TOLKIEN'S UNIQUE RECEPTION OF PYTHAGOREAN 'DISSONANCE' IN THE *AINULINDALË* OF THE *SILMARILLION*

This article is about J. R. R. Tolkien's adaptation of Pythagorean musical elements in the 'Song of the Ainur' of the *Silmarillion*. It details Tolkien's use of Pythagorean dissonance, along with what that amounts to in terms of musical theory, and explores the epistemological origins of the concept and how it found its way into this work of fiction. On the latter point, Platonism, Neoplatonism, and early Christian theology are considered. This includes the likes of Prudentius, pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, and Aquinas, among others. The article observes that Tolkien has deliberately chosen a somewhat esoteric element of Pythagorean musical theory, albeit highly relevant to his own historical context, in order to explore concepts of morality along with the traditional, Christian conundrum of predestination vs. free will.

This article examines a notable yet generally overlooked feature of J. R. R. Tolkien's cosmogony in the *Ainulindalë*, the 'Song of the Ainur', at the beginning of the *Silmarillion*, with particular regard to a specific Pythagorean element that the author of that work has elected to utilize in a fundamental way, notably the role of dissonance in Pythagorean tuning. The specific effect of this unique feature, that is to say Tolkien's reception of it in the *Silmarillion*, prefigures all subsequent action in the *Hobbit*/*Lord of the Rings* narratives. It determines the deeds of characters and plot outcomes to such an extent that this article argues that it cannot have been accidental or some kind of afterthought. The article will consider the relevant passages of the text itself and then move on to some of the known or suspected influences, their links with Christian thinking, Neoplatonism, and Pythagoreanism, principally

considering the impact of several ancient and medieval sources. The question is scarcely one of whether or not Tolkien was influenced by, and deliberately incorporated, Pythagorean elements into his *Silmarillion*. This is well known and, in this regard, scholars have tended to focus on the Harmony of the Spheres and Plato's Theory of Forms. The question here is this: why did he choose to incorporate Pythagorean dissonance in such a significant manner and how and by what epistemological routes did this and other related elements find their way into his thinking? It seems that Tolkien intentionally borrowed this fundamental feature of ancient musical theory, generally overlooked in the scholarship, and extensively wove it into his tale. That he did so was not merely the influence of early Christian adaptations of Pythagorean ideas present in Tolkien's Catholic context, as some sources seem to imply. It was certainly derived in no small part from his education and background but also clearly chosen by him for a purpose. The route of transmission seems most likely to have been by way of Augustine and Aquinas, as will be presently considered.

In Tolkien's creation *mythos* at the beginning of the *Silmarillion*, the divine beings, referred to as the Ainur, are summoned before their creator, Ehru Illúvatar (referred to also as 'the One'), to sing a song composed by that deity and from which, in a likeness of it, the world, Arda, would be created. Immediately, one can detect a parallelism with Plato's Theory of Forms in Tolkien's cosmogenic narrative. This is a double creation myth that is both like and unlike others with which Tolkien would have already been familiar. In fact it appears to have much in common with the Hesiodic cosmogony in some notable contrast to the creation narrative found in Genesis. This can be observed in the process of order being formed out of chaos (the Void), with the agency of the divine will of Illúvatar infusing every creation, which is strikingly similar with the Stoic and Neoplatonic concept of *logos* ('Ultimate Logic or Reason', 'Universal Ordering Principle').[1] It very much recollects Plato's Theory of Forms, where the 'Song of the Ainur' is the pattern/Form/Idea of the world, which comes first, and then the actual, physical creation comes next and

---

[1] K. R. Hensler, 'God and Ilúvatar: Tolkien's Use of Biblical Parallels and Tropes in His Cosmogony', *Mythmoot II. Back Again*, Proceedings of the 2nd Mythgard Institute Mythmoot, Conference Center at the Maritime Institute, Linthicum, Maryland (13–15 December 2013), 2–5: <https://signumuniversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Mythmoot2_Hensler_GodIluvatar.pdf>, accessed 8 December 2023.

'partakes' of that pattern. It is worth noting that time is a relative concept here, as all events transpiring amongst the Ainur prior to the creation of Arda occur in 'eternity' and therefore normal temporal referentials do not strictly apply. Within the divine choral song being performed, one of the most powerful of the Ainur, Melkor, introduces a 'sour note', so to speak: 'it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Illúvatar'.[2]

There are multiple references to the 'discord' of Melkor, with Tolkien adding that 'the melodies that had been heard before foundered in a sea of turbulent sound'.[3] Three times Illúvatar rose from his throne, with stern visage, to intervene when Melkor's discord seemed to overwhelm the harmony. Melkor's dissonant additions are described as 'loud and vain, and endlessly repeated'. But even though Melkor appears to be rebelling against the divine will, Illúvatar declares:

Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor; but that he may know, and all the Ainur, that I am Illúvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shalt see that 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.[4]

Ehru Illúvatar, whose will is paramount, mingles the dissonance of Melkor into the triple harmony, folding that discordant melody into the 'theme' of the song, which, as it turns out, is the 'pattern' of the world. And this will result in considerable strife playing out in the world itself, which will be the subject of Tolkien's other, better known writings. Whether 'evil' therefore was there all along in Illúvatar's plan, or came about as a consequence of the free will with which Melkor had been imbued, is a subject of much debate among scholars.[5] It opens up a range of possible discussions about free will and whether or not it resides with the creator alone or in the created subjects or, in some sense, both. That is not the principal aim of this

[2] C. Tolkien (ed.), J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London, 1977), 16–17.
[3] Tolkien (n. 2), 16–17.
[4] *Ibid.*, 17.
[5] See, for example, C. Agan, 'Hearkening to the Other: A Certeauvian Reading of the Ainulindale', *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 10 (2015), 34.1, <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol34/iss1/10>, accessed 20 November 2023; and see below.

inquiry; although it necessarily figures into it, given Tolkien's religious and philosophical influences.

