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Thresholds to Middle-earth: Allegories of Reading, Allegories for Knowledge and Transformation

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Abstract

Alexei Kondratiev Student Presentation Award, Mythcon 42. Begins by strongly questioning Tolkien's own assertions about allegory, and draws on a wide range of theory and scholarship to show the subtle operation of a deep pattern of allegory in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* centered around imagery of readers and reading, thresholds and journeys.

Additional Keywords

Allegory in J.R.R. Tolkien; Readers and reading in J.R.R. Tolkien; Threshold imagery in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Use of allegory



THRESHOLDS TO MIDDLE-EARTH:
ALLEGORIES OF READING,
ALLEGORIES FOR KNOWLEDGE
AND TRANSFORMATION¹

ANDREW HALLACD

Allegory and Some Methodological Obstacles

MANY OF TOLKIEN'S READERS WILL REMEMBER his foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, in which he declares that his novel is "neither allegorical nor topical" and that he prefers "history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers" (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] Foreword. xxiii-xxiv). Most scholars have chosen to accept Tolkien's assertion.² This choice still, however, represents a position that should be contested.

The choice to accept Tolkien's assertion is surely related to three methodological obstacles that commonly populate Tolkien scholarship. The first obstacle is a tendency to privilege Tolkien's interpretation of his texts. Consequently, many Tolkien scholars have leaned heavily on Tolkien's own commentary on his works—especially his foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* and his published letters—to form their premises for scholarship. But we should take note of another of Tolkien's statements about *The Lord of the Rings*. In a letter to a "Miss Batten-Phelps," Tolkien writes, "[*The Lord of the Rings*] does not belong to me." Rather, he insists his story "must now go its appointed way in the world" (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [Letters] 413). The passage is in sympathy with his preference for applicability to the reader's thought and experience. Tolkien affirms that he, the author, is no longer responsible for naming his texts. Consequently, in the *Letters* and foreword that enjoy so much the privilege of authority, we encounter inevitable resistance to it. *The Lord of the Rings'* meaning is at the mercy of—and belongs to—its readers, who must decide how the text they read applies to them. We cannot recognize its allegorical dimensions so long

¹ Alexei Kondratiev Student Paper award winner, Mythcon 42, Albuquerque NM, 2011.

² See Basney 192; Birzer 61-2, 92; and 114-15; Curry 8; Flieger 143; Grant 164-5 and 178; O'Neil 153-68; Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* 43-44 and 168-73; and Spacks 64-5. Additionally, scholars like Filmer and Nelson have tried to argue that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory. Unfortunately, to argue as they do that *The Lord of the Rings* imitates the medieval and Renaissance allegories personifying the virtues and vices, they have to ignore the complexity of Tolkien's characters.

as we concede authority to Tolkien's foreword or to the occasional, brief discussions of allegory in his *Letters*. As Michael D.C. Drout has said in his essay "Towards a Better Tolkien Criticism," Tolkien's opinions, perceptive as they may be, do not have "the status of holy writ" (19).

The second obstacle arises from what Deborah L. Madsen in *Rereading Allegory* has called "essentialist genre theory," which makes two assumptions. The first is that "a preconceived unifying principle is a sufficient basis for interpretation, classification, and evaluation"; the second is that the essentialist perspective does not consider the possibility of "a multigeneric text" (8), in which allegory may often play a prominent role. In sympathy with the first essentialist assumption, Tolkien borrows his attitude about allegory from the Romantics' preference for myth as a genre superior to allegory. The unifying essentialist principle Tolkien deploys is thus the assumption that allegory is in essence an impoverished and impoverishing genre, a perspective that finds its proof in many dry and didactic allegories. One reason for embracing this principle is the assumption that allegory is too limiting, or not polysemous enough, because it seeks to control the reader's response excessively. To free his readers from such narrow allegorizing, Tolkien denies that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory of "[t]he real war [WWII]" (*LotR* Foreword.xxiv). Furthermore, one may add, we cannot call it a Christian allegory of the kind C.S. Lewis often wrote, or a personification allegory of the kind that he examines in *The Allegory of Love*, without similarly constraining the reader. Because, then, *The Lord of the Rings* does not conform to these most familiar types of allegory and because we have accepted Tolkien's essential dismissal of allegorical misreadings, we have also usually dismissed the notion that *The Lord of the Rings* and most of Tolkien's fiction could be allegorical.

The second essentialist assumption Madsen notes—that allegory necessarily excludes and is excluded by other genres—is also present in much of Tolkien scholarship, but more subtly. Allegory, as essentialist logic would maintain, cannot participate in the formation of a text that represents and explores multiple linguistic modes, perspectives, and genres that in turn multiplies its polysemous possibilities. Yet if *The Lord of the Rings* is applicable, it is because the text imitates a variety of genres and linguistic modes—ways of operating in relation to other texts and to the world as a text—that are familiar to the reader. One of these genres or linguistic modes—arguably the one that allows it to function so effectively as a novel—is allegory.

