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Chapter 3. The Religious Affordances of Fictional Narratives

Tolkien's literary mythology constitutes a corpus of fictional narratives. His stories fall under the category of fiction, rather than history, because they are literary narratives which are not intended by their author to refer to events which have taken place in the actual world prior to being entextualised. Instead they project a fictional world of their own (cf. section 2.1.2 above). But if Tolkien's narratives are fictional, why then do some readers treat them as religious narratives? There must be certain semiotic elements in Tolkien's narratives, elements which not all fictional texts share, that make a religionising reading possible. I refer to these elements as the *religious affordances* of Tolkien's literary mythology. I explore the religious affordances of *H* and *LR* in chapter 7 and those of *S* in chapter 9. In section 14.1, I analyse the religious affordances of Peter Jackson's movies, and those of *HoMe* are treated in chapter 15.

In this chapter, I introduce the very notion of religious affordances in some detail, proceeding in two steps. First, I draw on text-centred *semiotic* and reader-centred *reader-response* approaches to offer some general comments on the process of semiosis by which text and reader co-constitute the interpretation of a given text. I also suggest that the dynamic relation between text and reader can better be conceptualised by applying James Gibson's concept of "affordances" (1979) to the study of texts. As a second step, I coin the notion of "religious affordances" to refer to those traits in a narrative which promote a reading of it as a religious text. I identify four types of religious affordances, namely fantastic elements, narrative religion, thematisation of the text's veracity, divine source claims. I further demonstrate that some of these religious affordances can be found also in fictional narratives, and that others can be attributed to fictional narratives by paratexts or be promoted by intertexts. In other words, some fictional narratives include a sub-dominant potential for religious interpretation which is not salient enough to force itself on a reader, but which can be activated by readers who are both emotionally attached to the narratives and believe in the reality of such supernatural features (gods, magic, etc.) which are presented as real within the fictional world. The concept of religious affordances makes it possible to theorise (and predict) why some fictional texts are more likely than others to be used as authoritative texts for religious activity without having to abandon the distinction between fictional and religious narratives.

3.1. Textual Affordances and the Semiosic Process of Reading

Literary scholars agree that reading takes the form of a meaning-constituting process which requires the co-presence of a text and a reader.[120] Umberto Eco refers to this process as "semiosic" or "semantic" interpretation (1990, 54). It is *interpretation* because it results from the reader's processing of the text, and *semantic* because the reader engages with the semantics or inherent meaning of the text (Eco 1990, 54). However, if literary scholars agree that both text and reader play a role in the interpretation process, they disagree fervently about the conclusions to be drawn from this fundamental fact.

For some reader-response theorists it implies that texts do not contain meaning in themselves prior to a reader's interpretive engagement with them. Stanley Fish, who is probably the most well-known reader-response critic, has even argued that we should no longer speak of texts if by a text we mean "an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next" (1980, vii). The 'texts' which are the object of literary studies from a reader-response respective are not the lines of letters on paper which we usually refer to as texts (and which Eco calls "Linear Text Manifestations"; 1990, 54), but those 'texts' which Wolfgang Iser refers to as 'virtual texts' (1976), namely the products of the semiosic and interpretive process. This does not mean that the interpretation of texts is completely random according to Fish. The "structure of meaning" which is produced through reading is namely always created "from the perspective of [a particular set of] interpretive assumptions" (Fish 1980, vii). Readers have acquired these assumptions by being socialised into an "interpretive community" (Fish 1980, ch. 6). Fish acknowledges that the text itself contributes to the construction of meaning, but maintains that we can never determine the inherent meaning of the text itself, hindered as we are by our own interpretive conventions and assumptions.

Eco grants that the situation sketched by Fish applies in most cases, namely when literature is read by casual readers whose engagement with the text takes the form of pre-theoretical and unreflective, semantic interpretation.[121] He insists, however, that it is possible for critical readers who are informed by semiotic theory, and who systematically test their interpretations against the text, to reconstruct or at least approximate the meaning(s) of the text itself. This reflective and theoretical exercise, which Eco calls "critical interpretation" (or "semiotic interpretation") is an entirely different way of approaching the text, a "metalinguistic activity – a semiotic approach –

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[120] "Context" is sometimes added as a third factor, but that would make the discussion at hand unnecessarily complicated. When I say that the reader co-determines the reading, I refer not only to the very presence of a person who can actualise (one of) the meaning(s) of the text, but also to one who brings his or her knowledge, experience, and expectations, a *semiotic context* in other words, to bear on the text.

