Poetry as Metaphor in *The Lord of the Rings*

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Abstract
Close examination of the three versions of the Walking Song in *The Lord of the Rings* that shows how it captures the themes of the book in miniature. The metaphors “encapsulate the same view of history and man’s role in it that he conveys through the larger metaphor of the trilogy itself.”

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by William Reynolds

In investigating J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* critics have sometimes concentrated on large scale questions about the trilogy's mythic qualities or its moral, philosophical, and theological systems. This concentration has proved something of a mixed blessing; for while definite critical positions on most of the major issues have been established, whole sections of the epic, even some which illuminate the larger matters, have not received the attention they merit. By examining in detail the three poems from *The Lord of the Rings* which Tolkien calls "The Old Walking Song" and "A Walking Song" I intend to demonstrate that in the metaphors of these short poems Tolkien encapsulates the same view of History and man's role in it that he conveys through the larger metaphor of the trilogy itself.

As has been noted, one accomplishment of "The Old Walking Song" (I, 62) is to deepen the characterization of Bilbo Baggins. After Bilbo has finally given up the Ring he has guarded for so many years and is prepared to leave the Shire, he can declare that he is as happy as he has ever been to "off on the Road with dwarves" (I, 62). But he still experiences not only the typical hobbit reluctance to cut himself off from what is familiar but also a troublesome foreboding about what the future holds for one who has given up his power. All this the poem makes clear; while Bilbo can claim to be "pursuing it [the Road] with eager feet" (I, 62, line 5) he repeats the poem slowly and quietly, pausing after its final verse, "And whither then? I cannot say," balancing within himself the new freedom to be gained against what may very well be lost.

Further along in *The Fellowship of the Ring* Tolkien uses "The Old Walking Song" for a similar purpose. Having learned the history of the Ring, Bilbo's nephew Frodo Baggins has resolved to do what he can to save the Shire from danger (I, 96), but he too is reluctant to take the final step. After some months of delay, Frodo together with two other hobbits, Sam Gamgee and Pippin Took, leave the Shire; on the second day of their journey Frodo -- like Bilbo -- speaks the poem "aloud, but as to himself ... slowly" (I, 110). His version of the poem differs from Bilbo's in only a single word. Frodo's feet are "weary" (I, 110, line 5) while Bilbo's had been "eager" (I, 62, line 5). But this single alteration is significant in disclosing that Frodo, more knowledgeable about the Ring's history and power, is more reluctant than Bilbo to begin his journey, the poem shows how dangerous Frodo considers the situation.

But the poem discloses more of Frodo's character: despite his fear of the known and dread of the unknown, Frodo still bravely chooses to continue his journey. Frodo chooses freely, rejecting the tempting plan to spend an extra day at Crickhollow to wait for Sam and Frodo's other companions, just as he had earlier responded to Gandalf's direct challenge, "the decision lies with you" (I, 95), by taking it upon himself to "keep the Ring and guard it well" (I, 96). Yet the poem also reveals that Frodo feels an obligation to choose one course rather than the other. His weariness is no excuse; he says plainly, "I must follow if I can" (I, 110, line 4), not "I will follow, if I like" or "I should follow, if I can." Finally, the poem signals Frodo's acceptance of what Gandalf had told him earlier: "There was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ringmaker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it" (I, 86). Frodo neither designed nor built the Road. He knows neither its beginning nor its end. But, because he "must," he trusts the power that made the Road and permits himself to be swept off (I, 110).

For Frodo, the awareness of these things is something new, something he voices only after he has sold his family home at Bag End, spent one fairly uncomfortable night in the open, and meditated on what Gandalf told him five months before. But Tolkien makes clear that Frodo's views are not frivolous by contrasting his reflective meditation on "The Old Walking Song" with the joking complaint of young Pippin: "The road gave on forever . . . but I can't without a rest. It is high time for lunch" (I, 109).

It is significant, too, that Frodo uses "weary" with its connotation of utter exhaustion rather than simply saying his feet are "tired" or "fatigued." The exhaustion cannot be merely physical. The hobbits have been on the road for only a few hours, and the night before it had been a Pippin not Frodo who had asked for a halt. Instead, Frodo is starting to feel the effects of the spiritual burden he has taken upon himself, the "dreadful, dragging weight" (III, 268) which in the end will trouble him more than weeks of wandering, knife wound, and spider sting.

It is surely no accident then that Tolkien follows this example of Frodo's growth in intelligence and strength with the first real threat to him -- the appearance of a Black Rider, one of the dread Nazgûl sent by Sauron. The point seems clear, to the reader if not to the hobbits concerning beside the road: the Good is to be chosen, but choosing the Good insures neither happiness nor safety and may, in fact, guarantee their opposites. For the Black Rider's business is not with a hobbit but with the Ring, the hobbit carries, not with Frodo Baggins but with the Ring-bearer.