The third obstacle that we face follows from this essentialism. If we assume Tolkien wrote "a mythology for England," and if we also assume allegory and myth are mutually exclusive genres or modes, then we must declare Tolkien could not have written an allegorical novel. The assumption comes from a letter to Milton Waldman, in which Tolkien expressed his desire "to make a

body of more or less connected legend" that he "could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country" (*Letters* 144). Tolkien was certainly fascinated by and sought to imitate the rhythm, tone, and structure of many myths, but to give undue attention to this one letter is to ignore the fact that Tolkien wrote a *novel* deeply entrenched in the literary, philosophical, and political interests of modernity, postmodernity, and inherently non-mythic consciousness concerned with navigating a multimodal or multigeneric discourse. For as Mikhail Bakhtin has emphasized in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the novel (from the post-classical Latin *novella* meaning "new shoot of a plant," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) is an ever-changing, ever-new, and multigeneric literary form that has escaped the confines of older mythic traditions. The novel instead represents and explores multiple linguistic perspectives, modes, and genres (including the mythic)—but this is a representation and exploration rooted in the author's newer modernity. The inevitable result is one in which a novel's characters, as agents of this modernity and as figures of the (modern) Reader, must consider and interpret these different viewpoints, modes, and genres.

Respectable scholars and theorists like C.S. Lewis, Northrop Frye, Angus Fletcher, Maureen Quilligan, and Paul de Man offer alternatives for defining Tolkien's works as allegory—especially for defining allegory as a modal or generic function within the text that operates in relation to other modal or generic functions. Considering a well-documented connection between myth and allegory, and given Tolkien's pervasive and enduring interest in myth, it is an opportunity Tolkien scholarship should not miss. Indeed, if we were to lean on Tolkien's *Letters* again, we may notice that Tolkien wrote in the same letter to Milton Waldman noted earlier, "I dislike Allegory [...] yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language" (145). Tolkien has as a result pointed to a fact of literature which C.S. Lewis had remembered in *The Allegory of Love* (61-2): allegorical interpretation was originally an interpretive mode the Stoic and Jewish philosophers of antiquity used to read Greek and Hebrew myth.³ Since then, as Northrop Frye has observed, "all commentary [has become] allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery" (89); it is the method we have inherited from the ancient world. As a means of commenting on the poetic imagery of myth and other literary traditions, the allegorical properties of Tolkien's fiction fulfill just this kind of function.

Situating theories of allegory and allegory's connection to myth in relation to Tolkien's works is the means to trace this function. The first premise for such a move I take from Paul de Man: *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's

³ For discussions of Stoic and Jewish philosophers and the history of allegorical interpretation, see Hansen 37-64, Madsen 29-41, Teskey 32-55, and Whitman 14-57.

other novels—notably, *The Hobbit*—function allegorically as allegories of *reading*, for their characters perform acts of interpretation; they become figures of the modern Reader as they move through the mythic landscape of Middle-earth. Then, since this landscape *is* mythic in character—that is, it is the result of and participates in a mythic past—I take the second premise from Roland Barthes’s theory of myth: Tolkien’s characters as figures of the modern Reader read the remnants of Middle-earth’s various mythologies as *stolen language*.

Allegory, Thresholds, and Bag End’s Front Door

Though we usually use the word *allegory* in connection with *The Lord of the Rings*, a discussion of allegory must begin instead with *The Hobbit*, after Bilbo’s first discussion with Gandalf. For it is in this earlier work that the reader first encounters Tolkien’s concern with acts of reading. When the nervous hobbit excuses himself brusquely from the wizard’s initial overtures to go on adventures, Gandalf makes “a queer sign” on the door to the hobbit’s hole. Then he leaves. The next day, thirteen Dwarves mysteriously show up for tea as if invited. But because of the hobbit’s flustered behavior and nervous disposition, and despite the freshly made sign on the door declaring Bilbo a burglar, Bilbo denies that any such sign exists. The Dwarf Gloin and Gandalf correct him:

“And I assure you [Gloin says] there is a mark on this door—the usual one in the trade, or used to be. *Burglar wants a job, plenty of Excitement and reasonable Reward*, that’s how it is usually read. You can say *Expert Treasure-hunter* instead of *Burglar* if you like. Some of them do. It’s all the same to us. Gandalf told us that there was a man of the sort in these parts looking for a Job at once, and he had arranged for a meeting here this Wednesday tea-time.”

“Of course there is a mark,” said Gandalf. “I put it there myself. For very good reasons. [...] Let’s have no more argument. I have chosen Mr. Baggins and that ought to be enough for all of you. If I say he is a Burglar, a Burglar he is, or will be when the time comes. There is a lot more in him than you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself.” (*The Hobbit* [Hobbit] I.49)

The passage underscores Tom Shippey’s observation in *The Road to Middle-earth* that Tolkien’s works are about “the identity [...] of namer and named” (131). And certainly, by placing the sign on Bilbo’s door, Gandalf thus explicitly *renames* Bilbo according to the wizard’s claims, never mind what the hobbit wants or thinks. Gloin, too, names Bilbo, though with a comic graciousness that gives the hobbit an option between *burglar* and the more euphemistic *Expert Treasure-hunter*. But the subtler point here is that Gandalf’s mark is not simply a form of writing that names. Since Gandalf reinterprets Bilbo by applying the

mark to the hobbit's door, it also denotes an act of reading; with the mark, Gandalf proclaims his authority to read and name Bilbo's existence beyond question—an authority he insists the dwarves recognize. He thus becomes a figure of the Reader. Seeing and interpreting the sign as they see fit, the dwarves are likewise such figures.

But just as significantly, the door is a threshold that marks the boundary between a variety of different linguistic modes. Most obviously, it marks the dividing line between two different mythic spaces. On the one hand, since Tolkien's narrator tells us that Bag End is the home Bilbo's father Bungo built for his wife Belladonna Took, it marks the comfortable space of Bilbo's personal family mythology. In his study *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard gave the name "topoanalysis" to the study of such space; for such an analysis would be one of place, of *topos*, "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (8). It would be the study of "confined, simple, shut-in space [...] space that does not seek to be extended" beyond the walls and emotional well-being of house and home (10), and so a space in which the unconscious may be at rest with its personal mythology for which all the objects of home serve as a reminder and a comfort.

