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The Neverending Story: Textual Happiness in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Discusses endings and closure in *The Lord of the Rings* with reference to literary theories of endings in literature, and to Tolkien's own "On Fairy-stories."

Additional Keywords

Closure in literature; Closure in The Lord of the Rings; Endings in literature; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings

The Neverending Story

Textual Happiness in The Lord of the Rings

Dominic D'Angeliello

Like most modern writers, Tolkien was haunted by the sense of an ending, but until now his impressive handling of closure in *The Lord of the Rings* has never been fully examined. This critical oversight can perhaps be attributed to our literary biases. We tend to prefer, for instance, novel over epic, or the literature of the absurd over the literature of fantasy. We have also grown accustomed to the ingenious strategies twentieth-century writers have devised to pointedly resist neat and orderly conclusions: Joyce ending *Finnegans Wake* in mid-sentence, Beckett always ending yet never ending *Endgame*, or Fowles asking the reader to choose between alternative endings to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Tolkien, of course, never draws attention to closural pyrotechnics of this kind and, besides, his *magnum opus* derives from a tradition whose salient feature, according to Bakhtin (32), is absolute conclusiveness and closedness: "There is no place in the epic world for open-endedness, indecision, indeterminacy. There are no loopholes in it through which we glimpse the future; it suffices unto itself, neither supposing any continuation nor requiring it." The novel, contrariwise, focuses on the continuing and unfinished present and, for that reason, better conforms to our experience of contingency. Despite its association with the oldest of genres, however, *The Lord of the Rings* cannot be dismissed simply, on generic grounds, as a "closed" fiction since some of its outstanding qualities derive from the world of the novel as well. While there is no room for epistemological uncertainty or chance alone in his fictional universe, Tolkien nevertheless exhibits what Bakhtin (32) calls the novelist's "specific 'impulse to continue' (what will happen next?) and 'the impulse to end' (how will it end?)." In fact, he considered different endings to *The Lord of the Rings*, opting, finally, to prolong the denouement for six chapters. By posing anew the problem of *finis* and "fullness of plot," Tolkien's version of "open-endedness" affords both character and reader a glimpse beyond the limited chapters of their individual story; that is, a glimpse beyond the present into the future, and into the endlessness of the larger World of Story. What I propose to investigate here, then, are the literary and metaphysical dimensions of his claim that "there is no true end to any fairy-tale" ("On Fairy-Stories," 68).

In a note to his seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien weighs the relative merits of conventional beginnings and endings: "As for the beginning of fairy-stories: one can scarcely improve on the formula *Once upon a time*," he affirms, since it acts as a veritable signpost to the world

of fairy. This felicity of phrase has an irresistible appeal. In a moment it takes the reader back to the "absolute past" (Bakhtin, 30), the infinitely distant time of earliest narrative, and then compels him to eagerly anticipate what is to follow in the rest of the narrative. The immediate impact of such a captivating beginning can be appreciated by reading, for instance, Andrew Lang's *The Terrible Head*. In opening his adaptation of the Perseus myth in the traditional way, Lang declines to name any year or land or person. Tolkien views the namelessness as a blemish on the story, but not so the timelessness because "it produces at a stroke the sense of a great uncharted world of time" (79). The finest fairy-stories "open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe" (36). Like Alice, we can suddenly and unexpectedly pass through the looking-glass into a different age, or transcend time altogether.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien seeks to evoke this sense of expanding time, even while foregoing the clichéd opening of fairy-tales. He sets his tale not in never-never land, as Lang does, but in Middle-earth, an ancient name for the human world situated between the seas as well as between the ice of the North and the fire of the South (*Letters*, 283). Its inhabitants, the hobbits primarily, experience a "mid-leness" of perspective in a space-time continuum, looking both backwards and forwards from an imaginary historical moment — the Third Age — whose closing the book chronicles. Poised between beginning and end, they catch sight of the Fourth Age, the time of the "Dominion of Men" which has yet to come. For the most part, however, they are made continually aware of their "roots and beginnings" (66), especially the extended history of the Ring stretching back thousands of years into the First Age in "a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, like a vast shadowy plain" (161). Like the "fair field full of folk" in the vision of Piers Plowman, or Chaucer's "sondry folk" from Canterbury, Tolkien's diverse and marvellous creatures find themselves on the road "by adventure," by chance, united in fellowship against a common enemy in the time allotted them. From the first moment prior to their journey, when plans for Bilbo's eleventy-first birthday are announced, to their final moment on Mount Doom, when the unknown, dreaded future is upon them, the fact that "beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last" (409) pervades the consciousness of the protagonists. The elves are so obsessed with time that they wish to halt its