But the result of the Black Rider's appearance is not the terrified despair Sauron hopes for. Frodo knows no more than he did before and still wishes Gandalf were present to make the choice (I, 113). But his decision is made without hesitation: "We'll move on now" (I, 114). And once again Tolkien uses poetry to enrich his account; for as the three hobbits move on, they hum another of Bilbo's songs (I, 115). "A Walking Song" is primarily a celebration of courage, a call to postpone the return to hearth and bed and push forward to "meet / A sudden tree or standing stone / That none have seen but we alone" (I, 115, lines 4-6). But it is also a reaffirmation (participated in this time by Sam and Pippin) of Frodo's earlier decision; for the emphasis in the second stanza is on freely braving the unknown to take the "secret gate . . . or the hidden paths / That run / Towards the Moon or to the Sun" (I, 115, lines 12, 15-16) while the third stanza combines an acknowledgement that evil may wait along the paths "through the shadows to the edge of night" (II, 115, line 23) with a calm trust that ultimately all will be well.
Though the poem is primarily a repetition of what has already been said, Tolkien also uses it to assure the reader that the principles which have been set up by him and the hobbits and the others in are. The poem looks ahead as well as back; it is one of those passages that Tolkien does not allow the speaker -- or, in this case, the reader -- to understand fully until much later. None of the hobbits has travelled to Mordor before, but Tolkien has them handle of the unknown which lies ahead in terms of "mist and twilight, cloud and shade" (I, 115, line 27), the same images which describe the scene Frodo and Sam actually encounter after their escape from the Tower of Cirith Ungol: "Smokes trailed on the ground in lurked in hollows, and fumes leaked from fissures in the earth. Still far away, forty miles at least, they saw Mount Doom, its feet founded in ashen ruins, its huge cone rising to a great height, where its reeking head was swathed in cloud. . . . Behind it there hung a vast shadow (III, 245).

Sauron is regularly referred to as the "Shadow" (for example, III, 244 and 279), and one of the weapons used against Gondor is a darkness which turns even the brightest day into twilight (III, 98 ff.).

More subtle is Tolkien's technique in the second stanza:

Still round the corner there may wait
A new road or a secret gate,
And though we pass them by today,
Tomorrow may come fate.

And take the hidden paths that run
Towards the Moon or to the Sun.
(I, 115, lines 11-16)

While the hobbits simply mean that each new day may hold, somewhere, new adventures, they cannot know that they will in reality soon be embarking on hidden, secret, and sometimes unknown paths which will, figuratively, carry them "Towards the Moon or to the Sun." For in a few months Sam and Frodo will pass beneath Sauron's Minas Morgul ("Tower of Sorcery"), or Minas Ithil ("Tower of the Rising Moon"), while Pippin and Merry Brandybuck journey to Minas Tirith ("Tower of Guard"), originally known as Minas Anor ("Tower of the Setting Sun") (I, 321).

It can, of course, be argued that this is making too much of a few short poems; but if a reader examines the context of Bilbo's version of "The Old Walking Song" in light of its second appearance, he will discover that, though unaware of the significance of the Ring, Bilbo has learned from long and often painful experience to live by the principles enunciated by Gandalf and accepted by Frodo in his version. For Bilbo has given the Ring to Gandalf freely (I, 61). Bilbo realizes on the Ring's effect on him, an effect which he describes as "queer" (I, 60) -- that is to say, unnatural, apart from what Bilbo accepts as the proper order of things. But at the same time, Bilbo too realizes that a greater power than he is at work, telling him that the Road has come. I'm being swept off my feet at last" (I, 62).

Tolkien has used these poems to frame and reinforce Gandalf's analysis of the situation with the examples of the hobbits, not great warriors, not possessed of the wizard's mental powers or abilities, but simple beings who recognize the existence of Good and evil and the necessity of choosing the Good and who are prepared to follow through with what they believe despite the certainty that their choice will cost them.

Neither of the walking songs appears in the Two Towers, the second volume of the trilogy. In the final volume, The Return of the King, Bilbo recites "The Old Walking Song" on the evening before Gandalf, Frodo, and the others depart Rivendell for the last time; and Frodo sings it while waiting to accompany Bilbo, Galadriel, and Elrond to the Grey Havens and thence over Sea to the West. As their counterparts in The Fellowship of the Ring, up to and including the War of the Ring, the walking songs of The Return of the King bring the War and the Third Age of Middle-earth to a close.