Melkor differs markedly from the other gods (the Ainur or Valar, as those that would go into Arda would be called) in the *Silmarillion*. And he aptly illustrates Pythagorean elements, with conspicuously Christian overtones, incorporated into the narrative. Melkor is the greatest in power amongst the other created divinities and, like Milton's fictionalized archangel Lucifer, he has his own plans, which he seems to think are at variance with those of the Supreme Being. Akin to Milton's Lucifer, Tolkien writes: 'To Melkor among the Ainur had been given the greatest gifts of power and knowledge.'[6] He is described in comparison to the other divine beings as follows:

> ...of these Melkor was the chief...and he meddled in all that was done, turning it if he might to his own desires and purposes; and he kindled great fires. When therefore Earth was yet young and full of flame Melkor coveted it, and he said to the other Valar: 'This shall be my own kingdom; and I name it unto myself!'[7]

Clearly, in the first instance, Melkor is meant to recollect the Christian Devil, in both biblical traditions and in fiction. And we can virtually pin down Tolkien's narratological links with the Bible to chapter and verse.

When, for example, Illúvatar summons the Ainur before him to sing his song, it reflects Job 1:6 (KJV): 'Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.' The descent of Melkor into Arda to work his mischief following the creation too recalls Isaiah 14:12 (KJV): 'How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!' Melkor will stir up serious strife among the elves, firstly, and then among men and other creations, stealing the Silmarills (gems of power made from the magic of creation found in the Two Trees, Telperion and Lorien), ultimately destroying the Two Trees themselves, which were the only source of light in the world before the sun and moon were made, causing wars and other violent upheavals. He will eventually be cast into the Nameless Void (not unlike the pit of Hell), though his evil would live on through his *protégé*, the lesser deity known as Sauron. What is more, like Milton's Lucifer, Melkor adopts an uglier, darker aspect when he goes into

---

[6] Tolkien (n. 2), 16.
[7] *Ibid.*, 20–1.

Arda to work his evil: 'Lucifer [i.e. Satan] was so illuminated that he far surpassed the brightness of the sun, and all the stars...this brightness was dimmed after Satan's fall'.[8] And Melkor too dwells in darkness, obsessed with the Void even before being cast into it, and concealing his deeds through a cloak of shadows cast by one of his monstrous servants, the giant spider-thing called Ungoliant.

   The parallels are too many to be coincidence; more could certainly be enumerated but will be omitted for want of space here. Indeed, we have Tolkien's own words on the matter which attest his position with relative clarity:

In the cosmogony there is a fall: a fall of Angels we should say. Though quite different in form, of course, to that of Christian myth. These tales are 'new', they are not directly derived from other myths and legends, but they must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or elements. After all, I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear. There cannot be any 'story' without a fall—all stories are ultimately about the fall at least not for human minds as we know them and have them.[9]

But that is not a subject of dispute here. And there are many other mythic features present in the work. Collins rightly calls Tolkien's approach 'syncretic', combining Indo-European (Sanskrit) and Latin linguistic and religious elements and, in terms of literary/philosophical influences, he alludes to authors such as Sydney, Milton, Spenser, and Plato. The character of Melkor, in particular, reflects aspects of the Judeo-Christian Satan, as indicated, as well as Norse and other mythological figures such as the Scandinavian Loki and the Celtic Bilé. Notably, though, Collins identifies a Pythagorean feature in the 'Song of the Ainur', adding that many 'of the Valar inhabit the orbs of the heavenly spheres, like the celestial intelligences of the pseudo-Dionysius, and their heavenly music recalls that of Pythagoras, while the essential dichotomies, particularly the emphasis of Concord versus Discord, reflect exactly the personified polarities of the Neoplatonist Prudentius'.[10] The role of discord is fundamental

---

[8] A. W. Verity (ed.), J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, vol. II (Cambridge 1929), 535, n. 132–3.

[9] H. Carpenter (ed.), with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien. A Selection* (Boston & Sydney 1981), letter 131 to Milton Waldman (not dated, but probably written late in 1951), 169–70.

[10] R.A. Collins, '"Ainulindale": Tolkien's Commitment to an Aesthetic Ontology', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 11.3 43 (2000), 257–65.

to this analysis and it is this Pythagorean connection in particular that this article is exploring in some further detail here, as well as presently adding an observation about it that has largely gone unnoticed by other scholars.

The musical aspects of the *Ainulindalë* are numerous and sophisticated. Collins points out that the 'Song of the Ainur', with Melkor's discordant blasts, has been identified as a three-part piece consistent with traditional sonatas and cantatas, themselves having Classical roots.[11] He identifies Melkor's dissonant tones as an 'aesthetic challenge' for the supreme deity Illúvatar, alongside a discussion of free will in the Christian context, as well as recollecting some points made by Geoffrey Chaucer (reflecting Boethius)[12] and others on some of the central problems inherent in Western, Christian theology. These points are observable in the quotes above. And Collins associates the harmony/disharmony of the song with Hegelian Dialectics: thesis, antithesis, synthesis, as well as being in some ways analogous to the Christian paradox of the 'fortunate fall'. Indeed, as indicated, Illúvatar adapts Melkor's dissonance into the music, suggesting that an interpretation based on Hegelian synthesis carries some weight. Consequently, the narrative structure of the *Lord of the Rings* itself follows the pattern prefigured in the 'Song of the Ainur' in the *Silmarillion*, keeping true to the theme of Plato's Forms, as already noted. But apart from the brief mention of Pythagorean influences, Collins mainly focuses on literary, religious (modern and other), philosophical, and structural elements playing out through the 'Song of the Ainur'.[13] Do Melkor's tumultuous additions then represent an actual 'challenge' to the will of Illúvatar? Halsall, for example, has pointed out that Melkor's dissonance not only merges with the 'Song of the Ainur', perhaps reflecting some kind of Christianized version of Hegelian synthesis, arguing that it is clearly part of Illúvatar's divine plan from the onset.[14]

---

[11] Collins (n. 10), 259. See J. Webster, 'Sonata Form', in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 17 (London 1980), 497–508.