Yet Tolkien's narrator gives us too little information for an extensive analysis of this kind. Adding to what we know of Bag End's history and its hobbitish comforts in *The Hobbit*, we know only two other important facts: one, that "people considered [the Bagginses] very respectable" both because they are wealthy and "because they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected"; and two, that Bilbo's Tookish side of the family often *did* go on adventures (*Hobbit* I.30-1). Thus, on the one hand, Bag End's front door marks the threshold of a space in which the myth of respectability may be harbored and nurtured as an uncontested truth. On the other hand, only outside the Baggins home do "other families" emphasize Bilbo's disconcerting family when they speak of the absurd notion that one of Bilbo's Took ancestors "must have taken a fairy wife" (*Hobbit* I.30)—as if to support and explain the scandalous suspicion that the Bagginses are more adventurous and therefore less respectable than Bilbo would prefer. Bag End's front door therefore also marks the point at which the family's myth of respectability may be contested, for the space outside Bag End is the space where other mythic systems reign—systems that describe uncertainty and adventure. Naturally, then, it is the space where other hobbits (and some wizards) may contest the respectability of a Baggins.

Additionally, as Joseph Campbell has noted in the chapter "The Crossing of the First Threshold" in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, "The usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds, and popular belief gives him every reason to fear so much as the first step into the unexplored" (64). Despite Bilbo's best efforts to refuse Gandalf's

invitation to adventure, Bilbo cannot be the usual and respectable example of a hobbit that lets the fear of the world outside his door determine his behavior and identity. If the house is the place where the unconscious may be at its ease, something else outside calls to him; it is not entirely Gandalf. Rather, Bachelard argues, this “something” is a psychoanalytic imperative that “sets the human being in motion [...]. It calls him to live outside the abodes of his unconscious, to enter into life’s adventures, to come out of himself. [...] Because we must also give an exterior destiny to interior being” (10-1). Gandalf is the agent of a psychoanalytic function of interpretation that has penetrated Bilbo’s respectable façade, his homely, house-bound behavior, his habits of confinement and comfort, to recognize Bilbo’s latent restlessness and desire for motion. Once he meets Gandalf, Bilbo cannot but cross the threshold of his doorway into adventure.

We may note that so far our concern has focused exclusively on myth. To a significant degree it is appropriate, especially if we are to insist on Campbell’s definition of thresholds. Applying Roland Barthes’s theory of myth as stolen language tends to reinforce this idea, particularly since one of the major themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is theft and the theft of language. Such themes become clear when we consider that Barthes takes myth to be a semiological system. Myth, he argues in *Mythologies*, steals a network of signs from a first-order system and places it in a new, second-order system in which it may signify an entirely different truth. It is theft because myth illegitimately declares its new system to be “factual,” the natural order of things, “whereas it is but a semiological system” (131). In Bilbo’s case, the first order system is the world and its elaborate system of signs lying outside his door awaiting discovery. His personal family history has stolen the language of that system to set up a second-order mythic system in which the Bagginses are respectable and above reproach, and in which the inside of Bag End is properly the place where this myth of respectability holds sway.

The only other study to examine Tolkien’s fiction using Barthes’s theory of myth is Margaret Hiley’s essay “Stolen Language, Cosmic Models: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien.” But Hiley uses Barthes as another means to interpret *The Lord of the Rings* as a modern myth. As I have emphasized, however, Tolkien’s fictional works are not themselves myths—a stolen semiological system; they are novels that explore the various thefts of language that constitute mythic systems. Thus, Bilbo lives in a world where other such systems compete with his personal mythology. Other hobbits have their own ideas about what is factually true within their own personal mythologies and within a larger communal mythology about which we will know little until we read *The Lord of the Rings* (and which we cannot discuss here); they represent other systems that would steal Bilbo’s mythic identity from him. But Gandalf is the one who most

devastatingly challenges Bilbo's early comfort and security because he successfully steals the hobbit's name—an act from which the hobbit will not recover until later in the novel. By marking Bilbo's door with the sign of a burglar, Gandalf not only takes Bilbo's name as that which marks him a quiet, respectable hobbit who lives in a comfortable hobbit-hole where his unconscious life may live at peace within the walls of his personal mythology. Nor does Gandalf simply transplant Bilbo's name into a second-order system in which the factual truth, the *real* order of things in Bilbo's life, is that Bilbo is restless and wants adventure in his most secret heart, secret even from himself. Gandalf's theft of his name is a *stealing back* to restore Bilbo to his "true" self, hidden behind a door and hobbitish respectability. He names Bilbo a burglar, thereby placing him at odds with all homes as someone whose function is not to reside in and maintain the safety of homes; he is, after all, now someone whose function is to disturb and threaten that very safety—a very *uncomfortable* position to be in for a hobbit who gains respectability from the appearance of and is used comfort and security. Consequently, for Bilbo at the start of *The Hobbit*, Gandalf's renaming makes Bag End's door not so much an *entrance* into a comfortable hobbit hole as a threshold—an *exit*—through which a burglar, dangerous adventure, and monsters in the wilderness may be found, so that Bilbo may discover *another* side to himself and to the world, thereby to take on new names.

