Day, when all souls are reunited with their bodies, will [with the exception of those in Hell] the dead regain this perfection" (Mandelbaum, *Inferno*, Canto XII, p. 356, Note 106-8).

Aquinas utilizes this idea of unity when he describes the anatomy of Eros.

Love is more unitive than knowledge in seeking the thing, not the thing's reason; its bent is to a real union, though this can be constituted only by knowledge. Other effects of love are enumerated: a reciprocal abiding, mutual *inhaesio*, of lover and beloved together; a transport, *extasis*, out of the self to the other; an ardent cherishing, *zelus*, of another; a

melting, *liquefactio*, so that the heart is unfrozen and open to be entered; a longing in absence . . . In delight, too, there is an all at once wholeness and timelessness that reflects the *tota simul* of eternity; an edge of sadness similar to that of the Gift of Knowledge; an expansion of spirit; a complete fulfillment of activity without satiety, for they that drink shall yet thirst. (Mandelbaum, *Inferno*, xvi)

The idea of love as the perfection of unity was, in fact, postulated years before, when Augustine, in his *Confessions*, wrote the now-famous words: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

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