[12] L. D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford 2008); Chaucer writes, in the 'Nun's Priest's Tale': 'Wheither that Goddes worthy forwityng [Whether God's divine foreknowledge]/ Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thyng, [compels me of necessity to do a thing,]/ Or elles if free choys be graunted me [or if free choice be granted me]/ To do that same thyng or do it noght…[to do that thing or not…]' (477 ff.).

[13] Collins (n. 10), 259–60.

[14] M. J. Halsall, *Creation and Beauty in Tolkien's Catholic Vision. A Study in the Influence of Neoplatonism in J.R.R. Tolkien's Philosophy of Life as 'Being and Gift'* (Eugene, OR, 2020), 57.

McIntosh has identified the relevant philosophical background behind the Ainur's Music as ultimately being derived from the mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras (sixth century BC) and indicates that this has naturally received frequent mention in discussions of the subject.[15] We shall see that it does indeed appear to be derived from Pythagorean musical theory, likely transmitted through Christian re-interpretations and particularly that of Aquinas by way of Augustine. Scholars have mainly focused on the obvious homage to the Harmony of the Spheres, which has been traditionally ascribed to the Pythagoreans. On this, Aristotle has written that 'they took the elements of number to be the elements of all things, and the whole cosmos to be harmony and number' and that, according to them, 'the movement of the stars produces a harmony, that is to say, the sounds they make are concordant'.[16] Yet, within both the 'Song of the Ainur' as well as in Pythagorean tuning, any continuous concord is broken by one or more dissonant notes. The very musical scale itself, along with any harmonious concord it may produce, is mathematically impossible without also generating some dissonant notes.

Consonance and dissonance are features of harmony, as observed by the Pythagoreans, who also extended this mathematical understanding to broader, 'cosmic' phenomena, as Aristotle has observed. Almost any mathematical division of the musical canon will produce some notes that are more harmonious and some that are less so. The dissonant notes might be omitted from the range chosen by a composer, or used in differently effective ways.[17] The twentieth-century composer Benjamin Britten, for example, a contemporary of Tolkien, utilized dissonance very effectively to convey in his music the disruptive upheavals of the First World War.[18] In relation to Tolkien and the 'Song of the Ainur', it is the 'dissonance' of Melkor that stands out and which

---

He also notes that Benjamin Britten combined dissonance in his musical works from April 1930, following the First World War, perhaps to reflect the discord that conflict introduced into human life. And Tolkien was well acquainted with that discord.

[15] J. McIntosh, 'Tolkien's Pythagorean "inversion": reality isn't "like" music, it "is" music', in *The Flame Imperishable*, <https://jonathansmcintosh.wordpress.com/2012/07/30/tolkiens-pythagorean-inversion-reality-isnt-like-music-it-is-music/1/1>, accessed 20 November 2023. For other references to Pythagoreanism in Tolkien, see also Collins (n. 10), 257–65.

[16] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.5.986a; and see the section usually titled 'On the Heavens', in *Metaph.* II.9.290b12.

[17] See J. B. Kennedy, *The Musical Structure of Plato's Dialogues* (London 2011), 37–8.

[18] A. Whittall, 'The Study of Britten: Triadic Harmony and Tonal Structure', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 106 (1979–80), 27–41.

principally connects to Pythagorean musical theory and its subsequent reception by the Neoplatonists and Neoplatonist Christians in particular. I have discussed these 'wolf intervals' or 'wolf tones' (the more dissonant notes) in detail in another article.[19] However, Pythagorean tuning may be briefly summarized here. The musical scale, or chromatic scale, is operationally defined through intervals composed of 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 or 9 semitones. That is, they are major and minor thirds or sixths, perfect fourths or fifths, and their enharmonic equivalents, which are notes that are written differently (such as A flat and G sharp) but sound the same in the tempered scale, the size of which deviates by more than one syntonic comma (about 21.5 cents) from the corresponding, justly intonated interval. In the twelve-note Pythagorean division of the musical canon in particular, all tones are separated by intervals of perfect fifths with the higher frequency at exactly 3/2 times that of the lower ones.[20] Number, ratio, and proportion define the notes and hence all subsequent music which partakes of that tradition.

This mathematical division results in at least one note on the scale always being out of tune, or 'dissonant', and usually there will be more than one. It has been a well-attested issue for musicians and composers since antiquity. And a more dissonant note from such a scale has been sometimes referred to as the 'wolf tone' due to it resembling the sound made by a howling wolf (sometimes referred to as the 'flatted fifth' as well as, rather pointedly, 'the Devil's interval'), especially when played on a pipe organ. The earliest demonstrable use of the term 'wolf tone' appears to derive either from very late antiquity or from the Middle Ages.[21] Even so, there is ample room for Tolkien to have become acquainted with the concept and likely even in terms such as 'wolf tone' and 'Devil's interval'. As we have already seen, the character of Melkor recollects the Christian Devil. As it turns out, he is also specifically associated with werewolves and wargs (along with wolves more generally), which were his creation and

---

[19] K. R. Moore, 'Pythagoras and the (Were)Wolf', *Athens Journal of History* 2.4 (2016), 227–38. See also W. Hawkins, *Pythagoras, the Music of the Spheres, and the Wolf Interval* <http://philclubcle.org/papers/Hawkins,W20111115.pdf>, accessed 20 November 2023; see, too, Kennedy (n. 17).

