

Tolkien and Post-Modernism

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It may seem manifest madness to suggest that J. R. R. Tolkien has any real engagement with post-modern concerns, especially when we recall the many reasons for describing him as a *pre*-modern and antiquarian writer. Tolkien regarded nearly everything worthy of praise in English culture to have ended in 1066. He scorned the imposition of Norman culture on a vibrant English tradition that had flourished for more than 500 years; he looked upon the Arthurian legends as an alien French import and thus as no fit basis for a national mythology; he lamented Chaucer's penchant for the gently rocking Italian iambic over against the hard spondaic stresses of Anglo-Saxon meter; he also regarded Shakespeare as hopelessly modern, since so many of his characters remain so obsessively subjective in their quandaries. Tolkien also judged the Reformation to be a terrible error, insisting that the cathedrals of England were stolen Catholic property, the booty of what G. K. Chesterton called the 16th century "revolution of the rich." Neither was he happy that his dear friend and companion, C. S. Lewis, remained, for the entirety of his life, what Tolkien derisively called "an Ulster Protestant."

The litany of Tolkien's anti-modernity could be extended almost endlessly. He was a confessed Luddite, for example, who lamented the Triumph of the Machine, as he described the Industrial Revolution and all its pomps. He refused, moreover, to drive a motorcar once he saw the damage that paved roads and automobiles had done to the English countryside. Tolkien also remained a lifelong Tory and an unapologetic monarchist in his politics, believing that hierarchical distinctions are necessary for the flourishing of any polity,

whether academic or ecclesial or governmental. He longed, in fact, for the return of Roman Catholicism as the established state religion of England. In both his poetry and his prose, moreover, Tolkien had repeated recourse to decidedly pre-modern literary forms, especially to the conventions of the epic and the romance. As Kenneth Craven has recently written: “J.R.R. Tolkien was an ‘Ancient’ in the sense that he never wanted to live in the present time, but in saner ages and in eternity.... Tolkien [was] as ancient as Treebeard, a mossy poet who lived in the languages and poems of the Dark Ages.”¹

Yet I contend that, for all of his admitted troglodyte sentiments, Tolkien can be shown to have anticipated many of the concerns of the post-modernists—even if he answered them not at all in post-modernist terms. Let it be made ever so clear that I do not regard Tolkien himself as a post-modernist in any intentional or accidental sense, but rather as an author whose concerns often coincide and overlap with those of the post-modernists. Just as Jan Kott revealed more than forty years ago that Shakespeare shares our contemporary *problématique*, so does Tolkien anticipate, in a similarly proleptic way, the vexations and opportunities of the post-modern world. To make this counter-intuitive case, I will first seek to define the collapse of modernism that Tolkien so accurately foresaw.

Prologue: The Modern “God” Who Is Not God

So convoluted is the program of postmodernism that John Barth has described it as “tying your necktie while simultaneously explaining the step-by-step procedure of necktie-tying and chatting about the history of male neckwear — and managing a perfect full Windsor anyhow.” Richard Rorty has suggested that we drop the term “post-modern,” so elusive has become its meaning, so crude has been its overuse. Yet there is no avoiding Jean-

François Lyotard's celebrated claim that to be post-modern is to be incredulous toward metanarratives. What Lyotard means is not that there can be no overarching Story—even its denial would constitute a new metanarrative—but that the chief modern narratives have been reductive and totalizing. Whether in Hegel or Marx or Freud, human existence is explained so finally and definitively that there is nothing left unaccountable, nothing without remainder, no mystery inviting wonder and endless exploration. Both the pretense and the inhumanity of the modern project were first named by Søren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century. The great Danish poet-philosopher famously said of Hegel that he built a palace of thought so magnificent that it was uninhabitable—and so he had to construct a shanty outside it to actually inhabit. Kierkegaard was thus the first to discern that, without recourse to the divine revelation that makes such a perspective possible, modernity nonetheless attempts to view the universe *sub specie aeternitatis*. At the heart of the Enlightenment project lies the notion that man-*qua*-man can stand above the flux of history to behold the universe from beyond, examining it “under the aspect of eternity”; i.e., from a timeless and placeless stance, a “view from nowhere.”

The story of this modern delusion has been told many times and in many ways. Suffice it ever so briefly to say that it has its origin in medieval nominalism, especially in Scotus and Ockham. They sought to rid theological language of ambiguity and equivocation, seeking instead “an absolute transparency of the language of every science.” They did so by way of semantic reduction and simplification that exalted the denotative over the connotative. “Only the former can be said to refer to existing entities that do not need the mediation of universals either for their existence or for our immediate cognition of them.” God, in turn, could no longer be symbolized through nature because nature itself is utterly

contingent on a “God” whose will is at once so powerful and arbitrary that He could just as readily have assumed the form of a stone or donkey as the person named Jesus of Nazareth.² The upshot of this reversal is that the rich medieval tradition of the *analogia entis*—the “method of predication whereby concepts derived from a familiar object are made applicable to a relatively unknown object in virtue of some similarity between two otherwise dissimilar objects”³—was steadily abandoned.

This was no small loss, for the analogical concept seeks to avoid both equivocation and univocation by embracing “the common and the proper, like and unlike, in a community which is logically indivisible.... [It] is founded on that community and diversity which is present in every existing thing precisely in its being.”⁴ Thus, for example, could Aquinas speak confidently of human justice being analogous to divine justice because, though the two terms are far from identical, neither are they utterly unlike. With the loss of such analogical predications for God, the analogical imagination itself was impoverished, for nature and history themselves were also desymbolized.⁵ Thus did a new conception of space and location arise with Scotus and Ockham. With such a vacating of real significance from both bodies and places, of metaphors as well as analogies, the universe had been made at once homogeneous and univocal and ultimately godless.

The Nominalists opened the way for Descartes to make God not only beyond analogy but also unnecessary. For him, bodies are nothing but extended things, so that space and matter have the same meaning: “the material world is one infinite continuum, and in fact, all matter is one substance.” Whence, then, motion? To say, as Descartes did, that God implanted certain rules of quantity and motion within matter is an empty hypothesis, as Newton complained. In fact, God is not needed at all in a Cartesian universe:

Matter-in-motion is conceived of by Descartes as devoid of any final cause or aim. But it is even difficult to see how a spirit could intervene in this closed system of causality by motion. If animals are pure *automata*, why not also all the actions of the human body? Finally, Descartes insists ... on a voluntarism more radical than the most radical Nominalists. God is first and foremost omnipotent and self-caused; all his other attributes depend on his will. If he so willed, he could invalidate our “clear and distinct” ideas; even eternal truths are contingent upon his will.⁶

Despite his well-meant attempt to defend such an arbitrary god as the author of such a mathematical universe, Descartes left the world godless. “Mind, not the universe,” writes Michael Buckley, “bears the evidence for the divine existence. Just as the divine truth guarantees the external physical world, so the divine infinity removes from this universe any discernible final order and purpose.” What is left, asks Buckley, when final causes are removed from the universe? “A mechanical universe whose entire composition can be explained simply by matter and the laws of nature.”⁷