Such an analysis should make apparent that Tolkien did not write a modern myth in *The Hobbit*. Myths are proper to eras innocent of the stories that have gone before; they cannot otherwise be a factual system, as Barthes knew, for otherwise their account of the facts could be challenged. While Tolkien may have nostalgically yearned for such an innocent world, he could not be part of it. He and his fiction could only participate in the long tradition of allegorical interpretation summarized earlier. Likewise, though crossing his first threshold into adventure may become a powerfully symbolic moment in the personal mythology of Bilbo's life, we as Tolkien's readers cannot have the same mythic experience as he has stepping through his doorway. We are too much aware of the mythic tradition of thresholds to think that by stepping over his threshold at Bag End he founds the truth of thresholds for himself and Tolkien's readers, for all time, and within an indisputable factual system. Instead, because *The Hobbit* cannot be a myth and because it can only reflect on the meaning and limitations of such mythological constructions, Bag End's front door becomes part of *The Hobbit's* allegorical function. It becomes a figure not of the truth of thresholds but of the literary *idea* of thresholds that can be used to signify all past and all future thresholds; it becomes the object for the philosophical contemplation of a threshold's meaning. In other words, allegory in *The Hobbit* is another agent of psychoanalysis: it causes the self to leave the abode of the mythic, the

unconscious, to begin to reflect, to seek adventure in and with the life of the mind—as Bachelard says, to seek an exterior destiny to an interior being.

We may infer that Gandalf, as one psychoanalytic agent, knows this circumstance to be in the offing when Bilbo does not. But we the readers may also begin to recognize an allegorical function in *The Hobbit* once we realize that the idea of the threshold has also become a small but noteworthy part of the theory of allegory. We encounter the idea in Edwin Honig's study of allegory, *Dark Conceit* (72). Maureen Quilligan developed it further in her study *The Language of Allegory*, naming the threshold a text that "not only initiates the [allegory's] opening episode and states the theme [...] but the [allegorical] narrative itself continues to refer back to it" (52). Finding as we do the door to Bag End in *The Hobbit's* first chapter, it acts as both a literal and figurative door with a semantic import that must be interpreted. We already know that as a door marked with the sign of a burglar, it is the boundary between safety and adventure. But it is also a door that declares the theme of thresholds for Tolkien's readers, thereby prefiguring all succeeding doors and other entrances in Middle-earth as thresholds that must in their turn refer back to and comment on that first threshold.

A heightened awareness of the philosophical implications of thresholds and Bilbo's door in particular is evident early in *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo recalls that Bilbo had once said,

It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door. [...] You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no telling where you might be swept off to. Do you realize that this is the very path that goes through Mirkwood, and that if you let it, it might take you to the Lonely Mountain or even further and to worse places? (*LotR* I.3.74)

Frodo's musing is both philosophical and prescient. His use of the second person indicates that his musing is hypothetical, a consideration of the possibilities inherent in the idea of thresholds. He is actively reflecting on and interpreting the nature of Bag End's front door. It is a part of his mythic landscape, but it is not something he can experience innocently as Bilbo did half a century previously. Like the Stoics and the Jewish philosophers, he can only interpret with a philosophical bent the storied threshold his mentor once crossed. But his words also foreshadow the future, for Frodo walks a similar path, and to the far worse place of Mordor where Frodo's self-discovery is far more disturbing. It is a moment that confirms the unstable, adventurous, and dangerous nature of naming upon which Frodo must reflect if he is to understand the possibilities of his own story.

Furthermore, to underscore the theme of thresholds and naming, doors bearing marks liberally populate Tolkien's fiction, accompanied invariably by the

presence of a character to interpret those marks. For example, the secret door in the Lonely Mountain leading to Smaug's lair in *The Hobbit* is marked as a door by the keyhole that can be found and opened only by standing nearby when thrush knocks during the last light of Durin's Day. Yet the event is only recognizable and meaningful—marked, like Bilbo's door—because Elrond had found and interpreted secret dwarven runes written on the map Gandalf and the Dwarves have furnished in *The Hobbit* (III.97); furthermore, Bilbo would never have found the keyhole opening the secret door had he not been sitting by it on Durin's Day when the thrush knocked (another naming marker). Likewise, the western door to Moria is marked with a riddle, "*Speak, friend, and enter*" (*LotR* II.4.306). Then, too, above the Dark Door to the Paths of the Dead, "Signs and figures were carved above its wide arch too dim to read" (*LotR* V.2.786), suggesting that any attempt to have named the door for all time or to read it has failed because its marks have faded over time or cannot be read in the gloomy light provided.

If, however, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* can be properly defined as allegories of reading, they are best explained in terms of grammar and rhetoric, the disciplines that Paul de Man uses to explain and explore the structural and semantic dimensions of a text. The successive thresholds Tolkien's characters encounter define the grammatical structure of the narrative through which they move, and by which myth consistently uses thresholds to steal and separate its version of history from the natural world. We have already seen how the door to Bag End leads to other doors. But to the thresholds already mentioned, we may also add (to name but a few) the main gate that leads out of the Lonely Mountain and Moria's Dimrill Gate; the door through which Aragorn leaves the Paths of the Dead; the door to Meduseld; the Argonath, the Gate of Kings; the Black Gate of the Morannon; and finally, the door to the Sammath Naur, the Fires of Doom in the side of Orodruin. Thresholds thus serve to map all the crucial events of the *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. They are, then, also part of the grammar, the narrative structure that shapes Tolkien's novels. They constitute the cartography of what, in allegorical terms, we would call the text's literal sense—the description of *what happened* and the *order* in which events occurred, but also the way events have been organized to separate them into second-order systems that declare a mythic, "factual" truth.