[20] W. A. Sethares, *Tuning, Timbre, Spectrum, Scale* (Madison, WI, 2005), 163.

[21] See R. W. Duffin, *A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music* (Bloomington, IN, 2000), 547. It is thought that the name might have originated when the wolf fifth was being played on Gothic organs and it reminded listeners of howling wolves, but this is not to say that the term was not used earlier.

serve him in his evil schemes and deeds.[22] And it seems to beg the question as to whether the author was deliberately invoking the so-called 'wolf tone' with such seemingly explicit associations.

Tolkien's education and background are helpful here in terms of pointing toward some possible epistemological connections. It is known that he studied Latin and ancient Greek from as early as 1904, along with Finnish and modern and ancient Gothic. In the autumn of 1911 he attended Exeter College, Oxford, where he initially read the Classics, Old English, the Germanic languages (especially Gothic), Welsh, and Finnish until 1913. Tolkien obtained a second-class degree in Honour Moderations, which was the 'midway' stage of a four-year Oxford 'Greats' (i.e. Classics) course, although he received an 'alpha plus' in philology, which would be a defining feature of his later, academic career. In consequence, he changed from the Classics to the English Language and Literature course, which he evidently found to be more agreeable with his interests. He would receive a first-class honours degree in June of 1915, prior to joining up for the War. One of the poems that he discovered in the course of his Old English studies was the *Crist of Cynewulf*, which clearly intrigued him with its use of the term *middangeard*, which he translated as 'Middle Earth'.[23]

What emerges from most any detailed biography or scholarship on Tolkien is that he despised modernism and industrialization and that he railed against the horrors of modern, industrial warfare, with which he had considerable personal experience. These become allegorized in the villains of his various books, such as Melkor, Sauron, and Saruman. Though a trained classicist and firmly rooted in the Classical tradition, he is perhaps best described as a medievalist, with perhaps his own Catholicism urging him toward medieval Christian philosophy including the likes of St. Augustine (13 November AD 354–28 August 430), Boethius (*c.* AD 477–524), and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–7 March 1274).[24] These facts do not necessarily clarify the epistemological journey from Pythagoras to Tolkien but seem to suggest that his Neoplatonic/Pythagorean roots derive more so out of the Christian writers of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. His

---

[22] Tolkien (n. 2), chapter XIX: 'Of Beren and Lúthien', 162–87.
[23] D. Doughan, 'J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biographical Sketch', *The Tolkien Society* <https://www.tolkiensociety.org/author/biography/>, accessed 20 November 2023.
[24] Halsall (n. 14), 10–13 *et passim*.

medievalism might also point to a source for his incorporation of Pythagorean tuning and the apparent association between discordant tones and wolves, and so thus the 'wolf tone' identified above, as well as Melkor's obvious connections with the Christian Devil. Even so, the subject of dissonance also figures prominently into Plato's depiction of the tripartite *psyche* ('soul/mind') in the *Republic*, especially when it is 'disordered' (439b–432a), which Tolkien almost certainly read, and which would also be adapted into the works of later, Christian thinkers.[25] Indeed, given the ubiquitous operation of something like the Theory of Forms in the *Silmarillion*, along with the later, but much more apparent, appropriation of Plato's story of the Ring of Invisibility (the myth of the ancestor of Gyges) in Book II of the *Republic* (359a–360d), he must have read at least that dialogue if not also the *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus* as well.

Neoplatonic influences and themes are numerous in Tolkien. This has been well-documented, and it is not the aim of this article to rehash them all here. However, some do bear mention as they are highly relevant to this topic. The concept of cosmic harmony adopted by Tolkien in the 'Song of the Ainur', for example, may be seen to derive almost directly from Plato's *Timaeus* (29b–42), and especially from St. Thomas Aquinas' discussion of it in the *Ethics* (15). These reflect ancient Greek ideas of the ratios in musical structure (noted above), equated by the Pythagoreans, Plato, and later, in their own unique way, Christian scholars such as Aquinas, Augustine, and Boethius with the 'World Soul' and the non-static nature of creation.[26] A link with Plotinus (AD 204/5–270) may be noted through his influences on Augustine and, as Halsall has observed, 'Tolkien allies himself to this received inheritance of the Augustinian Neoplatonic tradition in terms of goodness and evil in a pre-lapsarian state'.[27] There are obvious links with Augustine and especially his *de Musica* (*On Music*), which is replete with Neoplatonic and Pythagorean elements. Speech and light, for example, are taken together by Augustine as 'intellectual illumination', exemplified in his interpretation of Genesis. Although, if Tolkien was acquainted with Augustine's views on creation, then they

---

[25] See D. H. Rice, 'Plato on Force: The Conflict Between His Psychology and Political Sociology and His Definition of Temperance in the *Republic*', *HPTh* 10.4 (Winter 1989), 569, for Plato's use of dissonance in the *Republic*.

[26] Halsall (n. 14), 22–3.

[27] *Ibid.*, 28.

were worked into his cosmogony very 'astutely', with some notably 'stylized' departures from that philosophy.[28] The Ainur acting as sub-creators differ from Augustine's view, which regarded God as the sole creator, through the agency of *logos*.[29] And there is an additional variance. Tolkien himself has indicated in his own letters that he does not accept the idea of 'Absolute Evil', noting that Melkor's fall, unlike that of Lucifer, transpired 'before Creation of the physical world'.[30] This is more in keeping with the old Anglo-Saxon concept of 'doom' (or *Wyrd*, 'overarching law, judgement, or personal destiny'), which is apt considering Tolkien's interests; although, it also resonates well with Pythagorean tuning and the discordant tones inasmuch as Melkor's fall is effectively a feature of the musical theme prefigured by the will of Illúvatar.