When Frodo and his companions reach Rivendell for the second time, the War of the Ring seems to have ended; the segment of history begun seventy-eight years before with the fall of the Elves at the hands of the Ring appears complete. And Bilbo, an old and tired hobbit, reflects this in his new version of the walking songs:

The Road goes ever on and on
Out from the door where it began,
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
Let others follow it who can!
Let them a journey now begin,
But I at last with weary feet
Will turn toward the lighted inn,
My evening-rest and sleep to meet,
(III, 329)

One notices first Bilbo's conviction that he has played his part and is now entitled to seek peace and rest; he repeats Frodo's expression "wary feet" (III, 329, line 6 and I, 110, line 5) and speaks of turning aside from the Road. While Bilbo's weariness may seem nothing more than a result of his advanced age, Gandalf has made clear earlier that Bilbo's living long enough to pass the Old Took is not due to any special precaution on his part but to his having possessed the Ring for sixty years (I, 76-77). Thus Tolkien connects the poem to the main action of the trilogy and reveals the truth of Frodo's presentment that the ring is a heavy burden.

Through these lines Tolkien also ratifies the faith -- expressed earlier by Bilbo and echoed by Frodo -- that their journeys on the Road would not be in vain. For when Bilbo, surely informed by his friend and host Elrond that he will not be abandoned when the Elves withdraw from Middle-earth, speaks of leaving the Road to meet his "evening-rest and sleep" (III, 329, line 8), there is not the slightest note of fear or doubt in his voice. Instead he speaks with confidence, using the most concrete image of a "lighted inn" (III, 329, line 7) with all its hobbit-pleasing connotations to symbolize the place where he will take his rest. But at the same time that he is saying these things about himself, Bilbo directs a different message to others: "Let others follow it [the Road] who can! / Let them a journey new begin" (III, 329, lines 4-5). Through Bilbo's words Tolkien is asserting that everyone must choose between what is Good and what is not and must, if he is to arrive at the "lighted inn," prefer the former to the latter.

This universalizing element was clearly present in the elder poems already; the Road could never have been the Road of Life of one or two hobbits simply because it goes on forever, unlike the life of any hobbits. But Tolkien has carefully waited until the hobbits have brought about the defeat of Sauron to make clear that other heroes will also be met by that others -- men, elves, dwarves, wizards, ents, and so on -- are also called to follow the Road.

What then is the Road? Based on the poems, it must be something which has a beginning, something whose end one cannot know, something whose direction one can be confident of, and something which all rational beings must participate in for a time and then leave. The Road is providentially-directed History, the events which de-
fine Time amidst the timelessness of Eternity (the "larger way" of I, 62 and 110, line 6), directed toward a conclusion which, though unknowable, is confidently awaited by the very creatures whose free choices paradoxically bring it about.

Having been led to see the Road as History, the reader can also learn something of Tolkien's notion of its shape and direction. For one final, significant difference exists between the "Walking Song" of The Fellowship of the Ring and Bilbo's final version. In the earlier volume the first two lines had been: "The Road goes ever on and on / Down from the door where it began" (I, 62 & 110). But while Bilbo repeats this last line, he substitutes "Out" for "Down" in the second.

To say that the course of History leads down is to join a tradition which can be traced at least as far back as Hesiod's account of man's decline from a state of golden innocence in primitive conflicts and in which the hero's or the society's struggle against evil culminates at best in a temporary victory achieved at tremendous cost. Nevertheless, Tolkien is correct when he views Middle-earth as holding a view so radically different from the one he substitutes "Out" for "Down" in the second.

Bilbo's final version. In the earlier volume the victory over evil that leaves the victors weaker. In the trilogy the past is regularly seen as better than the present. Each historical age ends with a victory over evil that leaves the victors weaker. The men of Gondor were spiritual giants who built the great cities of Westernesse that stand in ruins about the forest; all agree their blood is faded and thin in their descendants. And each new age witnesses the reappearance of the vanished evil in new and more debased forms.

This view is logical and in many ways attractive, so when Bilbo changes "Down" to "Out" he is surely making a significant alteration, not merely seeking variety. That he makes the change at this point is natural; during a period of confusion like that at the end of the Third Age, travellers who suddenly encounter dangers whose very existence they had never before so much as imagined would naturally think that the Road was taking them to safety at the finish of his course. The Road, History, events in this world are all means, not ends. History is not an engine dragging individuals to destruction but the sum of individual reactions to situations involving choice; if the choices are right made by the individual, it is a sign of his end -- returning properly to the Eternity that lies behind History. Bilbo's new insight confirms one of Gandalf's earlier pronouncements: "Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields as we find it before it may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule" (III, 190). Nor, he could add, should we allow subsequent storms in our own lives to trouble us.