Buckley has traced the sorry history of those thinkers—especially Isaac Newton, Nicolas Malebranche, and Samuel Clarke— who both embraced and attempted to defend Descartes’s “God.” The result was unmitigated failure. Whereas the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was once regarded as the condition for the possibility of the world’s existence—so that everything in the world bore witness to God—this newly-minted deistic “God” now bore witness to the world. In the lesser tradition that runs from John Toland’s *Christianity Not Mystrious*, Matthew Tindal’s *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, and finally to William Paley’s *Evidences for Christianity*, the contradiction was even more drastic, as an impersonal natural order became the alleged basis for belief in the irreducibly personal God. “Let

nature,” writes Buckley about this tradition, “whether in the inner orientation of things or in the ontological structure of ideas, constitute the evidence for the existence of god; let philosophy be the discipline by which this evidence is analyzed.”⁸

What Buckley finds astonishing about the seventeenth and eighteenth century Christian apologists and defenders of the Faith is that, with the exception of Blaise Pascal, none of them appealed either to Christ or Christian experience. They had no recourse whatsoever to the lives of the saints, to mystical prayer and miracles, or to the ordinary Christian devotion and service that were still ingredient to the entire cultural existence of Europe. “Christianity as such,” Buckley writes, “more specifically the person and teaching of Jesus or the experience and history of the Christian Church, did not enter the discussion. The absence of any consideration of Christology is so pervasive ... that it becomes taken for granted.”⁹ There is little wonder that Diderot and d’Holbach made short shrift of the so-called “God” of deistic Christian philosophy. Even more devastating, of course, were the critiques that would follow a century later in Fichte and the Russian nihilists, in Nietzsche and Marx and Freud. They rightly railed against this Supreme Being who was but one among other beings, this Old Nobodaddy as Blake called him, this omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent It, this Nada which art in Nada and which thus could not possibly have become “flesh and dwelt among men, full of grace and truth.” Far from being the enemies of orthodox Christianity, these great “masters of suspicion,” as Paul Ricoeur called them, killed off a god to which pre-modern Christians had never given their devotion in the first place. Hence Pascal’s sharp rejoinder to atheists who believed that they were denying the True God:

They suppose that [the Christian religion] consists simply in worshipping a God considered to be great, powerful, and eternal: this is properly speaking deism, almost

as far removed from the Christian religion as atheism, which is its complete opposite. From this they conclude that all things combine to establish the point that God does not manifest himself to us with all the clarity that he might.

But let them conclude what they like against deism, they will conclude nothing against the Christian religion, which properly consists in the mystery of the Redeemer, who, uniting in himself the two natures, human and divine, saved men from corruption and sin in order to reconcile them with God in his divine person.¹⁰

Such a condensed history of modern atheism may seem far removed from the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien. Yet I contend that this deistic no-god whose death Nietzsche first prophesied in *The Gay Science* is also the deity of modernity, and that Tolkien's work has immense resonance for our time precisely because he writes in response to this modernity whose deity was already dead. Tolkien has post-modern resonances in this precise sense: his work addresses the problem of the dead deity of modernism. He does it, I will argue, in a variety of ways: (1) in his praise for cultural pluralism as a necessary good in order for particular peoples to prosper; (2) in his refusal of modernist and foundationalist accounts of reason, insisting instead that knowledge and truth are historically located and grounded; (3) in his critique of modern culture as wickedly coercive in its false claims to universality, especially in its resulting warfare; and finally (4) in his demonstration that divine action is never obvious but hidden, in fact so providentially obscure that it is to be found in small communities of the weak and the emarginated who overcome modern self-aggrandizing individualism by refusing all coercive power. Finally, in a brief postlude, I will suggest how Tolkien's work remains radically relevant for the culture of life amidst the culture of death

and the deceits of modernity—namely, by enabling Christians to enter the post-modern “tournament of narratives.”¹¹

I. Tolkien’s Embrace of Cultural Pluralism

In calling Tolkien a cultural pluralist, I do not mean to suggest that he is a cultural relativist. Unlike many post-modernists, Tolkien holds neither to the supposed equality of all cultures nor to the impossibility of making judgments among them. Neither seeking some impossibly Archimedean stance outside the universe (as do the allegedly objective modernists), nor claiming that Western culture has authority only for Westerners (as do the radically subjective post-modernists), Tolkien approaches other cultures as an unabashed Christian. He follows the injunction of the early Apologists for Christians to “take the spoils of the Egyptians”—to make Christian use of the many accomplishments left from the Greco-Roman world. Thus does Tolkien retrieve from various ancient Northern cultures those virtues that serve his Christian project, just as he largely ignores their many vices: witchcraft, slavery, incest, polygamy, and human sacrifice. Nor do his protagonists employ any of the pungent four-letter epithets that salt the Anglo-Saxon tongue. Some of Tolkien’s critics have objected, in fact, to such linguistic sanitation. Tom Shippey wittily complains, for instance, that Tolkien’s noble characters “are so virtuous that one can hardly call them pagans at all.”¹²

One of the most deleterious effects of modernism has been the eclipse of particular languages and cultures in favor of those forms speech and social order that rely on unhistorical abstractions, on unnarrated concepts, on words unrooted in either time or place. In the name of such untraditioned political systems and ideas has much if not most of our modern mischief been done. From George Orwell to George Steiner, we have been reminded

that the unprecedented bloodletting of the modern age is largely the work of omnicompetent governments both acting upon and legitimated by reiterated slogans and deadly neologisms: *Arbeit Macht Frei*, the triumph of the proletariat, etc. Words uprooted from their concrete origins and made to substitute for real thought can be wickedly used:

When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the things you have been visualizing you probably hunt about till you find the exact words that seem to fit. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make constant effort to prevent it, the existing dialect [i.e., the regnant jargon] will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning.... Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”¹³

We need not look to modern political rhetoric as proof of this danger; Saruman illustrates it all too well. Knowing that he has earned Gandalf’s respect as one whose name befits his character—*wizard* is rooted in *wisdom*—Saruman urges Gandalf to join him in an alliance with Sauron. Together they would use the power of the Ring to accomplish great good. That Saruman’s promise is true, there is no doubt. Saruman almost persuades Gandalf because his rhetoric so eloquently disguises the sinister quality of his Sauronic methods, as well as the evil side-effects which would be the terrible cost of such ill-gained good. He thus urges Gandalf to forgo his alliance with such “weak” creatures as men and hobbits, and to keep silent about the malevolent means necessary to accomplish such high-sounding ideals as Knowledge, Rule, and Order (253).¹⁴

Arguments of Saruman's kind, as Czeslaw Milosz observes, have had immense appeal in the modern world because they simply transplant the Cartesian and Newtonian understanding of nature into the human realm. Just as the Enlightenment had reduced nature to a mechanism of colliding and conjoining forces, so have modern materialists regarded "man [as] a social animal whose thought is the reflection of the movement of matter."¹⁵ Since natural creatures can be improved by overcoming things detrimental while enhancing things beneficial to their material well-being, modern ideologues have sought to apply the same principle to history. They thrust the vagaries of human existence through sieve of economic and racial and class conflict so as to assure an alleged improvement of the species. Through political and social structures designed to enhance such historical progress, they attempted to create an ideal New Man, one who would not submit to the necessities of physiology and to the shackles of ethnicity, but who would transform such limits into a world without want and without need, a realm of universal peace. The result? asks Milosz. Individuals homogenized into controllable slaves of the omniscient state. There could hardly be an apter description of Sauron's aim and of Saruman's collusion with it.