passage, perhaps in a vain attempt to postpone the inevitable. Frodo temporarily succumbs to this temptation during his stay in Lórien, the timeless, Edenic realm of the Elder Days, but realizes he would jeopardize the success of the quest in so doing. In narrative terms, this flight from time would mean suspending the plot *in medias res*, as if the character were unwilling to finish an action or satisfy the reader's desire to know "what happens next" and "how will it end." So when Gimli says he likes tales told in the right order, not those that begin in the middle (585), he recalls the principle of linear sequence articulated by Alice's King of Hearts (158): "Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end: then stop." In spite of Gimli's preference for well-made plots, readers of *The Lord of the Rings*, like the characters in it, are compelled to see things from the middle, for Tolkien creates the distinct impression that there is no definitive beginning or ending to his story, that it starts at mid-point and then continues.

Tolkien emphasizes in this way the problematic nature of endings, rejecting the formula usually tacked on to fairy-stories:

The verbal ending — usually held to be as typical of the end of fairy-stories as 'once upon a time' is of the beginning — 'and they lived happily ever after' is an artificial device. End-phrases of this kind are to be compared to the margins and frames of pictures, and are no more to be thought of as the real end of any particular fragment of the seamless Web of Story than the frame is of the visionary scene, or the casement of the Outer World. ("On Fairy-Stories," 78)

These formulaic exits render the text's artificiality — its relation to the outer world — troublesome. Some critics attribute this textual difficulty to the shortcomings of fantasy as compared to realism. So argues Frank Kermode (130), for example, in his influential *The Sense of an Ending*: the force of the novel lies in its eschewal of "the old laws of the land of romance. . . of fantasy, which is a way of deforming reality." Tolkien holds a contrary view. Kermode's argument ignores the obvious point that realistic novels, no less than romances, are "fictions;" they do not so much conform to reality as offer an interpretation of it.¹ Inspired by medieval poetics, Tolkien is careful to distinguish between what he calls the "primary world," created by the "supreme Artist and the Author of Reality" (*Letters*, 101), and the sub-creator's "secondary world." Once inside this secondary world "what [the sub-creator] relates is 'true:' it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" ("On Fairy-Stories," 41). The moment we can no longer willingly suspend disbelief, the spell is broken and the art has failed. We are then in the primary world looking at an abortive secondary world from the outside. As a corollary to this crucial distinction between primary and secondary worlds, Tolkien insists that "the fairy story has its own mode of reflecting 'truth,' different from allegory, satire, or 'realism' and in some ways more powerful" (*Letters*,

253). Realistic fiction often confines itself to its own small time, one day or one era; the fairy-story, on the other hand, unfolds a great uncharted world of time and a keen sense of "the endlessness of the World of Story" ("On Fairy-Stories," 79). In battling the "dragon of realism" (Thomson, 43-59), Tolkien opens up to the novel "the endless new vistas" (*Letters*, 321) of traditional romance,² and, in the process, makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of closure.

Tolkien's practice in *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrates that the fairy-story, no less than the novel, can be, in Robert Alter's phrase, a "self-conscious genre." Generic self-consciousness dominates Bilbo's musings about the very subject of fairy-tale endings. We learn that he is writing his memoirs and planning a quiet retirement to complete them. At the decisive Council of Elrond, Bilbo mistakenly thinks that he, and not Frodo, has been chosen to destroy the Ring in the volcano where it was forged:

'Very well, very well, Master Elrond!' said Bilbo suddenly. 'Say no more! It is plain enough what you are pointing at. Bilbo the silly hobbit started this affair, and Bilbo had better finish it, or himself. I was very comfortable here, and getting on with my book. If you want to know, I am just writing an ending for it. I had thought of putting: *and he lived happily ever afterwards to the end of his days*. It is a good ending, and none the worse for having been used before. Now I shall have to alter that: it does not look like coming true; and anyway there will evidently have to be several more chapters, if I live to write them.'