Each threshold therefore also has other meanings or senses that concern the text's rhetorical (or figurative) dimension, thereby threatening the mythic grammar's stability. Bag End's door is such an example. It can signify *either* the entrance to a comfortable hobbit-hole (if one chooses to walk *into* it) *or* a threshold to adventure (if one chooses to walk *outside* into the larger and more dangerous world). Bag End's door can then signify multiple rhetorical possibilities that Bilbo and Frodo may actualize according to the way they choose to interpret its significance. Since Bilbo and Frodo also find success in their

ventures beyond Bag End's door, it also raises the question of their respective quests' outcomes and the implication that they could fail. Naturally, Middle-earth's other thresholds also signify other rhetorical possibilities, always connected to the tension and passage between safety and adventure, civilization and the wilderness, success and failure. If they stand out as a notable element in *The Hobbit's* and *The Lord of the Rings'* grammar, it is because of the rhetorical possibilities they evoke.

Thror's Secret Door and the Sammath Naur

Consequently, Middle-earth's other thresholds signify more than one rhetorical possibility, always connected to the tension and passage between the kinds of semantic options I have discussed. I would now therefore like to look more closely at two particularly significant thresholds in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, especially since both mark the end point of Bilbo's and Frodo's respective quests. Both I have already mentioned, albeit briefly. The first is the secret door in the side of the Lonely Mountain. The second is the entrance to the Sammath Naur, the Chambers of Fire, inside Mount Doom. They are significant because, standing near the end of each novel, they fulfill the themes to which Bag End's door points at the same time that they implicitly refer us back to it.

Tolkien's choice of words in relation to the secret door into the Lonely Mountain marks it as a threshold text early in *The Hobbit*. When Elrond discovers and translates the moon-letters previously hidden on the map Gandalf received from Thorin's grandfather Thror, he asks to what "Durin's Day" refers in the map's inscription. Thorin explains that it is "[t]he first day of the dwarves' New Year [...] the first day of the last moon of autumn on the *threshold* of Winter. We still call it Durin's Day when the last moon of Autumn and the sun are in the sky together" (III.96; my emphasis). Neither Elrond nor Thorin name the secret door a threshold, but because the secret of its unlocking is connected to the temporal boundary between seasons, it is caught in a network of signs that declare its nature as such. Since, as Mircea Eliade has noted, the moon's ever-changing phases make it a symbol of cyclical change and transformation, the fact that one can only discover and read the moon-letters by moonlight is another such sign (154). For thresholds are also boundaries that mark a change from one state to another, a change that leads ultimately to both growth and diminishment, and finally to a kind of symbolic death and rebirth as reflected in the waxing and waning of the moon. Naturally, the moon then becomes a suitable celestial body to preside over such secrets as Thorin's grandfather wished to remain hidden. It signifies the inevitability of cyclical change, the knowledge that the Desolation of Smaug will not last, and the possibility that the dwarves' wealth and sovereignty under the Mountain will return to them. It also then points back to Bilbo's front

door as that which marks the possibility of Bilbo's cyclical transformation from unadventurous gentlehobbit to burglar and back again upon his return.

Consequently, as a part of a mythology tied to lunar cycles and the seasons, the secret door is also a threshold text that may be read as stolen language. As with so many cultures, the moon has been wrested from the natural world's first-order system to be placed in the second-order system of the dwarves' mythology to which it does not naturally and properly belong. It is even connected to the legendary mythic father of the dwarves, Durin, as a way to order the years according to nature's pre-existing factual system. But the Lonely Mountain as part of the dwarves' history and the mythology of their sovereignty over their own mountain kingdom and the wealth therein is also something that they have in a sense stolen from the earth's embrace, and which the dragon Smaug in turn stole from them. After all, the dwarves' wealth and resulting sense of security and power over their world is not something natural, factual, or proper to a world where the fact of dragons exists to upset their plans to accumulate wealth and power. The dwarves, as with any community, must steal the opportunity for security, stability, and sovereignty from the inherently dangerous and unstable natural world. It is not theirs to keep, and Smaug proves it by stealing their vast store of treasure as well as their seat of power, both of which should have been safe under the mountain. He stole what the dwarves had to place it in his second-order—or by this time, if you like, his third-order—system, the system that declares the power of dragons (not dwarves) will preside over and guard the wealth found deep in the earth.

Considering that the Lonely Mountain is a kingdom modeled after the ancient dwarven home in Moria, and that the dwarves' name for Moria is actually Khazad-dûm—literally, the halls or “mansions of the Dwarves” (*Silmarillion* 337)—Bilbo's title of *burglar* becomes more significant as he approaches and enters the secret door to engage in a battle of wits with Smaug. As I have said, while within the boundary of his own country, such a name marks him as one who threatens the safety of houses. But in relation to the Mansions (or Houses) that the dwarves had built under the Lonely Mountain, *burglar* means “liberator,” and no longer only in the euphemistic sense of a thief who will “liberate” someone from his or her possessions. He will of course “liberate” Smaug from his hoarded treasure, but in doing so (with Bard's help) he will also liberate the dwarves from their wandering life without a home and the nearby Lake-men from the always imminent threat of the dragon. The meaning of the secret door as it unfolds in the history of Middle-earth is therefore indeed one of change through liberation, for the secret door ultimately also leads to the liberation of another door: the front gates on the Lonely Mountain's other side. Once Thorin and his companions finally make peace with the Elves and Men knocking at the doors of their newly liberated home, the

Lonely Mountain can once again become a place to reside—a house or series of houses in which the dwarves may find a measure of security and stability. Bilbo thus extends a part of his nature—his *interior being*—beyond the boundaries of Bag End. He finds an exterior destiny for his ability and psychological need to make a safe and comfortable home. But he does so by reading the *exterior* signs connected to the secret door (the moon-letters on Thrór’s map, the thrush knocking at sunset, etc.) that tell him the nature of his destiny and what he will need to do to fulfill it. His destiny, therefore, is not so much fixed as it is a destiny decided by the imperative to read the signs in the world around him, beginning with the significance of the front door that anticipates and leads to all others. He is necessarily a reader of signs, a role impressed on him by concerns external to his interior being, and therefore allegorically the figure of such a Reader.