What astonished Milosz about the collusion of thousands of east European intellectuals with the totalitarian programs of the Leninist-Stalinist regimes was their willing consent. While millions of ordinary people were subjected to the terrors of brute political *force*—often committing unspeakable crimes of their own in allying themselves with their overlords—the intellectuals who unleashed this crushing force deliberately embraced demonic *ideas*. For the first time in history, Milosz argues, the human spirit has been enslaved not by outward and mindless oppression but by inward and highly intellectual *consciousness*. "Never before," he writes, "has there been such enslavement through

consciousness as in the twentieth century. Even my generation was still taught in school that reason frees men.”¹⁶ What “scientific” reason provided these intellectual totalitarians was absolute *certainty*, and thus an escape from ambiguity and mystery, from fate and luck, from the vagaries of human decision and desire. They sought an earthly salvation, and they envisioned human happiness in entirely material terms.

It is exactly these modern Cartesian-cum-Marxist delusions that Tolkien vehemently rejects. He understands that beauty, like certainty, can be put to evil purposes, and that even the noblest can be self-deceived. He expressed alarm, in fact, that our world finds “it difficult to conceive of evil and beauty together. The fear of the beautiful fay [fairy] that ran through the elder ages almost eludes our grasp. Even more alarming: goodness is itself bereft of its proper beauty.”¹⁷ Thus does the remarkable beauty of Galadriel expose the elven-queen to unique temptation. If she were to accept the Ring of coercion, she confesses, she would accomplish great good, just as Saruman had promised. But her loveliness would become binding rather than inviting. Everyone would bow down and adore her beauty, hopelessly subjecting their wills to hers—thus putting an end to all true loveliness and liberty. Galadriel would come to preside over a despairing crowd of slaves, she declares, not a living community of souls. She would become a new and worse Sauron, a terrible Queen of Absolute Power.

Saruman is the master rhetorician in his ability to put beautiful words to bestial uses. When he later speaks from his tower called Orthanc (“Cunning Mind”), he addresses the Company with a voice that is suave and sweet in contrast to the seeming ineloquence of others. His enchanting words thus elicit easy agreement—until Gimli suddenly detects what is false in Saruman’s mellifluous language. Though dwarves often seem obtuse, Gimli

responds as if he were an early George Orwell writing *Animal Farm*. For Gimli penetrates Saruman's perverse attempt to give sinister intentions deceptively pleasant expression, upending the obvious meaning of ordinary terms: "In the language of Orthanc help means ruin, and saving means slaying, that is plain" (565).

Tolkien set his face like flint against such linguistic abominations. To preserve the humility implicit in things local and particular, he became the advocate of a cultural pluralism that has considerable post-modern resonances. As John Garth has demonstrated in *Tolkien and the Great War*, Tolkien's philological concerns were moral and historical from the start. His two forms of elvish—eventually they became known as Sindarin and Quenya—were based on the phonological principles he had learned from his study of Welsh and Finnish, respectively. These studies were premised, in turn, on Tolkien's conviction that Celtic and Northern cultures enshrined virtues that were largely absent, not only from the late modern world but also from the antique cultures of Greece and Rome.

Unlike both Victorian and contemporary enthusiasts for ancient Celtic life—naively believing that it was warmly feminine and spiritually comforting—Tolkien learned from the Celts that nature is teeming with *faery*—with elven creatures who, as ambassadors from the natural world, are rather like the angelic emissaries from the heavenly sphere who appear in Scripture: fierce, even frightening. In their close alliance with nature, they reveal it not to be an entirely rational and benignly ordered as Newtonian modernism once held, but rather as a living and dangerous realm, a vital plentitude that invites our awe-struck participation, not a dead Cartesian domain that invites our bullying mastery. Thus do the Ents bring us in relation to trees as sentient creatures to be revered for the slowness of their growth, the hardness of their fiber, indeed, for their sheer *otherness*.

As Milosz and others have observed, the first aim of modern totalitarian states is to crush such otherness as it is manifest in local cultures and languages. The Communists immediately made Russian the official language of occupied Lithuania, for example, even though Lithuanian is not a Slavic tongue, and thus Russian was a completely alien idiom to the citizens of Vilnius and other Lithuanian cities. Tolkien, by contrast, was concerned to preserve the languages and cultures of conquered peoples. He believed that the ancient Northern cultures enshrined a heroism that is largely absent in both the antique Mediterranean and the modern European worlds—namely, a dauntless human courage in the face of unremitting hostility, a heroic willingness to perish without any hope of post-mortal reward.

Tolkien was convinced, moreover, that languages and cultures are inextricably rooted in time and place, that geography is hugely determinative for the way people think and act, that human variety is tied to the knotty particulars of culture, that a people's first products are its myths and stories, and that these narratives are the essential carriers of both religion and morality. He lamented, therefore, the ruthless monoculturalism of the Romans in failing to preserve the northern European cultures that they had overwhelmed. Tolkien had no sympathy, it follows, for Enlightenment-inspired attempts to transcend tradition-grounded locality for the sake of allegedly universal values. He lived long enough, alas, to witness the slaughter of roughly 190¹ million souls in the name of such putatively timeless and placeless truths. Tolkien also abominated the prospect of English emerging as the new *lingua franca* of the modern commercial world. Such a commodifying of his native tongue would destroy the

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vitality of the many local languages that English would come to displace, Tolkien complained, while also ruining the rich local dialects of English itself.

Such cultural and linguistic pluralism prevents Tolkien's enterprise from becoming anything hegemonic or triumphalist. On the contrary, there is a post-modernist strain in Tolkien's celebration of cultures and narratives other than his own, his abjuring of abstract ideas and political programs as inherently coercive, and thus his ready confession that we inhabit a world of blessed linguistic particularity and thus of saving cultural limitation. In sum: Tolkien gladly sets the various historical and linguistic worlds in conversation and engagement with each other. Rather than being hermetically sealed off unto themselves, such cultural traditions can be mutually fructifying. Precisely as a writer rooted and marked in the Christian culture of the West could Tolkien engage other traditions than his own, retrieving from them those things that were consonant with his Faith while rejecting those that were alien and inimical to it.