Gandalf manages to dampen his ardor and divert him from his self-appointed task:

'We do not doubt that under jest you are making a valiant offer. But one beyond your strength, Bilbo. You cannot take this thing back. It has passed on. If you need my advice any longer, I should say that your part is ended, unless as a recorder. Finish your book, and leave the ending unaltered! There is still hope for it. But get ready to write a sequel, when they come back.'

Bilbo next brings up the possibility of rewriting his text in an exchange with Frodo:

'What about helping me with my book, and making a start on the next? Have you thought of an ending?'

'Yes, several, and all are dark and unpleasant,' said Frodo.

'Oh, that won't do!' said Bilbo. 'Books ought to have good endings. How would this do: *and they all settled down and lived together happily ever after?*'

'It will do well, if it ever comes to that,' said Frodo.

'Ah!' said Sam. 'And where will they live?'

'That's what I often wonder.'

The pertinent rejoinders of Frodo and Sam reinforce Tolkien's view about the artificiality of typical endings.

Frodo sees the handwriting on the wall, Bilbo a necessarily happy outcome. Both assume a pre-determined plot, a complete knowledge of completed events. But such omniscience is unwarranted because both perspectives are limited. The success or failure of the quest is by no means a foregone conclusion: suspense, which keeps one reading until the end of the story, could not be sustained if it were.

Frodo and Sam make this critical point during a pause in their journey to Cirith Ungol:

'I don't like anything here at all,' said Frodo, 'step or stone, breath or bone. Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.'

'Yes, that's so,' said Sam. 'And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started. But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually — their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on — and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same — like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?'

'I wonder,' said Frodo. 'But I don't know. And that's the way of a real tale. Take any one that you're fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don't know. And you don't want them to.' (738-9)

By embedding this self-conscious critical discourse in his text, Tolkien prepares the ground on several levels for the unexpected finale of *The Lord of the Rings*. He situates his characters' disquisition on the seamless web of story in an old yet vital tradition of understanding closure. The sub-creator has no "anxiety to be original" — Harold Bloom notwithstanding — but strives instead to be "startled anew" by the already familiar ("On Fairy-Stories," 58). A philologist *par excellence*, Tolkien accordingly sets out to "recover" a lost sense of "happiness," derived from its etymological root "hap" and related words such as "mishap" or "haphazard" ("hazard" being a medieval dice-game), all indicating the vicissitudes of chance that can come into play in each person's story. These linguistic echoes find their source in a

weltanschauung prevalent during the Middle Ages which saw human beings merely as pawns in the hands of Destiny on the giant chessboard of life. Tolkien invokes the arbitrary logic of this looking-glass world only to eventually reverse it with the workings of a providential order. Underlying the whole dialogue between Sam and Frodo is the ancient saying, attributed to Solon by Aristotle (45), exhorting us to "look to the end" before calling anyone happy.

In the realist tradition the endings of novels typically became identified with the end of life. On account of this equation, the act of drawing to a close often brought with it a peculiar narrative infelicity. *Don Quixote* provides an interesting variation on this narrative trend. At one point in Cervantes' novel, Sancho narrates an unending story about goats ferried across the river, arbitrarily protracting, then finally eliminating the conclusion (135-137). This self-reflexive story acts as a paradigm for the one Don Quixote finds himself in. He is assured of continuing life, of "immortality" in the annals of romance, as long as he is on the road. Like the gypsy-rogue Gines Pasamonte, who cannot terminate his autobiography because his life isn't finished yet (156), Quixote sallies out to live the book of endless adventures, always seeking to prolong his textual life (di Battista, 108-109). His homecoming, once his career as an errant knight is over, means a return to domestic living, to a world in which the actual and ideal are plainly different, and coincides with his natural death. By this time, however, the Knight of the Rueful Countenance has considered the merits of temporal fame in relation to his last end, looking more "to a future glory that is everlasting in the ethereal regions of heaven than to the vanity of the fame acquired in this present transitory life. However long that fame will last, it must after all end with the world itself, which has its own appointed end" (466).