[121] Eco defines the "semantic interpretation" (or "semiosic interpretation") of casual readers as "the result of the process by which an addressee, facing a Linear Text Manifestation, fills it up with a given meaning" (1990, 54).

which aims at describing and explaining for which formal reasons a given text produces a given response" (Eco 1990, 54).[122]

My analysis of Tolkien's literary mythology seeks to combine insights from Eco and Fish. On the one hand and inspired by Eco, my own approach is a form of critical interpretation of Tolkien's texts aimed at describing and explaining the formal reasons why they are able to produce certain responses, *in casu* a fictionalising and a religionising reading.[123] On the other hand, I am particularly interested in the formal reasons why Tolkien's narratives produce a variant response (the religionising reading) *in a certain group of readers* who are typically already active in the cultic milieu and hence might be said to constitute an interpretive community in Fish' sense. Not all religionists in the cultic milieu are inclined to read Tolkien religiously, however, so it seems that belonging to the cultic milieu is only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for adopting the religionising mode. The best way of explaining this is to say that Tolkien's literary mythology offers two principal reading modes or sets of 'textual affordances', namely *fictional affordances* which are dominant and promote a reading of the text as fictional, and *religious affordances* which are sub-dominant and promote a religious reading of the text. That the text possesses religious affordances at all explains why it *can* be read religiously. The fact that the religious affordances are dominated, so to speak, by the fictional affordances, explains why only a few follow this interpretive option. In other words, Tolkien's literary mythology not only affords an interpretation as fiction for readers in general. For religionists within the cultic milieu it affords *both* an interpretation as fiction *and* one as a religious narrative.

I borrow the concept of affordances from the ecological psychologist James Gibson. Gibson argued that objects in the environment possess particular "affordances" that present themselves as "action possibilities" for animals and humans (1979, ch. 8). Hollow trees, for instance, afford 'living-in' for certain animals. Going beyond Gibson, we can add that also human-made artefacts have affordances.[124] Some of these artefact affordances are a function of the designer's intention, but not all. Chairs, for instance, afford

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[122] Borrowing from Richard Rorty, Eco further distinguishes the two forms of interpretation from what he calls the "use" of a text. While interpretation, whether semantic or critical, engages with the semantics of the text, use, in Eco's technical sense, has a purpose that lies outside the text itself. Lighting one's pipe with a page from the Bible is an example of use. Readings that use the text to infer something about text-external states of affairs are also uses for Eco, for instance the attempt to reconstruct the personality of the author from a reading of his or her text (1990, 57).

[123] I will adopt Eco's general approach, but not use his particular theoretical apparatus in my analysis of Tolkien's narratives. Where relevant, I will draw on other semioticians, including Gérard Genette (1980; 1997a; 1997b), Algirdas Julien Greimas (cf. Courtés and Greimas 1988), and Ole Davidsen (1993), as well as on the fiction theorists Dorrit Cohn and Marie-Laure Ryan who were introduced in chapter 2.

[124] The concept of affordances has recently been applied to the study of material culture (e.g. Dant 2005, ch. 4; Woodward 2007; Knappett 2005) and it has inspired the analysis of human-artefact interaction in actor-network-theory (Latour 2005; Law 2009).

'sitting-on', but also 'standing-on', 'throwing-with' and so on. I argue that the same is true of texts. Analogous to the chair example, texts tend to afford both an 'intended interpretation' (analogous to 'sitting-on' the chair) and a range of unintended, but possible interpretations (analogous to 'standing-on' and 'throwing-with' the chair). One strength of Gibson's notion of affordances is that it emphasises that the same natural object or human-made artefact can simultaneously offer more than one action possibility to actors, even when one is most likely to occur and/or when one action possibility is intended.[125] While Gibson is interested in *action possibilities* offered by objects, his insight is easily transferred to texts and other signs which afford various *interpretation possibilities* or 'semiotic affordances'. What I refer to as textual affordances are simply the semiotic affordances of texts. As already mentioned, I further speak of those semiotic elements in a text which make a fictional respectively a religious reading possible as fictionalising and religious affordances.