II. Tolkien's Rejection of Modern Foundationalism

In addition to his embrace of cultural pluralism, Tolkien shared the post-modern rejection Enlightenment foundationalism—the Cartesian notion, namely, that we can exercise our reason utterly without presuppositions and completely apart from historical conditions. Here we find, surprisingly, a keen disjunction between Tolkien and his friend C. S. Lewis. Unlike Tolkien, Lewis was devoted to the Socratic Club at Oxford—where he eagerly debated non-believers, attempting to flatten their arguments—for two related reasons, as Christopher Mitchell observes. Not only did Lewis want to establish Christian truth; he also sought to restore the Enlightenment ideal of “free inquiry” with its assurance that, by

fearlessly “following the argument wherever it led,” the truth would surely emerge.¹⁸ Thus would “the marketplace of ideas”—a revealing metaphor itself, enshrining a notion of truth as something purchased—produce a conclusion worthy of common affirmation.

Tolkien did not approve of Lewis the Christian apologist, referring to him derisively as “everyman’s theologian.” Only a Joe Blow sort of theologian, in Tolkien’s estimate, would seek to defend Christianity by stepping outside it and proving its validity from some neutral standpoint above both the church and its cultured despisers. This is not to deny that Tolkien was something of a moral foundationalist himself, especially in his conviction that there *are* ethical assumptions common to all cultures—what Lewis calls “the Tao”—without which human life would not be possible at all. However brutal the pagan North may have been, and while both the Romans and the Japanese have both exalted suicide as a moral ideal, all peoples everywhere have held to ideals of honor and friendship and humility before the intractable necessities and contingencies of life. Nowhere do people torture their babies or scorn their own kin. The most obvious evidence for Tolkien’s belief in an eternal and unchanging order of truth is found in Éomer’s query concerning how, in the midst of such strange times, one can judge aright: “As he ever has judged,” said Aragorn. “Good and evil have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men. It is man’s part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house” (428).

It is noteworthy that Aragorn does not suggest that such truth can be discerned in advance or in solitude; and much less can it be descried apart from local communities grappling with particular problems in particular situations. Hence Tolkien’s rejection of Lewis’s assumption that one must first hold to a supernaturalist world-view before one can

embrace the Christian gospel. Without such an intellectual foundation, Lewis believed, Christianity has nowhere to stand. In his fiction, therefore, Lewis creates a parallel universe that readers must first credit in order to enter imaginatively into it. Thus do we move from the natural and ordinary to the magical and supernatural realms as if they were essentially disjunct, even though they are finally knitted together. Lucy and Edmund, Susan and Peter, pass wondrously *through* the back of the wardrobe and *into* Narnia. Ransom travels *from* the earth *to* Malacandra and then Perelandra. In Lewis's fiction, the realm of Deep Magic always lies on the *other* side of the quotidian world.¹⁹

Not so for Tolkien. He assumes no timeless and spaceless "foundation" on which his imaginative world might be erected. For him, transcendent reality is to be found in the depths of this world rather than in some arcane existence beyond it. Tolkien argued, for example, that fairy-stories "cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion." Such devices create a skepticism that undermines the truthfulness of the entire fictional enterprise: "The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken." Tolkien elects, therefore, to set his readers right down in the midst of Middle-earth. There is no time voyage or space travel in his fiction, no slipping through the back of a wardrobe into a magical realm. Tolkien seeks, instead, to convince readers that his imaginative world is already and utterly real, having no other foundation than its own laws and conventions. The Company of Nine receives its mandate from Gandalf, the wizard who has studied the history of the Ring ever so carefully, and they are bound by concrete ties of friendship and remembrance and trust rather than reliance on abstract principles. When they enter warfare, therefore, they shout not such multisyllabic slogans as "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" but simply "The Shire!"

III. Tolkien's Critique of Modern Coercions and Addictions

A third and even more important conjunction of Tolkien's work with post-modernism is to be found in his conviction that modern cultures are coercive beyond all others, and that their worst coercions have issued in the hideous wars of this the bloodiest of all ages. More people were killed by violent means—most of them by their own governments—in the twentieth century than in all preceding centuries combined: roughly 220 million. As Tom Shippey has shown, Tolkien wrote directly in the face of unspeakable horrors—not only the evil regimes of Fascism and Nazism and Stalinism, but also “the routine bombardment of civilian populations, the use of famine as a political measure, the revival of judicial torture, the ‘liquidation’ of whole classes of political opponents, extermination camps, deliberate genocide and the continuing development of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ from chlorine gas to the hydrogen bomb.”²⁰

John Garth argues, in similar fashion, that Tolkien's grand *legendarium* was decisively shaped by his participation in the Great War. For while Tolkien began to construct his huge mythological system well before 1914, largely in response to his early immersion in the languages and literatures of the ancient North, he radically reshaped it because of the horrors he experienced at the Battle of the Somme. Like Karl Barth and many others, Tolkien came to discern that the Victorian age did not end, nor did the twentieth century begin, with the queen's death in 1901. Something dreadfully new entered modern life in 1914, with this war that was supposed to end all wars. A fundamental cleavage in Western culture occurred at Verdun and Passchendaele, at Ypres and the Somme. These battles were conducted not with swords and catapults and rifles, but with tanks and howitzers and airplanes. Here was

revealed the essential modernist legacy: the murderous Machine. These new instruments of war were designed no longer to kill individual soldiers but to obliterate entire towns, to blast the countryside clean of forests and farms, and thus to lay waste to nearly every living thing. Thus did Tolkien live to witness the fulfillment of the dire prophecy that Nietzsche perversely celebrated in 1887: “We now confront a succession of a few warlike centuries that have no parallel in history; in short, ... we have entered *the classical age of war*, of scientific and at the same time popular war on the largest scale (in weapons, talents, and discipline). All coming centuries will look back on it with envy and awe for its perfection.”²¹

Unlike Nietzsche, Tolkien did not respond to the nihilistic terrors of his time by recurring to the romantic idea that warfare can be morally cleansing. Rather did he set out to create a new and redemptive mythology for his own native England, one that would not exalt war. Convinced that the Arthurian legends were not only an inimical French import but also that their exclusively Christian character made them oblivious to the greatness of England’s pagan past, how could Tolkien be faithfully English while not also becoming hopelessly chauvinistic, even imperialistic? How, in short, could he retrieve the noblest virtues of his own land and people while avoiding any notion of “England, England, *über alles*”? The answer lay, in part, with his long immersion in *Beowulf* and the *Eddas* and the *Kalevala*. They had taught Tolkien to honor the courage of heroes who face insuperable obstacles without divine assistance. Unlike their Greek and Romans counterparts—heroes whom the gods either aid or impede, often for their own selfish ends—the deities of the aboriginal North are themselves destroyed at Ragnarök. In that final battle, after all social and familial order collapses, everything returns to monstrous chaos and permanent night.