The result is that Tolkien has created a plausible, alternative version of Genesis, in the sense of internal consistency and external comparability with existing systems of belief. Houghton has observed that the cosmogony of the *Ainulindalë* fits neatly 'among the real cosmogonies known to early Western medieval Europe', albeit also differing from them.[31] Christian thinkers inherited two distinct traditions of this kind, reflecting those which had originated in Jerusalem and Athens: on the one hand, the Hexameron (Ἡ Ἐξαήμερος Δημιουργία), which included the *ex nihilo* creation myth of Genesis and, on the other hand, some combination of the Hesiodic cosmogony mingled with that found in Plato's *Timaeus*, referred to above, which had been translated into Latin and was widely read by medieval scholars in the West.[32] The Hexameron genre of theological treatise elucidates the Judeo-Christian God's activities during the biblical six days of creation, usually in the form of commentaries on Genesis I, and hexameral literature was popular in the early and medieval periods of Christian history. This kind of commentary is to be found among the Latin Church Fathers; St. Basil composed works on the topic, as did St. Ambrose (*c.* AD 340–397), St. Augustine, and

---

[28] *Ibid.*, 56.
[29] J. W. Houghton, 'Augustine in the Cottage of Lost Play: The *Ainulindalë* as Asterisk Cosmogony', in J. Chance (ed.), *Tolkien the Medievalist* (London, 2003), 171–82. 'Sub-creation' and 'sub-creators' are Tolkien's own terms. See letter 153, to Peter Hastings (draft, not sent), in Carpenter (n. 9), 206–11.
[30] H. Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien. A Biography* (London, 1977), 243.
[31] Houghton (n. 29), 171.
[32] *Ibid.*

later St. Thomas Aquinas.[33] Alongside these, the early medieval thinkers had access to numerous pagan commentaries on Plato's *Timaeus*, all of which, to one extent or another, bore a significant influence from the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus. It was St. Augustine's reflections on both these commentaries and on interpretations of Genesis that dominated medieval theological thought about creation.[34] In fact, it has been observed that the double creation (first the idea/ song, then the world) of Tolkien's *Ainulindalë* would have likely been regarded by medieval scholars 'as reassuringly easy to fit into the schema of Augustine's Christian Neoplatonist synthesis, and the writings of others such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Dante'.[35] This is particularly observable in Augustine's refutation of the dualist beliefs within the Manichaean heresy. Even so, Tolkien himself has not provided us with any definitive statement to the effect that his work was directly influenced by these sources.

In keeping with this theme, if we are to trace the epistemological roots of Tolkien's Pythagoreanism, it is worthwhile to consider some additional, specific Neoplatonist influences such as those identified by Collins and others already noted above.[36] As we have seen, they are intrinsically interwoven into early Christian thought thanks to Plotinus by way of Augustine. A key source identified by both Collins and Halsall above is pseudo-Dionysius. He was a Christian Neoplatonist writing in the late fifth or early sixth century AD who transposed, in a thoroughly unique manner, the whole of pagan Neoplatonism from Plotinus (AD 204/5–270) to Proclus (AD 412– 485), but particularly that of Proclus and the Platonic Academy of Athens, into an idiosyncratically novel Christian framework. His works were written as if they were composed by St. Dionysius the Areopagite, a member of the Athenian judicial council (the *Areopagus*) in the first century AD who had been reportedly converted to Christianity by St. Paul. This was clearly with the intent of giving the author a greater claim to veracity. So, these works might be considered a 'successful' forgery insofar as the author was not really

---

[33] See F. E. Robbins, *The Hexaemeral Literature. A Study of the Greek and Latin Commentaries on Genesis* (Chicago, 1912), *passim*.
[34] Halsall (n. 14), 53.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] See M. D. C. Drout (ed.), *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia. Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (New York, 2007), 19. He too identifies the probable influence but without being able to pinpoint a definitive connection to Tolkien.

St. Dionysius the Areopagite but nonetheless contributed greatly to Christian thinking, injecting key elements of Neoplatonism into it and thereby Pythagoreanism as well. Pseudo-Dionysius' view of the visible, created universe was to exert a prominent influence for two major reasons. Firstly, this was due to his vivid sense of the 'aesthetic and imaginative beauty of the sensible universe', which derived from the perspective of divine beauty by its 'interrelatedness and harmony'.[37] Such notions came to inspire Abbot Suger's (Sugerius; *c.* 1081–13 January 1151) programme for a new architecture, notably the Gothic cathedral. Secondly, pseudo-Dionysius also took account of 'ugliness, defect, resistance and evil' according to his principle of evil as 'privation and non-being', which was a theory adopted directly from Plotinus (with major theological changes further adapting it to Christianity) and also from Proclus. Pseudo-Dionysius' interest in 'non-being' as associated with evil here seems virtually synonymous with Tolkien's Nameless Void, with which Melkor, we are told, is also obsessed and intrinsically connected.[38]

The views put forth by pseudo-Dionysius would exert a further influence upon the likes of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–7 March 1274) in medieval times and Marsilio Ficino, the noted Platonist scholar and alchemical researcher, in fifteenth-century Renaissance Florence.[39] Ficino was also responsible for translating the complete works of Plato, obtained from Constantinople, into Latin. In pseudo-Dionysius, harmony is always associated with goodness. And that author likewise comments on disharmony or discord, saying:

But if they should say that it does not make baseness in souls, but that they are dragged to it, how will this be true? For many of them look towards the good; and yet how did this take place, when matter was dragging them entirely to the Evil? So that the Evil in souls is not from matter, but from a disordered and discordant movement. But, if they say this further, that they invariably follow matter, and unstable matter is necessary for those who are unable to stand firmly by themselves, how is the Evil necessary, or the necessary an evil?[40]

---

[37] See esp. pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names* (Περὶ θείων ὀνομάτων), 7.