Indeed, as this kind of figure Bilbo achieves an apotheosis—a “divine state” that has “gone beyond the last terrors of ignorance” (Campbell 127)—when he finally confronts Smaug. To the dragon’s polite request for his unwelcome guest’s name and origin, Bilbo responds with a series of riddles, in which he declares among other things that he is “from under the hill, and under the hills and over the hills [his] paths led”; he is the one “that walks unseen. [...] the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly”; the one “chosen for the lucky number. [...] I am he that buries his friends alive and drowns them and draws them alive again from the water. [...] I am the friend of bears and the guest of eagles. I am Ringwinner and Luckbearer; and I am Barrel-rider” (*Hobbit* VII.279). Smaug is skeptical of all but the last set as probable, but it is a side note to Bilbo’s apotheosis. That Bilbo has finally started to name himself is more pressing. Having once been named by everyone else around him, Bilbo now takes an active role in shaping his identity. Having gone under and over hill and through many of Middle-earth’s other thresholds, he is a traveler who has been transformed. As clue-finder, web-cutter, stinging fly, Ringwinner, Luckbearer, and Barrel-rider, he names himself no mere hobbit or burglar but someone who can act decisively and with astonishing fortune in moments of danger. He is very far, geographically and psychologically, from the terrors he had in his ignorance imagined awaited him in the world outside his hobbit-hole’s safety and comfort. He can now face the real terrors of his exterior destiny with a knowledge of self that has transformed who he is and what he can do. It is a new development in his personal mythology, an addendum to the story of the familial narrative that holds sway within Bag End.

As with Bag End’s threshold, however, Bilbo cannot experience his apotheosis innocently. It only resembles the godhood that some mythic heroes achieve. Bilbo is *like* those mythic heroes in some important ways (he boldly confronts a dragon and asserts his own identity), but he is not identical to them;

he is too small. He thus participates in the *idea* of apotheosis and the language of allegory that can philosophize about it. Gandalf implicitly reinforces this fact when Bilbo expresses surprise that the prophecies foretelling the return of the Dwarves to Lonely Mountain have proven true. Gandalf responds with,

Of course! [...] And why should not they prove true? Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all! (XIX.362-3)

Bilbo's reply is a hearty "Thank goodness!"; and he gives the wizard some more tobacco. Gandalf knows of (or at least has faith in) a greater cosmic scheme that neither he nor Bilbo can fully know. He is, in fact, making an argument Boethius elaborated in *Consolatio Philosophiae*: good or bad fortune—what Gandalf describes as "mere luck"—does not exist; a larger plan subsumes all as part of its design. Gandalf thus emphasizes that Bilbo's role in events and the luck that seemed to be his never belonged to him. His role was always properly a part of the greater Boethian scheme that Dwarves, Elves, Men, and hobbits alike inhabit. But Gandalf also implicitly argues that Bilbo is part of history as an allegorical system that always points to and signifies that cosmic scheme that determines it. Consequently, Bilbo can only follow Gandalf's lead and become philosophical about his newly understood place in the world. The world and its mysterious historical machinations are now what name Bilbo, and name him someone small and ultimately inconsequential. Naturally, he can only give thanks for it and retreat into the sanctuary of his creature comforts and the inconsequential lifestyle of a hobbit. For being named such is no bad thing, after all, and his secure hobbit-hole allows him the luxury of reflecting philosophically on the meaning of his experience and his small role in history.

This last conversation between Gandalf and Bilbo is a fitting end to *The Hobbit*, for it anticipates the fact that Bilbo's adventure will also be a smaller thing in comparison to Frodo's much harder and more harrowing quest. The secret door into Smaug's lair emphasizes this difference in magnitude. While it led to a dragon's fire, it is only a figure of the entrance to the Sammath Naur that leads to the much hotter Fire in which Sauron forged the One Ring. Thus, like all thresholds, the Sammath Naur also leads to danger, with a difference: it marks the boundary beyond which the greatest threat to Middle-earth was made. But also like the Lonely Mountain's secret door, the entrance to the Sammath Naur announces a connection with a mythic system, though also much greater. This time, the system is Sauron's. When Sam enters the place, Tolkien's fictional narrator tells us, "He was come to the heart of the realm of Sauron and the forges

of his ancient might, greatest in Middle-earth; all other powers were here subdued" (*LotR* VI.3.945). In a cosmos where Ilúvatar reigns supreme over everything (for his name means Father of All), Sauron has illegitimately appropriated the power of the earth for himself, claiming it for purposes that would deviate from his progenitor's. All other powers must be tamed in the heart of the Dark Lord's dominion if his claim to power is to remain true. Like Smaug, he would set up a second-order myth of his own power over a domain that was never his to rule.