There is a godlessness implicit in the indigenous Nordic cultures, a cosmic vacancy that eerily resembles our late-modern sense of divine absence and abandonment. As the Venerable Bede notes in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, life in the pre-Christian world of the antique North was like that of a sparrow flying into one end of a lighted mead hall and out the other: from the Void into a brief moment of light and warmth back into the Void. The Nazis thus seized upon the dark traditions of the ancient North in order to create their own racist and imperialist myth of national greatness. In defense of a demonic *Blutbrüderschaft*, Hitler would slaughter seven million Jews—not to mention the millions of Gentiles who died either defending or defeating Hitlerism. As a lover of the antique Northern myths, how could Tolkien avoid the mythic nihilism that the Nazis had exploited? In a remarkable act of cultural and spiritual retrieval, Tolkien found his answer lying in a previously neglected quality of the heroism of the primeval North. The spirit that animates it, he remembered, is not preening victory so much as somber defeat.

If Tolkien were merely anti-modern, he would have opposed coercive modern power with its medieval counterpart, perhaps by creating a warrior Christ such as we find in the Germanic recension of the four gospels called the *Heliand*. Instead, Tolkien made the radically antithetical decision to enshrine *loss* rather than victory at the heart of his massive mythology. Not only would he thus eschew any sort of English triumphalism; he would make his work thoroughly Christian as well. Yet its God would not be the arbitrary monarch who acts upon the world from without, as in Newton and Descartes. Nor would divine action be obvious and clear so much as dark and hidden. The Gospel, after all, is not a narrative of conquest but of defeat. The Resurrection does not cancel so much as it vindicates the Cross as the essential instrument of Christian vocation. It summons disciples to live in the light of a

strange sort of Victory—namely, within a community built on apparent weakness rather than obvious strength, embodying a triumph that comes not by seizing but by surrendering coercive power, even unto death.

By granting the Ring a remarkable power to coerce the will, Tolkien reveals what he regarded as the chief evil of the modern world—the various tyrannies that have trampled the human spirit. The most obvious examples are to be found in the assorted totalitarianisms of Germany and China and Russia. Quite apart from the multiplied millions who were slaughtered by their own governments, many more were made to live in constant fear of violating the oppressive system and thus of bringing its terror upon them. There was the daily dread that the Nine Walkers and their allies also confront. Never have fear and coercion been so pandemic, as millions have been murdered for no reason at all, and as countless millions more were made to practice secret surveillance on their neighbors, lest they themselves be devoured by the gigantic bureaucracy of control and oppression.

We who live in the so-called Free World—the nations of the democratic West—are hardly immune from this worst of modern legacies: mass death. This is not to deny the brutality of many pre-modern ages and cultures. In addition to practicing human sacrifice and cannibalism, our forebears often chopped heads and lopped hands for trivial offenses, and many of our ancestors lived in constant terror of various royal autocracies. Even so, our age is incomparably Sauronic. Our culture of comfort and convenience can be as subtly coercive as dictatorial regimes are obviously enslaving. In the U.S., for instance, we have created a demonic drug culture and an enslaving eroticism that are hardly less addictive than the Ring itself. Could this be the work of the Sauron who was defeated at the Cracks of Mount Doom,

but only—as we are told—to assume new and even more sinister guise, still subjecting the human spirit to hideously coercive pressures?

Almost everyone exposed to the Ring experiences its mesmerizing power, even the splendidly innocent Samwise Gamgee. Only Faramir, among our own human kind, remains so pure of spirit as to be totally immune to its magnetic attraction. Yet it is Frodo, the most valiant of the hobbits, whose will is most severely tested by the Ring. The closer he comes to the place where it was forged, in the very heart of Sauron's evil empire, the greater its power over him. It has not only left Frodo physically emaciated; it has also drained his spirit, overwhelming him with hopelessness. The dread fear that he will not succeed in his mission, especially as the obstacles to his errand increase in fury and horror, afflicts Frodo with a paralyzing pessimism. The Ring takes control of him, both awake and asleep. "I begin to see it in my mind all the time," Frodo confesses, "like a great wheel of fire. . . . I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fails" (898, 916).

Having arrived at the Cracks of Doom so weary that he cannot walk, Frodo seems incapable of self-defense, much less of asserting his own self-will. Yet when Gollum leaps on Frodo's back in an attempt to seize the Ring at the last, Frodo flicks him away as if he were an insect. Sam is rightly startled to find Frodo suddenly so strong and so merciless. In an act of seeming sanctity, Frodo is seeking to draw strength of will from the Ring in order to keep Sauron from seizing it. So fully is he imbued with a kind of holy severity that Frodo undergoes a virtual transfiguration of his own. Sam is given a sudden mystical vision of his friend. He sees Frodo as a stern and terrible figure, "untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white" (922)—as if he were a new Saruman who has returned to replace Gandalf. Yet at

the very apogee of his mistaken attempt to combat evil with evil, Frodo is overwhelmed by the Ring's bullying power, a force so strong that even Sauron can no longer command it. Frodo becomes, in fact, a virtual puppet for the ventriloquizing Ring. On all other occasions when he has been able to resist the Ring, Frodo speaks in the passive voice, as Tolkien makes clear that he is being graciously acted upon no less than himself acting. But here he speaks in the active voice, loud and stentorian. He does not declare, "I will not" but rather, "I choose not"; for while his will still desires to destroy the Ring, he has no power to enact what he wills. Like the Apostle Paul lamenting that "I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom 7: 18b-19), Frodo also lacks the strength to enact his will. Yet it is not his sinful nature that binds Frodo; it is the coercive power of an evil Other: "I have come," Frodo declares. "But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" (924).

This is surely the great and terrible anti-climax of Tolkien's epic fantasy. After his yearlong twilight struggle to take the Ring back to the Cracks of Doom, Frodo fails at the very last—not because his will is weak but because the Ring finally overwhelms him. Thus does the Quest culminate not in jubilant victory but in dispiriting defeat, as Tolkien deflates the reader's hope for a conventionally "heroic" ending—whether ancient or modern. It's a quintessential anti-modern moment, this failure of Frodo at the end of his Quest. For it reveals the hobbit not to be, in typically modernist fashion, an anti-hero who embodies a sort of upside-down goodness in his very insufficiency. Neither is it a classical moment, for Frodo is no tragic hero like Oedipus, one who is ennobled even in his defeat. Rather is Frodo a thoroughly Christian victor with peculiarly post-modern appeal. For in his very failure, as one finally unable to resist the coercive force of the Ring, Frodo remains a humbled and

flawed protagonist who is vindicated only by the silent and invisible Ilúvatar. There is not the least sign of Old Nobodaddy at work here, no Supreme Being bringing sure and final victory to his faithful ones. Not only do we later discover how much of the Shire had gone over to Sauron's side during the Company's year-long absence, but also how Frodo himself is far too wearied and worn by the Quest to enjoy the delights of victory. Instead, he departs for the Grey Havens amidst a tearful and enormously sad farewell.