[38] Tolkien (n. 2), 16, 32.

[39] K. Corrigan and L. M. Harrington, 'Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite', in E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive* (Winter 2019 edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/>, accessed 20 November 2023.

[40] Pseudo-Dionysius (n. 37), 4.28.

He also adds, 'so far as, if anything should have been led astray to dis-cord and disorder, and should suffer any diminution of the perfection of its own proper goods, even this it [Divine Justice] redeems from pas-sion and listlessness and loss'.[41] One can readily observe in these quotes, following Collins above, a view that appears to resonate quite strongly with Tolkien's 'Song of the Ainur' and particularly Melkor's dissonant contribution to it, along with his subsequently villainous behaviour in his role which, as stated, was the equivalent in many ways to that of Milton's Lucifer and, more broadly, the Judeo-Christian Satan. Pseudo-Dionysius too subordinates discord to Divine Justice, much as Tolkien subordinates Melkor's dissonant notes to the ultimate will and plan of Illúvatar.[42] Was Tolkien acquainted with pseudo-Dionysius? It seems more than possible but specific evidence to that effect is lacking.

Tolkien too has offered some tantalizing revelations on this subject in a letter which, for whatever reasons, he never sent but is included in the *compendium* of his surviving correspondences. He writes:

The Ainur took part in the making of the world as 'sub-creators': in various degrees, after this fashion. They interpreted according to their powers, and completed in detail, the Design propounded to them by the One. This was propounded first in musical or abstract form, and then in an 'historical vision'. In the first interpretation, the vast Music of the Ainur, Melkor introduced alterations, not interpretations of the mind of the One, and great discord arose. The One then presented this 'Music', including the apparent discords, as a visible 'history'.[43]

This harmonizes (if the reader will pardon the wordplay) well with other topics already discussed here. But note Tolkien's repeated use of the term 'the One' to refer to the supreme creator Illúvatar. And he does so not only in this letter alone but in multiple such communications, using that term to refer alternately to both Illúvatar and the Christian God. The phrase appears to leap straight out of the pages of Plato, echoing the teachings of the Eleatic Parmenides along with similar language used by the Pythagoreans. And it is not only in his correspondences that he has recourse to that term. In the very opening paragraph of the *Silmarillion* is stated: 'There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the

[41] *Ibid.*, 10.9.
[42] See Halsall (n. 14), 37–9, where he references Job 38:6–7.
[43] See letter 212, draft of a continuation of letter 211 to Rhona Beare, dated 14 October 1958 (not sent), in Carpenter (n. 9).

Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made.' That they are the 'offspring of his thought' emphasizes the likeness with Plato's Theory of Forms, itself quite probably of Pythagorean origin, as well as confirming that Melkor's dissonance is likewise derived from the thoughts of 'the One'. Even if Tolkien has not directly alluded to any specific Pythagorean or Neoplatonist source within his correspondences, the draft letter and the opening lines of the *Silmarillion* itself appear to substantially confirm just such a connection. Tolkien's unsent letter also recollects Christian adaptations of Pythagoreanism as observed in the writings of pseudo-Dionysius and elsewhere. The discords are only 'apparent', as Tolkien writes, not an actual rebellion in the true sense, because they are inherently integral to Illúvatar's plan, much as the dissonant notes must be included in the Pythagorean division of the musical canon in order for the scale to exist at all.

The other Pythagorean source indicated by Collins, whose ideas appear present in Tolkien, is the Neoplatonic poet Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, a Roman Christian from Tarraconensis (Northern Spain), who lived from AD 348 to 413. He is also identified as a probable influence by Drout in his compendious encyclopaedia of Tolkien scholarship, but without definitive proof, that the author was familiar with that source.[44] Prudentius' allegorical *Psychomachia* (*The Battle of the Psyche*) was his most prominent work, incorporating elements of Classical epic in order to explore aspects of internal, psychological struggle.[45] Unsurprisingly, within it we can clearly observe notions of harmony and discord adapted to a Christian context. Consider the following lines from the poem spoken by Discord personified:

I am called Discord, he said, and my other name is Heresy; God to me is variable, now lesser, now greater, now double, now single; when I please he is insubstantial, merely an apparition, or again the soul within us, when I chose to ridicule his divinity. My teacher is Belial, my home and country is the world.[46]

Discord here could almost be speaking the words of Tolkien's Melkor (or Milton's Lucifer). Like Tolkien in the twentieth century,

---

[44] Drout (n. 36), 346.

[45] See G. Highet, *Juvenal the Satirist* (Oxford 1960), 184 ff.

[46] 'Discordia dicor, cognomento Heresis, deus est mihi discolor', inquit, 'nunc minor aut maior modo duplex et modo simplex, cum placet, aerius et de fantasmate uisus, aut in nata anima est, quotiens uolo ludere numen; praeceptor Belia mihi, domus et plaga mundus' (709–14).