It is important to emphasise that fictionalising affordances and what Dorrit Cohn calls "signposts of fictionality" (1999, viii, ch. 7) *are not the same*. Cohn's signposts of fictionality point *back* towards the author. They are elements in the text which a careful reader can use to determine whether the text *in itself* is fiction or not, based on a reconstruction of the author's intention. By contrast, textual affordances, including fictionalising and religious affordances, point *forward* towards the reader. They are elements in the text which make a particular reading possible, regardless of the author's intention. The same textual elements can serve both as signposts of fictionality (or non-fictionality) *and* afford various interpretations for readers. Consider for instance the occurrence in Tolkien's literary mythology of Elves and Wizards and playful statements about the historicity of the text. These semiotic elements are signposts of fictionality and at the same time afford both an intended reading as through-and-through fiction and an unintended reading as a fictional story about real supernatural entities.

3.2. Four Types of Religious Affordances

We can hypothesise that fictional narratives are usable as religious texts in so far as they possess some of the religious affordances which characterise religious narratives proper. In order to be able to discern the religious affordances of fictional texts, it is therefore necessary to first look at those textual traits that scholars of religion consider constitutive

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[125] There is another aspect of the affordance concept which is equally important in Gibson's work, but unimportant for us. That is Gibson's insistence that affordances are relative not only to the physical qualities of an object in the environment, but also to the physical-functional qualities of a perceiving animal (or human actor). Affordances are thus not features of the environment itself, but of the environment-animal relation. Water, for instance, affords 'walking on' for certain insects, but not for elephants. Tolkien's literary mythology does not afford 'reading' for insects and elephants, but only for humans who can process the language in which it is written, but that is irrelevant for the purpose of this thesis.

of religious narratives. I draw here on the work of the Scandinavian scholars of religion Ole Davidsen (2005a; 2005b), Torsten Pettersson (2005), and Anders Klostergaard Petersen (2005) who have identified three textual features that promote a religious reading and who argue that texts with a high concentration of such traits can be referred to as religious texts.[126] One of these traits has to do with the *narrate*, i.e. the meaning content of the narrative, and two have to do with the mode of *narration*.

The criterion of what constitutes a religious narrative in terms of content is intimately linked to the definition of religion. Given my substantive definition of religion (cf. section 0.3.3 above), religious narratives should thus include references to supernatural agents and possibly to supernatural worlds and processes as well. In religious narratives we encounter agents and worlds (think of Zeus and Hera, and of Muhammad's journey to Heaven) which are supernatural from the point of view of the actual world, but real within the narrative world.[127] Also fiction can include references to supernatural agents, worlds, and processes on the narrate level, however, so clearly this substantive criterion is not enough to demarcate religious narratives from other narratives. It is necessary, therefore, to look also at the mode of narration.

One fundamental feature of the narration in religious narratives is the text's claim to speak about the actual world rather than about a fictional world.[128] In Torsten Pettersson's words, the religious narrative has 'reference ambition', i.e. it 'claims to communicate the truth about the actual world, 'truth' here referring to a postulated correspondence between the textual discourse and the subject matter it refers to' (2005, 219).[129] Ole Davidsen formulates the difference between fiction and religious texts in a similar way when he writes that

> [w]here fiction stays within its own world which the reader has to transport himself to, [religious literature] intrudes into the life-world of the reader. Fiction speaks about the world of the reader, but only indirectly. It tells of a fictional world which the reader can use as a mirror for his own world. The religious text does not only speak about, but *blends into*, its reader's world (2005b, 397-398; emphasis in original).[130]

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[126] When quoting these authors, I have translated the original Danish and Swedish into English.

[127] I do not mention impersonal powers here, since these rarely feature in narratives (unless in personified form), but rather belong to the province of discursive theology.

[128] It follows from this that the responsibility for the speech act of 'claiming truth' resides with the text's author rather than with a narrator. This is even the case with ancient religious texts whose author is unknown.

[129] Fictional texts lack reference ambition, though they can have the ambition to convey representative truths about what is true in general, for instance of certain types of people or situations (Pettersson 2005, 221). Pettersson contrasts the reference ambition (or representativity ambition) of the text with the reference authority (or representativity authority) which is ascribed to the text by its reader (2005, 221).

[130] See also Davidsen (1993, 7-8).

Taken together with the substantive criterion above, a definition of religious narratives now emerges according to which religious narratives are *narratives which claim to tell of the actions of supernatural agents in the actual world*.