IV. Tolkien's Answer to Modernist Individualism

Why, then, the enormous currency of Tolkien's work in a post-modern world hungry for certainty and victory? It is clear that Tolkien rejects much of what the post-modernists reject—especially the Enlightenment conviction that all evils, being humanly generated, can be humanly overcome. On this view, what is broken can be fixed, so that even tragedy remains a problem to be solved rather than (as Flannery O'Connor said) a mystery to be endured. Tolkien is also agreed with the post-modernists that, despite the enormous human benefits accomplished during the modern period, the attendant evils almost outweigh them: cultural and moral disintegration, the collapse of ethical and social standards, genocidal wars of unprecedented scale and ferocity, and new technologies that seem beyond human control. Yet it must be emphasized that, over against such modern evils and ailments, Tolkien does not propose post-modern solutions. Not for him the postmodern fascination with what Stanley Fish has called the "boutique multiculturalism" that scorns historically-developed communities while admiring nearly every other culture than one's own: "the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high-profile flirtations with the other in the manner satirized by Tom Wolfe under the rubric of 'radical chic.'"²² Post-modernism of this

kind is but hyper-modernism, as autonomous individuals create their own identities by fulfilling whatever needs and choosing whatever services they prefer.

Tolkien is certainly a cultural pluralist, as we have seen; but he is most certainly not a religious pluralist. Without apology, he held to the absolute finality of God's act of self-disclosure and definition in the Jews and Jesus and the church. Yet the self-revealing God is not an obvious God. Thus is Tolkien ever so subtle in his depiction of divine authority and power, lest it appear hegemonic even in its silent and anonymous victory. Tolkien confessed, in fact, his desire to evoke a Presence that would be felt by its absence, and this surely accounts for the continuing appeal of Tolkien's work to a world overwhelmed by swaggering power. Tolkien demonstrates, over and again, that there are evils too great for human resistance, forces too powerful for human control, coercions that can be conquered only by the transcendent Power of non-coercion.

The destruction of the Ring is accomplished, it is noteworthy, by the operation of secondary causes, not by supernatural intervention. The greed-maddened Gollum, having bitten the Ring off Frodo's finger, dances his jig of joy too near the brink of the volcanic fissure, thus tumbling into the infernal lava that alone can liquefy it. For the undiscerning reader, the Ring is destroyed by Gollum's hobbitic presumption and carelessness. For the discerning reader, however, the standard workings of natural causation and human willing are providentially guided. Just as Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, so was the Ring *meant* to be destroyed by the very evils that it has spawned. That so many millions of readers, whether Christian or not, have found the scene completely convincing demonstrates the wisdom of Tolkien's strategy. In a world driven by coercive power, only a modest, even a failed kind of

valor—failed because it is an uncoercive valor—can have lasting purchase. And the theological metanarrative which undergirds such bravery must have an uncoercive God as its Author and Director and chief Actor.

It is not difficult to discern what is not post-modern in Tolkien's account of Frodo's victory-in-defeat: his insistence that the coercions plaguing late-modern life can best be combated by communities rather than individuals, yet not by strong and dominant communities, but rather by a weak and emarginated fellowship, by the little people of the world, the *populi minuti*. The Company of the Nine Walkers is a frail and often broken community. They are sustained throughout their seemingly hopeless struggle not by ties of self-interest, much less by contractual agreement. Their unbreakable bond—the covenant that undergirds their Quest—lies in their forgiving faith and their enduring trust in each other: in their *friendship*. Sauron, by contrast, can form no community. His orc-slaves serve him out of fear, not from devotion. Tolkien is convinced, in fact, that there can be no true company of vice, no fellowship of the wicked, however rigidly loyal its members may remain. Whether in the Taliban or the Mafia, whether in Al-Queda or street gangs, their clan-and-tribe like dedication to evil makes their singleness of spirit both internecine from within and contemptible from without.

Over against all such aggregations of force, Tolkien poses the Company (literally: the Bread-Sharers) of the Nine Walkers. They are chosen by Elrond as Middle-earth's answer to the Nine Riders of Sauron—the nine mortal men who, wearing the rings that the Sorcerer made for them, have come totally under his power and thus have been turned into the fearsome Ringwraiths. But while the Nine Riders have been made into vaporous shadows of an evil sameness, the Nine Walkers are a remarkably diverse assemblage of the unlike. And

this surely is one of their most remarkably post-modern qualities. Yet Tolkien makes clear that diversity for its own sake is no virtue. The members of a polyglot group chosen only for their race and class and gender differences would, if lacking any commonality of transcendent and self-surrendering purpose, merely take sides and fight, in a Hobbesian war of all against all—or else they would come to a legal agreement about how best to preserve the self-interest of each individual. And thus would they have undertaken the new undeclared war of constant competition.

Elrond chooses nine radically disparate travelers for this seemingly impossible journey, electing them according to the unique strengths they bring to their singular task. Gandalf is chosen for his wisdom, Aragorn for his royal link to the Ring, Boromir for his manly valor in battle, Legolas for his elvish mastery of the woods, Gimli for his dwarvish knowledge of mountains and mines, and Sam because he is Frodo's closest and most trustworthy companion. When Merry and Pippin also insist on accompanying Frodo, Elrond objects that such youngsters cannot imagine the terrors that lie ahead. Gandalf admits that, if these two youngest hobbits could foresee the dangers that await them, they would surely hold back. Yet they would also be ashamed of their cowardice, Gandalf adds, and thus be made even unhappier at staying than going. Merry promises that they will hold hard to Frodo until the very end comes, no matter how bitter—maintaining their solidarity with him regardless of circumstances and keeping confidences without fear of disclosure. They will not allow Frodo to go off and face danger and difficulty alone. Their deceptively simple reason for wanting to accompany Frodo is voiced by young Meriadoc Brandybuck himself: “We are your friends, Frodo” (103). With those four plain monosyllables, had Sauron heard and fathomed them, his mighty fortress at Barad-dûr would have been shaken to its foundations. For this little

community of non-coercive weaklings will help thrown down, as we discover at the end, the seemingly impregnable strongholds of the master Force-Wielder.²³

Not only does the Fellowship consist of friendly representatives of all the world's Free Peoples; it also includes two examples of historic enemies: the elf Legolas and the dwarf Gimli. Yet through their radically communal life of mutual devotion and sacrifice, they become the fastest of friends, even being allowed at the end to spend their lives together in Valinor. The Company also contains its own subverter and betrayer in the overly brave warrior Boromir. As is nearly always the case in Tolkien, community is broken by force. In a foolhardy desire to attack Sauron himself with the aid of the Ring, Boromir tries to seize it from Frodo. For such a heinous act of betrayal, he surely deserves to be ousted from the Fellowship. If his community were merely contractual, he would no doubt have been driven out. But as we have noticed briefly before, covenantal communities cannot be broken, even when egregious evils are committed by one of their own, since they are grounded in a non-coercive Source beyond themselves.