Prudentius was marrying Neoplatonic and Pythagorean ideas with Christian ones, in keeping with the likes of fourth- and fifth-century scholars such as Eusebius and St. Augustine.[47] Prudentius was also appropriating epic tropes from Virgil.[48] And that is fitting for Tolkien too, given the epic nature of his own works. The reference to Belial in the *Psychomachia* is additionally striking, as this name occurs in the Hebrew Bible and is later considered synonymous with the Devil.[49]

Could it be that Tolkien had an eye on pseudo-Dionysius and Prudentius when composing the *Silmarillion*? Perhaps that is the case, and these may well have been part and parcel of his reading lists during his student days; although, we have no explicit evidence to support such a view apart from Collins' speculation that this material might have been covered in the philosophical lectures that Tolkien attended at Oxford. However, it has been suggested that another source, even more in keeping with Tolkien's Catholic religious background, is at play here, and one that subsumes many or all of the others here discussed. Halsall has argued that Tolkien's Neoplatonism in the *Ainulindalë* derives more from the musical theory and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas than from Augustine or Boethius, even if it appears to reflect pseudo-Dionysius and Prudentius, as Collins and McIntosh have implied. And Aquinas' theological interpretations of musical theory have been regarded as having an observable impact on Tolkien and his contemporaries.[50] Furthermore, when Tolkien was a youth, it is known that he was given an annotated copy of the *Summa Theologica* (*Summary of Theology*) by his guardian, Father Francis Morgan.[51]

St. Thomas Aquinas was well aware of Pythagorean ideas and especially those concerning music, which he derived in no small part from Augustine's *de Musica*. He even devoted quite a few passages to

---

[47] See M. Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity. Prudentius and the Poetics of the Soul* (Baltimore, MD, 2008), *passim*.

[48] Contrast Prudent. *Psychomachia* 902 with *Aeneid* 6.86 and 7.41.

[49] See also the *Ascension of Isaiah* 1:8–9, 2:4, 3:11–13, 4:2, 4:14–18, 5:1, 5:15; this is a pseudoepigraphical Jewish-Christian text, ranging anywhere from the final decades of the first century AD to the early decades of the third century and certainly known to Prudentius.

[50] See J. Maritain (trans.), J. W. Evans, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry* (New York, 1962) and J. Maritain (trans.), F. J. Sheed, *Theonas. Conversations of a Sage* (London, 1923).

[51] A. B. Robertson, *Voices in Tolkien. Aquinas,* The Lord of the Rings, *and True Myth in the Twenty-First Century*, A thesis submitted to Atlantic School of Theology, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Theology and Religious Studies (Halifax, Nova Scotia, April 2017), 4 *et passim*.

discussion of 'the One' in his *Summa Theologica*, as he understood it to have been expressed by Plato and Pythagoras.[52] Frequently referencing Aristotle, Plato, Empedocles, Augustine (especially his *de Musica*), and Pythagoras throughout, he declares that music is derived 'from principles established by arithmetic'.[53] Pointedly, in his discourse on music, he talks about it as having being *per se*, since it has a cause, and he contrasts it with the colour white, or 'whiteness', which too has being, also having a cause (L.115.7). It may be merely coincidence, but the Pythagoreans considered the colour white to have special, metaphysical symbolism and properties.[54] Empedocles (444–443 BC) had worked out a theory of light and colour which was innately connected with musical harmony. Colour theory in general was important to the Pythagoreans, as well as to Plato, and it formed part of the theoretical framework of both his and their philosophy about music.[55] Whether Aquinas was aware of this, making it a conscious selection for him to place 'whiteness' alongside music as things that have being, is not possible to affirm with any certainty; it is nevertheless an interesting choice on his part.

Again, in his *Summa Theologica*, discussing the metaphysics of music, Aquinas delineates three objective characteristics of beauty: integrity, proportion, and clarity.[56] Integrity refers to the 'completeness' and formal structure of a thing, in keeping with Tolkien's vision of the Ainur as sub-creators based on Illúvatar's sonata. Proportion is a fundamentally Pythagorean concept; 'qualitative proportion' produces harmony and beauty and refers explicitly to the mathematical qualities of the division of the musical canon noted above. Clarity is the 'shining forth of form', which Tolkien inserts into the *Ainulindalë* when the Ainur first observe the created world.[57] Aquinas was heavily influenced by Neoplatonism and if, as some sources noted above have suggested, Tolkien was intimately acquainted with Aquinas' views on the

---

[52] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2, especially in his reply to Objection 1, 'It seems that "one" adds something to "being"'.

[53] *Ibid.*, 1.3 and see too 1.6.

[54] K. R. Moore, 'The Pythagorean Symbolism in Plato's *Philebus*', *Athens Journal of History* 2.2 (2016), 83–95.

[55] See R. V. Munson (trans.), G. Comotti, *Music in Greek and Roman Culture* (Baltimore and London, 1989), 110–20; See too Pl. *Meno.* 76c–d, *Tht.* 153e–154a, both referencing Empedocles and Pythagorean theories of colour; *Lysis* 217d, *Ti.* 67c ff., *Euthyd.* 303d, the *Republic*'s myth of Er 617a, *Leg.* 947b.

[56] Aquinas (n. 52), 1.5–6.

[57] Tolkien (n. 2), 21. See Halsall (n. 14), 68–9; and see too R. E. Wood, *Placing Aesthetics. Reflections on Philosophic Tradition* (Athens, IL, 1999), 109.

metaphysics of music, then there appears to be a clear link which may account for the author's use of such concepts in the *Silmarillion*.