The truth of Bilbo's vision becomes clearer as the events of the final two chapters of the trilogy unfold. Instead of the Shire they had left, Frodo and his companions return to a devastated land whose hobbit is turned against hobbit, subject to the oppressive rule of a gang of thugs led by the fallen wizard Saruman. Instead of peace there is more fighting and dying, culminating in the deaths of Saruman and Wormtongue which Frodo tries in vain to avert. But even after this last act of the War of the Ring has been played out and the Shire has been restored, Frodo suffers such intense pain that he is unable to enjoy the Shire as he had hoped and is forced to leave Middle-earth to gain relief.

If ever Frodo has reason to believe that History leads down, that his quest was in vain, this seems the time. But his reaction shows that he too judges by other standards. He tells Sam: "I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them" (III, 382). The important things have been done: the Shire has been saved and the Good has been served. Compared to these, nothing else matters.

Only two poems, one of them more than half Elvish, appear in these two chapters; Tolkien makes most of his points directly, through speeches like that quoted in the previous paragraph. But Frodo's last poem and the Elves' response are of vital importance since they establish that Bilbo's lighted inn symbol does not merely stand for a sense of satisfaction at following a hard task through to the end and for a different sort of life beyond that of the Road. While walking near the spot where he had first encountered the Black Rider, Frodo recites his last poem, a revision of the Walking song he had sung after that meeting nearly three years before. The choice is a good one, for it transfers the trust and confidence with which Frodo began his first, and ultimately successful, journey to his second trip and suggests that now as then his faith is well-placed.

The suggestion is carried further by Frodo's awareness that what is happening is but another stage in the larger plan. Earlier the hobbits had sung:

And though we pass them by today,
Tomorrow we may come this way
And take the hidden paths... (III, 381, lines 3-5)

But Frodo changes the words to:

And though I oft have passed them by,
A day will come at last when
I shall take the hidden paths... (III, 381, lines 3-5)

But the most significant change is the alteration of the first version's "Towards the Moon or to the Sun" (I, 115, line 16) to "West of the Moon, East of the Sun" (III, 381, line 6). G. B. Johnston suggests that the location alluded to is Faerie, but this designation creates difficulties since, in terms of Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories," Middle-earth is Faerie. While clearly pointing to an existence beyond the boundaries of this world, the line's exact meaning is obscure and would only make the poem's effect were it not for the poem with which the Elves answer it:

A! Elbereth Gilthoniel!
silvren penna miriel
o menel aglar elenath,
silivren penna miriel

While Tolkien does not choose to explain the nature of the Valar and their queen Elbereth or their relationship to the One, he does make clear that they are the demiurgic powers which direct the affairs of Middle-earth to a Good end (III, 389 and 455).
Further, the destruction of the Ring had been possible only because of Elbereth's direct intervention on several key occasions. The mention of her name in an Elvish song had driven away a Black Rider (I, 116-117). Sam prayed to her in Shelob's lair and so gained the strength to drive off the previously invincible spider (II, 430-431). When their escape from the Tower of Cirith Ungol had been blocked by the Watchers, stone statues somehow endowed with a share of Sauron's evil power, Frodo and Sam were helpless until they called upon Elbereth. Then, "the will of the Watchers was broken with a suddenness like the snapping of a cord, and Frodo and Sam stumbled forward ... . There was a crack. The keystone of the arch crashed almost on their heels, and the wall above crumbled and fell in ruin" (III, 325). To journey to a land where Elbereth rules is surely not to travel into danger or even into a shadowy Hades of mere survival. The Undying Lands like Middle-earth are ordered for and by the Good.

In this way Tolkien leaves no doubt that The Lord of the Rings does indeed end with the happy ending, the "ecstaticrpolge" he describes elsewhere as being the proper ending of a fairy-story.9 With the aid of the poems, Tolkien shows that, though sorrow, failure, and evil will always exist, man has the power to rise above them and attain a final "Joy beyond the walls of the world."10

FOOTNOTES

1 "A Walking Song" appears once: I, 115; "The Old Walking Song," the only poem to appear more than three times in the trilogy, occurs in four slightly different forms: I, 62; I, 110; III, 329; and III, 381 (where it resembles part of the second stanza of "A Walking Song" but is referred to in both the text and the index as "The Old Walking Song"). All references from The Lord of the Rings are taken from the paperback edition published by Ballantine Books. Future citations will appear parenthetically in the text by volume and page numbers.


3 Kelley, 173.

4 Hesiod, Works and Days, 109-201.


6 Evans, J. R. R. Tolkien, p. 53.


9 Ibid., p. 68.

10 Ibid.