Here, then, is Tolkien's most radically Christian move against both the modern and post-modern grain: not only to create a non-coercive community willing to suffer terrible loss, but also to found it on a radical sense of forgiveness. The leitmotiv of the entire epic lies in Gandalf's crucial speech (though virtually ignored in Peter Jackson's films) explaining why Bilbo refused to kill the murderous Gollum, choosing to spare him in pity: "The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many." It is important to note that Tolkien is at once unclassical and unmodern in this privileging of pity. In both ancient heroic societies as well as so-called modern meritocracies, pity is not a virtue but a vice. The Greeks, for example, extend pity only to the pathetic, the helpless, those who are able to do little or nothing for themselves.

When Aristotle declares that the function of tragic drama is to arouse fear and pity, he refers to the fate of a character such as Oedipus. We are made to fear that Oedipus's plight might tragically be ours, and thus do we pity him for his unjust fate. But whether in the ancient or the modern world, pity is never to be given to the egregiously unjust or undeserving, lest they be denied the justice that they surely merit. Yet *The Lord of the Rings* is a book imbued with such unmerited mercy and forgiveness. It is extended not only to the unworthy Gollum over and over again, but also to the far unworthier Saruman, not once but thrice.

Perhaps knowing that his readers would not draw this historical distinction, and perhaps fearing that any overtly Christian allusions would meet with modernist incredulity, Tolkien offered his subtlest and least direct version of transcendent forgiveness in the death of Boromir. This exceedingly courageous warrior would seem to be the Judas of the story, for it is he who breaks the Fellowship by trying to seize the Ring from Frodo. Frodo in turn is forced to wear it in order to escape—not, alas, from orcs or Ringwraiths or even Saruman, but rather from his friend and fellow member of the Company. As soon as Boromir has seen the horror that he has committed, he calls out to Frodo in shame at what he has done, pleading with him to return rather than to flee, explaining that a momentary madness had overtaken him. It is too late in the literal sense, because Frodo has already fled. But it is not too late in the spiritual sense, for in Boromir's death we are shown one truly binding tie that can knit a community of the weak and uncoercive into an unbreakable unity.

When Aragorn and Legolas and Gimli at last hear the sounding horn of the desperate Boromir, they fly to him, only to find him dying from his orc-wounds, after he has slain many of the enemy in order that Sam and Frodo might go free. Yet Boromir does not boast of his valor, nor does Aragorn accuse him of betrayal. They perform, instead, the ultimately

communal act, one that Tolkien conveys with supreme craft and tact—again proceeding with subtle indirection rather than overt theological reference. For Aragorn, the future king with priestly powers, leads Boromir through the three steps of what was once called the sacrament of Penance. First, the *confessio oris*, as Boromir admits that he tried to seize the Ring from Frodo. Boromir’s oral confession alone would not suffice unless he genuinely lamented his evil deed, which he does, declaring, “I am sorry.” Yet this *contritio cordis*, this sorrow of the heart, has validity only if it also issues in *satisfactio operis*, works of satisfaction, as it did in his losing battle against the orcs. Boromir poignantly concludes, therefore, “I have paid.”

Aragorn knows that these last words are not Boromir’s vain boast that he has bravely recompensed for his community-rending sin; they are his humble admission, on the contrary, that he has paid the terrible price of breaking trust with Frodo and the Fellowship. Hence his final words of defeat: “I have failed.” Aragorn reads this admission aright: it is Boromir’s final penitential act, and thus a declaration that refutes itself, since it enables his pardon and thus his reconciliation with the Company that he once betrayed. Aragorn thus absolves the dying hero by holding Boromir’s hand and kissing his brow, assuring him that his life is not ending in the pain of absolute loss but in the confidence of permanent gain. “You have conquered,” says the priest-king. “Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace! Minas Tirith shall not fall” (404).

Again, Tolkien offers an indirect affirmation, allowing the discerning reader to see what is sacramental in this reconciling act. Boromir’s last gesture, a silent smile, could be construed as his ironic doubtfulness, as if to say: “My people at Minas Tirith will hardly be saved by this rag-tag Company, on whom Sauron and his minions will feast like jackals.” But Boromir’s smile may also be read as an expression of gratitude, a sign that he has received

mercy and been restored to the community that he once had broken. On either reading, it is fair to say that Tolkien has placed a multicultural community at the center of his epic. It is not a company united by either by high-minded abstractions or merely private excellences. Rather is it a fellowship bound in unbreakable solidarity by the ultimate remedy to coercion: the act of pity and mercy and reconciliation performed within a reconciled and reconciling company. In a power-driven world characterized by community-denying coercions of all kinds, this non-coercive community built on a willingness to lose and a willingness to forgive is surely the key to Tolkien's post-modern appeal, even as it sets him at a far distance from post-modernism itself.

V. Tolkien and the Post-Modern Tournament of Narratives

Our remaining task is to determine how such a community can make its witness to the post-modern world. Tolkien has made the answer plain though far from easy. It is not by adopting the tactics of modernism, especially not the modern enlargement of the technical and conceptual realm over the narrative and storied world. On the contrary, it will happen as we live and move and have our being in hobbit-like fellowships. Among Christians, such companies will welcome others into the ever-widening circle called the church universal. Or else they will be contracted into an ever-shrinking circle by the persecution which truly non-coercive communities nearly always face. Even then, the tiny circles constituted by the blood of the martyrs will always remain the secret seed of the church.

Literarily, the post-modern task for Christians will consist in the indirect display of the Christian story by means of such carefully crafted works as *The Lord of the Rings*. The massively popular reception of Tolkien's epic demonstrates that Christians are able to enter

what the late baptist theologian, James Wm. McClendon, called “the tournament of narratives.” Despite its potential relativism and even nihilism, McClendon discerned that the post-modern revolution enables us Christians to set our tradition alongside its various competitors and companions. It also frees us to confess that ours is a fundamentally narrative tradition, that we are sustained by the constant retelling and thus the repeated re-enactment of the Christian story via the proclaimed Word and the dramatized Sacraments. Even our creeds are but compressed plots, with their beginning and middle and end.

So strong does story figure in Tolkien’s work that he makes very few appeals to historical fact. Myth and history come to resemble each other, Tolkien notes, because, like story and truth, they are radically interdependent. Mythical pattern gives form to history, just as historical occurrence gives substance to myth. Story is not merely the “vehicle” of truth. Nor does Tolkien merely clothe Christian “themes” in the pleasant guise of fiction, as if the religious element were the kernel covered by the husk of the mythology. Such a tactic would be a reversion to the “old” modernism. What we see displayed so winsomely in *The Lord of the Rings* is a subtle kind of Christian confidence—namely, Tolkien’s anti-nominalist conviction that the world is not only narratable but that it has its true life only by way of analogies. Hence his willingness to retell the Gospel story in an indirect and mythological and anticipatory way, setting his metanarrative right alongside the many others—whether Joycean or Lawrentian, Nietzschean or Marxist, capitalist or socialist, liberal or conservative. Who wins and who loses in this tournament is not Tolkien’s primary concern; he desires only that his vision be seen and his voice be heard. His is thus an irreducibly Christian desire, since the metanarrative of the Gospel is built around the one Loss that constitutes the ultimate Victory.