A second trait on the level of narration is furthermore used by Anders Klostergaard Petersen to differentiate a *specific type* of religious texts, namely the so-called 'holy texts', from religious texts in general (2005, 429). For Petersen, holy texts constitute a type of particularly central religious texts which not only claim to tell the truth *about* the supernatural, but also claim to *stem from* a supernatural source. This is most pronounced in texts which claim to be directly revealed or indirectly inspired by a divine source. In Ole Davidsen's terms, such texts claim that a 'discursive determinator' stands behind the human author as the text's ultimate addresser (2005b, 390, 397-398).

We can distinguish so far between three types of religious affordances that characterise religious narratives in general – or holy texts in particular – and which all promote a religious interpretation. On the narrate level, religious narratives include (1) *fantastic elements*[131] (especially agents; also worlds and processes) which are real within the narrative, but supernatural from the perspective of the actual world. On the level of narration, religious narratives (2) thematise and assert their own *veracity*, and (3) sometimes claim to stem from a *divine source*. Since it is important to be able to distinguish between religious narratives and holy narratives, I consider the claim to stem from a divine source to be an independent type of religious affordances, though it strictly speaking only constitutes a sub-set of the religious affordances 'thematisation and assertion of veracity'.

If we think of religious narratives not only as expressions of a religious worldview, but also as texts which can (and are often made to) inspire religious practice to be modelled upon them, it becomes necessary to add a fourth type of religious affordances to the three we already have. On the narrate level, religious narratives often include what I will term *narrative religion*, i.e. more or less organised systems of practices directed at supernatural agents who are considered divine within the narrative world, together with information given in the narrative about these agents, their actions, and their projects. The core of narrative religion is constituted by religious practice engaged in by the characters of the narrative and instructions by authoritative characters on how to do so. Prometheus' institution of sacrifice to the gods in Hesiod's *Theogony* (actual practice) and Jesus' lesson to the disciples on how to pray in Luke 11:1-4 (instruction) are examples of this. The function of narrative religious practices is to provide the text's readers with a model for their own religious practice in the actual world. Also other information about the

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[131] I use the term 'fantastic' in this thesis to denote something which is (a) impossible in the actual world, but (b) evidently real within the narrated world. This is one of two uses of the term, the other being associated with Tzvetan Todorov (1975), for whom 'the fantastic' refers to those *seemingly* supernatural events whose status as natural or supernatural remains uncertain within the narrative world. Todorov refers to that which is supernatural from the perspective of the actual world, yet unequivocally real within the narrative world, as either the "marvellous" (if it is benign) or the "uncanny" (if it is malign).

divine beings (theology), about the actions of the divine beings (such as the creation of the world), and about their projects (soteriology; eschatology), fall under narrative religion. The function of these parts of the narrative religion is to demonstrate why it is worthwhile to engage in a relationship with the divine agent(s).[132] Analogous to the divine source claim being really a sub-type of 'thematisation and assertion of veracity', narrative religion is strictly speaking a sub-type of fantastic elements. Given that communication with and about supernatural agents constitutes the core of living religions, it is nevertheless warranted to single out communication with and about supernatural agents within narrative worlds (narrative religion) as a distinct type of religious affordances.

Now the questions are: to what extent can fictional narratives in general possess these four types of religious affordances? And does Tolkien's literary mythology actually do so? Let us first consider the two religious affordances on the narrate level, fantastic elements and narrative religion. Speculative fiction, especially fantasy and science fiction, per definition includes fantastic elements. That is true also for Tolkien's literary mythology: both *LR* and *S* swell with non-human beings, magic, otherworlds, visions, and so on. In many cases, speculative fiction also includes narrative religion. That is the case when it includes beings who are regarded as divine within the narrative world and to whom ritual practices are directed by the characters of the narrative. Tolkien's literary mythology includes some narrative religion in this sense, for it includes several deities (Eru and the Valar) and beliefs associated with them, though it has few rituals and no religious institutions. The main narrative of *LR* includes a few descriptions of rituals directed at the Valar, and the appendices provide some information about the Elven ritual calendar. *S* contains no narrative religious practices, but includes extensive information on the topics of theology, cosmology, and eschatology. To take another example, we also have bits of narrative religion in *Star Wars*. For example, Obi-Wan Kenobi tells Luke Skywalker about the Force, Master Yoda instructs Luke how to 'use the Force', Darth Vader meditates in his Meditation Egg, and the rebels greet each other 'May the Force be With You'.[133]

Speculative fiction does not assert its own veracity regarding the supernatural beings it tells about, nor does it claim to be divinely inspired. Indeed, if a narrative did one of those two things, it would not be fiction at all, but would instead be a religious (and possibly even a holy) narrative. Nevertheless, some works of fiction indirectly or ambi-

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[132] Petersen similarly points out that religious texts share the substantial feature of 'representing or manifesting systems of meaning which include transempirical powers situated in a world different from the immediately accessible' (2005, 417). He does not, however, emphasise the importance of narrated religious practices in the way that I do.