Even so, Halsall has argued that having the Ainur as co-creators runs contrary to the Neoplatonist principle of 'diminution and decline' (exemplified by Plato's 'Nuptial Number' in the *Republic*, 8.546b), adding that 'even the rebellious and discordant music of Melkor is an opportunity on the part of the Ainur for "theodicy"'.[58] And that is more in keeping with Aquinas' theological positions than those of Pythagoras or Plato. Theodicy refers to the vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil, or why a 'good' God would permit evil to exist at all. This is a topic with which Christian theology has grappled for centuries. Halsall addresses the issue of evil and free will in his work with much recourse to Catholic doctrine and Aquinas in particular. Tolkien himself has added his own views on this subject in his letters, writing:

That Sauron was not himself destroyed in the anger of the One is not my fault: the problem of evil, and its apparent toleration, is a permanent one for all who concern themselves with our world. The indestructibility of spirits with free wills, even by the Creator of them, is also an inevitable feature, if one either believes in their existence, or feigns it in a story.[59]

Melkor's 'free will' is clearly subordinated to the divine plan of Illúvatar and, in that regard at least, it is highly compatible with Aquinas' and Prudentius' views. Yet, as has been demonstrated, the dissonance of Melkor's musical theme is not merely a discordant element that reflected the zeitgeist of Tolkien's era following the First World War, figuring prominently into the music of composers at the time, as stated, it is also absolutely essential for the Pythagorean division of the musical canon. Tolkien, of course, as he himself has written, is not obliged to follow any single philosophical or religious tradition in his fiction-writing and we would therefore not expect his constructed theology or cosmology to be 100 per cent compatible with either Neoplatonism or Christianity, however influenced by both of them. The discord of Melkor resonates with Christian debates and discourses over evil and free will going back to the Latin Fathers, but it is also a

---

[58] Halsall (n. 14), 72.
[59] Letter 211, in response to a letter of Rhona Beare, dated 14 October 1958 (the one to which 212 was originally written as a further reply but was not sent), in Carpenter (n. 9), 295–302.

distinctly Pythagorean element and a deliberate choice on Tolkien's part.

In terms of the secondary scholarship availed here, some further caveats need to be levied. Collins seems to overplay the role of modern philosophy, though not without due recourse to ancient and medieval, in his interpretation of the *Ainulindalë*. And this position has some merit though it depends on precisely which philosophical influences affected Tolkien and whether we can know them. By contrast, Halsall is clearly more immersed in medieval Catholic philosophy, undertaking some very finely focused analysis of Aquinas in particular and relating it reasonably well in his exegesis of Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. The author was, by all accounts, a devout Catholic, and Halsall may not be remiss in drawing just such connections. Both of these scholars, as with others, have their own agendas. And they run the risk of depicting Tolkien perhaps less correctly than he really was and more as they would have him be. Not unlike Alexander the Great, Tolkien has become in our own age such an epic figure that his reception has taken on a distorted *Nachleben* (afterlife) in the writings of, albeit well-intentioned, interpretive biographers; although, all usually entail elements of truth to varying degrees. The 'real' man and his thoughts nevertheless remain more elusive.

What we can know with relative certainty is that Tolkien read Aquinas at an early stage in his life and that he was living in an era and a cultural context steeped in that theologian's philosophies. And Aquinas was well versed in Pythagorean musical theory. Tolkien studied the Classics too, during which time he was almost certainly exposed to Plato and other ancient philosophers, especially those whose ideas were more compatible with Catholic doctrine. Did he also read Augustine, Prudentius, and pseudo-Dionysius? This is not certain, but the apparent connections with Neoplatonist views regarding music, and discord in particular, seem reasonable and well supported by the scholarship on the *Ainulindalë*. Even so, as this article has tried to demonstrate, Tolkien evinces a keen grasp of Pythagorean tuning and has incorporated this in a specific and unique way within his writing – a subject that, apart from its allegorical manifestations, has been widely unknown outside specialist studies of Pythagoreanism and musical theory. And he has deployed it in a manner that is apt to both the allegorical and the wider metaphysical ramifications of those approaches.

No doubt some would find it thrilling for this article to conclude by asserting that J. R. R. Tolkien was in fact some kind of secret Pythagorean who was fully aware of their division of the musical canon, with its dissonant notes, along with the wider, more cosmic implications thereof, embedding these ideas into his narrative. Melkor's discordant additions to the 'Song of the Ainur', as with the 'Song of the Ainur itself', are compelling evidence in and of themselves. And Tolkien's multiple references to 'the One' in both the *Silmarillion* and in his letters, sent and unsent, are very interesting indeed. However, the evidence available does not unequivocally sustain such an assertion.

What appears to be a more solid a conclusion is that Tolkien was manifestly influenced by a series of thinkers, spanning through a virtually unbroken chain from Pythagoras himself up to Aquinas, from which the general pattern of the *Ainulindalë*'s Pythagorean elements may be epistemologically deduced to a point, as they have been here. This article's particular inquiry into Tolkien's awareness of rather nuanced elements of Pythagorean tuning has disclosed a range of possible and probable links. Most scholars have missed this unique reception of Pythagorean dissonance in Tolkien or only obliquely noted it in the context of other agendas. Collins alluded to the potential influence of pseudo-Dionysius and Prudentius. And, while their impact is evident, it has been demonstrated that they formed only links in the chain of transmission and that there is no evidence that Tolkien ever read them, although he did read sources influenced by them. Like Collins, Halsall noted the discord of Melkor but focused more on its subordination to the divine will of Illúvatar, drawing parallels with the Christian Fall and questions of free will. This article has argued that Tolkien purposefully selected the notion of Pythagorean dissonance almost certainly from Augustine, by way of Aquinas, and potentially from his reading of Plato's *Republic* as well, pointedly implementing it in order to prefigure the narrative structure of his fictional universe. However, there are limits to what we can know of Tolkien's thoughts, and one runs the risk of concluding on a 'sour note' here, not unlike the so-called wolf tone howling out for attention, but without revealing the details of its arcane mystery. Such discord may perhaps yet be harmonized by permitting the closing lines to Tolkien himself and, in those words, we can perhaps take some small consolation: 'For (partly to redress the evil of the rebel Melkor, partly

for the completion of all in an ultimate finesse of detail)', as that author has provocatively expounded, 'the Creator had not revealed all'.[60]

KENNETH MOORE

Teesside University, UK

K.R.Moore@tees.ac.uk

[60] Letter 131 to Milton Waldman in Carpenter (n. 9), 167–78.