Tolkien remained convinced that the first task of the church is not to answer critics and to defeat enemies so much as to body forth its Story in both word and deed. Nor can these two be separated, for the right deed is nourished and enabled by the right word, the right story. This is the point that Samwise Gamgee, the least reflective of the hobbits, comes to discern. In the Tower of Cirith Ungol, as he and Frodo have begun to doubt whether their Quest will ever succeed—and thus to fear that they will die and be utterly forgotten—Sam seeks to distinguish between tales that really matter and those that do not. There are many competing stories that vie for our loyalty, and Sam is trying to distinguish among them, to locate the one hope-giving Story. It is noteworthy that Sam judges from a stance within his own story, not by seeking to transcend all narratives and to assess them from a delusory eagle-aerie perch above space and time. He declares that, if they themselves had known how hard was the Road that lay ahead of them, they would never have come at all. Yet such is the way of stories, he adds, that rivet the mind and of songs that are sung for the ages. They are not about fellows who set out on adventures of their own choosing, Sam confesses, but about folks who found themselves traveling a path that they would have never have elected to follow on their own. But while they were chosen for the quest, they could have turned back. If so, no one would have ever sung their story, since those who defect from their calling are not celebrated. What counts, Sam wisely warns, is not that these heroes defeated their enemies and returned home safely to relish their triumph, but that they soldiered ahead and slogged forward to whatever end awaited them, whether good or ill.

If it is not a happy ending that matters, then what does? After all, each particular human story—and, by extension, all the stories of all fellowships and companies—will finally end and permanently disappear. Does this mean that all stories are equal—even

perhaps equally futile and vain? Not at all, says Sam. What matters is whether our own little story forms part of an infinitely larger Story, and thus whether we rightly enact our own little roles within this grand Saga. If we do, Sam adds, then when our own story is done, someone else will take the tale forward to either a better or worse moment in the ongoing Drama. Until the End, we cannot stand *sub specie aeternitatis* to see the final outcome. Yet we can also know, in fact, what kind of story we are enacting: whether we are actors in one of the various modern stories of individualist preference or statist coercion; whether in one of the many post-modern dramas of boutique multiculturalism; or whether in the only Narrative centering on a community that is publicly called into being rather than privately chosen; and whether, within this latter Story we belong to those who, rather than enslaving their enemies, are willing to forgive them because they know themselves to have been forgiven. What we learn from Tolkien is that this infinitely larger Story encompasses all the smaller stories, that it retrieves all things worthy from them—even from the story of modernity and its hyper-modernist legacy. All of the perversions and distortions of the one true Story can thus be redeemed: “Why,” says Sam, “even Gollum might be good in a tale” (697). No wonder, then, that so many readers of Tolkien have been converted, albeit often unawares, from their hegemonic and triumphalist modernism—not to an anarchic post-modernism, but to the classically Christian virtues of the hobbits and their friends.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Kenneth Craven, "A Catholic Poem in Time of War," in *A Hidden Presence: The Catholic Imagination of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Ian Boyd, C.S.B and Stratford Caldecott (South Orange, NJ, Chesterton Press, 2003), p. 145.
- ² Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 57-58.
- ³ "Analogy," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. E.A. Livingstone (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 19.
- ⁴ "Analogy," in Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1973), p. 18.
- ⁵ Funkenstein, p. 58.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- ⁷ Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 97.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 345. In both Newton and Descartes, Buckley adds, "god functioned as an explanatory factor in a larger, more complete system" (349).
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- ¹⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 170.
- ¹¹ I should add that, while Tolkien has little affinity with those who would make post-modernism an *answer* to the mistakes of modernism, he shares the post-modernist critique of modernism's chief errors: its endless self-reflexivity and cognitive instability, its domestication of ordinary life into separate domains (e.g., sacred and secular, public and private, work and play, the political and the individual), its creation of massive bureaucracies through centralized state power, its elevation of impersonal scientific experimentation and proof over religious ritual and sacrament, its enlargement of the conceptual realm over the narrative and storied world, and finally its inadvertent creation—via reaction

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- and rebellion—of an inwardly subjective art and likewise an inwardly experiential religion. It should also be said that Tolkien shares some of the positive goals of the post-modernists: their desire to recover the organic from the mechanical, their elevation of the communal over the individual, their admission that hierarchy is inevitable in every culture, and their re-envisioning of a universe in which everything is mutually referential rather than being divided into precise and isolated spheres. See Gustavo Benavides, “Modernity,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 190.
- ¹² Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, rev. and expanded ed. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 202.
- ¹³ “Politics and the English Language,” *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell* (New York, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), pp 176-77.
- ¹⁴ All references to *The Lord of the Rings* are from the single-volume edition (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994)
- ¹⁵ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York, NY: Vintage, 1981), p. 147.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- ¹⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, “*The Monsters and the Critics*” and *Other Essays*, (London: George Allen & Unwin), p. 151.
- ¹⁸ Christopher Mitchell, “Following the Argument Wherever It Leads,” *Inklings-Jahrbuch* 17 (1999): 183, 193. Yet, at least in *The Discarded Image*, Lewis rejected such a flight from history. There, rather than subjecting the medieval world-view to modernist terms, he demonstrates its own internal consistency and integrity, showing that it is as persuasive in its own way as the Darwinian naturalism that has replaced it. The English poet John Heath-Stubbs confessed to me, in a 1988 interview, that he became a Christian largely from hearing Lewis deliver the *Discarded Image* lectures at Oxford in the 1950s. They convinced him that the ancient Christian outlook was more cogent and persuasive than the materialist world-view of modernity.
- ¹⁹ In *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis locates his narrative in the ancient pagan kingdom of Glome, making its life-world marvelously and chillingly credible. Yet even there, Orual remains torn by the natural-supernatural distinction, as she is forced to decide whether Psyche’s heavenly palace is objectively real or her own subjective illusion.
- ²⁰ Shippey, 324-25.
- ²¹ *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York NY: Vintage, 1974), Book 5, Section 362, p. 318.
- ²² Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 60-61.
- ²³ It is important to recall that, for Aristotle, friendship is not a plebeian but an aristocratic virtue. It can be realized only among those who, by dint of the labor done by others, have been freed to pursue such higher activity. Friendship, by definition, is restricted to the few. Tolkien’s friendships, as we have seen, cut all across all “types and conditions,” so that true mutual fidelity is open to all who will enter it.