[133] Within the textual worlds projected by most cases of speculative fiction (and certainly within Tolkien's Arda), it makes no sense to consider those beings who are most powerful and non-ordinary (such as the Valar or the Force) to be 'supernatural', for within such fictional worlds (just as in the textual worlds projected by religious texts) the gods *really exist* and are not merely *believed to exist*.

guously thematise their own veracity, and *LR* is one them. In the prologue to *LR*, a frame narrative connects the narrative events to the reader's world, and a voice, either a fictional narrator or Tolkien the author, claims that the text which follows is ancient history. The referential reading of the text which is hereby made possible is further supported by the frequent assertion by authoritative characters that there is a true historical core in all myths and folktales.[134]

Paratextual and intertextual sources can promote the ascription of veracity to fictional texts and even ascribe divine authorship to them. In the case of Tolkien's literary mythology, Tolkien's prefaces to *H* and *LR* constitute *paratexts* which support the ploy of feigned history established in the narrative itself.[135] Also Tolkien's letters (*Letters*) provide information about the author's intentions on how to read the narratives.[136] The letters are interesting, because Tolkien in some of them professes to have felt inspired during the writing process, statements which afford the reading of his text as ultimately stemming from a divine determinator. Tolkien's narratives can furthermore be ascribed (indirect) religious veracity because of their *intertextual* relation to those German, Celtic, Biblical, and other mythologies from which Tolkien drew inspiration.[137] Readers who consider (some of) Tolkien's sources to have religious reference authority are more likely to attribute such authority also to Tolkien's literary mythology. This goes for both readers with a Neo-Pagan and a Christian background.

In my analysis of the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology I will look for the four types of religious affordances outlined above in the narratives themselves and in the prefaces and letters. My approach is to list those traits in Tolkien's narratives which characterise religious texts in general, but it is ultimately an empirical

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[134] I analyse this playful imitation of history in greater detail in section 7.3 below.

[135] In Gérard Genette's terminology, the 'paratext' refers to all the auxiliary texts around the main text. The category includes not only the authorial preface, but also the book cover and notes from the publisher (Genette 1997a, 3). The function of the paratext is to make it clear to the reader how to read the main text (Genette 1997b). On the back cover of the 50-years anniversary edition of *LR*, for instance, a review from the *Sunday Telegraph* is quoted, referring to the book as one "among the greatest works of *imaginative fiction* of the twentieth century" (emphasis added). That is a patent paratextual deixis of the text's fictional character, i.e. a paratextual fictional affordance. As I point out in section 7.3 below, however, Tolkien's authorial prefaces, especially the one to the first edition of *LR*, can be read as prescribing a referential reading of the narrative.

[136] Though the letters can be read as authorial prefaces and hence serve the same function as the paratext, they are strictly speaking (in Genette's terminology) *metatexts*, i.e. texts which comment or reflect on other texts that they have not been published together with (Genette 1997a, 4).

[137] I use Mikael Bakhtin's term intertextuality here since it is the better known term. For Genette, whose terminology I otherwise follow, intertextuality refers narrowly to the citation of (or allusion to) particular hypotexts. Genette would characterise the transtextual (his general term) relation between Tolkien's literary mythology (especially *S*) and the mythologies which inspired Tolkien as one of *architextuality* (i.e. dependence on mythology as genre) and *hypertextuality* (i.e. obvious, but implicit dependence on particular other texts) (Genette 1997a, 4-6).

question which of these religious affordances are actualised in the religious activity of Tolkien religionists. It might be that some of the traits which I here hypothesise to promote a religious interpretation of fictional narratives are absolutely necessary, while others are optional. This question, which requires a comparison of the hypothesised religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology with the actual use of this text corpus in the spiritual Tolkien milieu, will be considered along the way and treated systematically in the conclusion.