The Ring is a product of this parasitical system. For the Ring was designed as Sauron's agent that would steal its bearer's will and make it Sauron's. The Dark Lord would rule the bearer, name the bearer's actions and fate within the malicious designs of his second-order mythic system, and thereby reclaim the Ring to subdue challenges to his power. For this reason, Frodo cannot achieve the kind of apotheosis at the end of his quest that his mentor could. The precise mechanism that causes this failure becomes clear when Sam asks his master if he remembers the rabbit they ate just days ago. Frodo answers,

No, I'm afraid not, Sam. [...] At least, I know that such things happened, but I cannot see them. No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. 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 fades. (*LotR* VI.3.937-8)

Unlike Bilbo, who bore the Ring for too short a time in *The Hobbit* to notice its effects by the time he returned home, Frodo has begun to succumb to the Ring's power—a process hastened by his proximity to the center of Sauron's power. Its seductive influence so consumes his mind that he can no longer remember the sensual dimensions of his experiences. By implication, he can no longer remember the things of his home in the Shire that he had once known empirically. He now only sees "the wheel of fire"—an image that evokes the circularity of the Ring, as if he could now only see the Ring's power, its essence, as it might look without the materiality of its golden surface. In any case, Frodo has become horribly vulnerable to the Ring. It is a clear danger to him, a fire with a proximity that can burn, a fire from which Frodo cannot protect himself, a fire that blinds him to the memories of better times that can no longer protect him.

But the wheel of fire is also, then, a sign that the Ring—and Sauron through the Ring—operates most terribly by *stealing* its bearer away from his sense of self rooted in the material world and in relation to one's material sense of personal history and mythology. For Frodo, the consequence of this theft is that he is now a part of the mythic system that establishes Sauron's power over all things. It also then leads to Frodo's inability to achieve the kind of apotheosis

that Bilbo did—for the only “divine state” in such a system must be Sauron’s. Having passed the final threshold of his quest—the entrance to the Sammath Naur—Frodo therefore cannot name himself. Instead, finally standing at the Cracks of Doom, he says, “I have come. [...] But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!” (VI.3.945). As Shippey has noted in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Frodo’s choice of the words “I do not choose” instead of “I choose not to do” is significant, for “Frodo does not choose; the choice is made for him” (140). Because the Ring places its bearer within Sauron’s second-order mythic system and because the bearer then loses contact with his sense of self, he surrenders agency to the Ring’s power. If he cannot choose, he cannot name; much less can he choose to name himself as the master of his own will. The Ring becomes his sole concern, the possession of which is now the only event in his life that matters; the Ring possesses him and marks him a slave to its designs and the designs of its maker. He does not transcend the limitations of his past and personal mythology—he does not achieve an apotheosis—because the Ring has taken the means by which he may do so.

The Lord of the Rings’ last chapter has more to say on the matter of Frodo’s missing apotheosis. Settled comfortably now at Bag End, Sam one day discovers Frodo “looking very strange”; so he asks, “What’s the matter, Mr. Frodo?” Frodo responds with, “I am wounded [...] wounded; it will never really heal” (VI.9.1025). As Sam realizes later, Frodo refers to the injury he received from the Black Rider’s weapon on Weathertop; the pain of it is still with him, especially on the wounding’s anniversary. Likewise, though the Ring is long destroyed, its legacy lingers, stealing the peaceful repose in Bag End he has earned and which Bilbo once enjoyed. He explains his circumstance more clearly in the Grey Havens when the bewildered Sam wonders why his master cannot “enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all [he has] done.” Frodo answers with, “So I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me” (VI.9.1029). Since the trauma of past terror still lingers and cannot be dispelled by any rational means, it defers the possibility of achieving a transformative apotheosis, of a self-naming state Bilbo enjoyed. His exterior destiny is not yet complete, for he has no distance from his suffering; his journey must continue. If his apotheosis is possible, it awaits in Valinor across the sea, where the Valar may heal him, eliminate the legacy of Mordor’s terrors, and give him back himself and the solidity of interior being that the Ring stole.

Frodo’s freedom from suffering Gollum’s horrible fate becomes possible due to a crucial weakness in Sauron’s defenses, of which the position of the Sammath Naur’s entrance is a sign. Tolkien’s narrator informs us that a road leads from Barad-dûr to the Chambers of Fire, so that the latter’s doorway “gaze[s] back east straight to the Window of the Eye in Sauron’s shadow-

mantled fortress" (VI.3.942). Since he can see directly into the Sammath Naur from his perch atop the Dark Tower, Sauron has therefore situated himself in such a way that, with his great "Eye," he can easily monitor and read whatever happens at the Cracks of Doom. Such a circumstance points to the fact that his power depends to a great degree on the panoptic. His Tower, to borrow from Foucault, is a panopticon—a construct whose name literally means "that which sees all." But no panopticon can truly extend its powers over such a wide field; it exerts power only because others under its dominion suffer from the fear that it is watching. Those who would approach Mount Doom to destroy the Ring will therefore do so with great reluctance, fearing that Sauron's gaze would certainly see and destroy them if they do. Having no alternative, Sam and Frodo dare to cross the plain of Gorgoroth and finally enter the Sammath Naur only because Aragorn has brought the armies of Gondor and Rohan to the Morannon to draw Sauron's gaze away from Mount Doom.

Thus, though Sauron has expanded his powers of perception beyond that of mortals, he cannot have power over that which he does not see or perceive. Moreover, his attention can be diverted, and he allows himself to become distracted because he cannot imagine that a hobbit could have penetrated his borders, much less be a threat to him. In his arrogance, he can only imagine that someone like Aragorn could ever pose a real danger. As always, danger lurks beyond a threshold, but because he reads the signs beyond one threshold—the Morannon—he fails to see, identify, and read the real threat beyond the entrance to the Sammath Naur. The entrance into Mount Doom is an opportunity to reinterpret Sauron's power. For Sauron as a result becomes a figure of the defective Reader—the type that cannot understand events in the world around him because the signs he needs to read the most are the ones about which he is pridefully ignorant or neglectful.

The final effect of Sauron's arrogance, though, is that he does not know Frodo has penetrated to the center of his power until Frodo finally puts on the Ring. The delay puts Sauron's minions too far away to interfere in the events at Mount Doom, giving Gollum time to bite the Ring from Frodo's finger and fall into the Fire, destroying the Ring. Sauron's limitation is finally his and his servants' inability to bridge the gap in space between the Morannon and the Sammath Naur, to cross a threshold to address the danger that will destroy him. He is a warning, a moral granted to all who read Tolkien's allegory of reading, which is simply: do not become this kind of reader.

As importantly, the Sammath Naur's entrance emphasizes the rhetorical possibilities of thresholds and narrative. After all, what will happen upon crossing a threshold is always a matter for speculation. Will Bilbo be able to steal Smaug's ill-gotten treasure? Will Frodo be able to destroy the Ring? Will Sauron and his Black Riders be able to stop him? Will the crossers of any threshold fail

the purpose of their quests? Only reading further will answer these questions. The uncertainty of each threshold, of what will happen beyond them, of what those events will mean for Middle-earth, its inhabitants, and the reader, must be a central concern. For each threshold is an opportunity to consider the philosophical implications of thresholds as texts in a narrative that is consequently about and allegorizes the process and moral consequences of reading. Maureen Quilligan summarizes these implications most vividly by writing,

After reading an allegory [...] we only realize what kind of readers we are, and what kind we must become in order to interpret our significance in the cosmos. Other genres [like myth] appeal to readers as human beings; allegory appeals to readers as readers of systems of signs, but this may only be to say that allegory appeals to readers in terms of their most distinguishing human characteristic, as readers of, and therefore creatures finally shaped by language. (24)

By reading an allegory, including those of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, we discover this most profound of philosophical truths. Tolkien's characters are indeed shaped and transformed by language and the reading of signs; some (like Bilbo) are as a result better able to interpret their place in the cosmic design; others (like Frodo and Gollum) risk losing their agency and sense of self. Changed as they are, they in turn change their world. But it starts by reading and recognizing the possible thresholds through which transformation may lie. Once Gandalf marks Bilbo's door, Bilbo can begin to see the potential for change from comfort-loving hobbit to adventurer. Once Elrond reads Thorin's map, Thorin and company know how they may open the Lonely Mountain's secret door and steal back their treasure; they thus change their fate as homeless wanderers to those with a home. Once Gandalf finds and reveals the inscription on the One Ring, Frodo can know his destiny as an agent of its destruction beyond the Sammath Naur's threshold. And once Frodo places the Ring on his finger at the Cracks of Doom, Sauron can know that the possibility of his destruction has become an imminent reality that he cannot avoid.

The final threshold for both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is fittingly, then, once more Bag End's front door—for Bag End is also "the end" in both novels that not only marks the return to house and home. It also marks transformation through knowledge. As Joseph Campbell suggests in his chapter "The Crossing of the Return Threshold," the adventurer must accept "as real, after an experience of the soul-satisfying vision of fulfillment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life" (189). Bilbo returns a wiser, more worldly hobbit, aware of the simplicity and naïveté of his former existence in the Shire, and of the naïve innocence of his fellow hobbits, though good and

worthy in their own way. Frodo returns wounded and world-weary; he cannot accept the passing joys and sorrows, the banalities and noisy obscenities of daily life because the pains of his physical and psychic wounds are still too much with him. Sam turns out to be more like Bilbo. Having discovered sorrow in Frodo's departure for Valinor, he returns to his family, and his wife "drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap"; then with a "deep breath" and a melancholy that at once recalls and moves beyond *The Hobbit's* subtitle *There and Back Again* to embrace a moment of philosophical irony, Sam says, "Well, I'm back" (VI.9.1031). Thus, while Frodo cannot benefit from the knowledge his experiences beyond Bag End's threshold have given him, Bilbo and Sam are granted such a boon. Once they return to Bag End after their respective adventures, they are free to consider and enjoy their interior being in light of the exterior destiny they have discovered. Sam is even free to add to the personal and family mythology that will inhabit his home with him by making a family for himself and Rose. As Frodo tells him, he has "so much to enjoy and to be, and to do" (VI.9.1029). He will build a sense of internal being for his family and himself, a being that—thanks largely to his efforts—will be safe from the worst kinds of theft for many long years.

But neither Bilbo, Frodo, nor Sam are free any longer to consider their return to Bag End's threshold innocently. Changed by their newly acquired wisdom, they can only philosophically consider it, their new sense of self, and the idea of returning home with knowledge of the possibilities that lie in the future and beyond any threshold. Just as significantly, Tolkien's novels guide the reader into a consideration of their identity as readers. Novels, like the thresholds (and the apotheoses) that populate them, do not belong to and do not give rise to mythic consciousness; they are multimodal, multigeneric thresholds that function in relation to the discourse of allegory. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are themselves threshold texts opening onto such a discourse that transforms the reader accordingly. They must be read and interpreted, and while the possibilities they imply may often lead to adventure, they will certainly lead to philosophy.



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