Tolkien also pondered the metaphysical implications of the end. He drew much inspiration from the earthbound approach to the subject taken in epic or "heroic-elegiac" poems. *Beowulf*, in particular, presented "a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings," "an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death." *Beowulf*'s heroism lies precisely in waging battle bravely in the face of "the inevitable victory of death" (*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," 84, 81). For all his earthly fame, *Beowulf* is still doomed to an unhappy fate. No one escapes the limitations of mere mortality. The genuine fairy-story, on the other hand, defies this deterministic, melancholy view of the end by satisfying imaginatively "the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" ("On Fairy-Stories," 67). If tragedy represents the highest function of drama, then, Tolkien maintains, the opposite holds true for the fairy-tale. To describe the consolation it offers even while affirming the reality of death, he coins his well-known term "eucatastrophe":

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good

catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist,' nor 'fugitive.' In its fairy-tale — or 'otherworld' — setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. ("On Fairy-Stories," 68)

When the happy turn comes in the story, it can give the reader "a catch of the breath, a beat and lift of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears" ("On Fairy-Stories," 68). Tolkien remembered blotting his manuscript with tears as he wrote of the welcome of Frodo and Sam on the Field of Cormallen (*Letters*, 321). There, as the minstrel praises their exploits in song, the ring-bearers pass in thought "out to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness" (VI.iv.990). The eucatastrophe elicits more than a purely physiological or cathartic release of emotions. The joy it produces — coexisting with sorrow — pierces the whole person:

your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back. It perceives — if the story has literary 'truth' on the second plane. ... that this is indeed how things really do work in the Great World for which our nature is made (*Letters*, 100).

So Strider confirms before he chants the tale of Tinúviel, which has no known end: "It is a fair tale, though it is sad, as are all the tales of Middle-earth, and yet it may lift up your hearts" (208). In such stories we get "a sudden glimpse of Truth" that for a moment passes outside the frame and allows us to reflect on time's full narrative, from the Creation to the End of the World. The Gospel account of the birth, death and resurrection of Christ — the "Great Eucatastrophe" that begins and ends in joy — becomes the focal point where Story meets and fuses with History. "The Evangelium has not abrogated legends," Tolkien makes clear; "it has hallowed them, especially the 'happy ending'" ("On Fairy-Stories," 71-2).

A premonition of imminent death permeates *The Lord of the Rings*. The words "doom" and "fey" (O.E. "faege," "fated") alternately and repeatedly punctuate the narrative. (Beowulf was fey in his fight with the dragon; that is, he was doomed to die in spite of his courage.) Elrond articulates the book's overwhelming question: "What shall we do with the Ring, the least of rings, the trifle that Sauron fancies? That is the doom that we must deem" (259). Orc drums in Moria constantly pound "Doom, doom" (341), as if to punningly echo in sound the sense of doom that accompanies the quest from the outset. When Aragorn

dejectedly decides to follow the Paths of the Dead, for example, he appears to Éowyn as "fey. . . like one whom the Dead call" (829). Denethor and Théoden are also described as "fey," while a "fey mood" overtakes Éomer, prompting him to egg on the Riders of the Rohirrim sinisterly, "Death! Ride, ride to ruin and the world's ending" (877). Despair, the chief weapon of the Enemy, gradually imbues each member of the fellowship until the quest reaches its climax in the chapter appropriately entitled "Mount Doom," the place Frodo calls "the end of ends" (978). As he bids Sam farewell, Frodo predicts ominously, "This is the end at last. On Mount Doom doom shall fall" (979). After succumbing to apocalyptic gloom, he reneges on his promise, and utters the fateful words, "The Ring is mine!" (981). At this point the unexpected "turn" occurs: Gollum strikes Frodo from behind, grabs the Ring only to stumble along the chasm's edge and fall into the fiery abyss, unwittingly destroying himself and his precious talisman. Without Gollum, Frodo tells Sam, their whole enterprise would have been imperilled "even at the other end. . . Here at the end of all things" (983).

Tolkien's version of the modern apocalypse in this climactic chapter recalls the literature of crisis derived from a theological way of considering the present that Kermode (5-25) describes as "end-directed." Texts which demythologize the End of the World as depicted in the Bible, Anne Wright claims, are also characterized by an "end-anxiety" since they look forward to a telos both metaphysical and literary:

End-anxiety is the way in which the text yearns for, and at the same time dreads, the end: the texts direct themselves towards an End, which may not after all be the 'promised end,' but only, in some sense, a refracted image of that horror. And the real horror, equivalent to the terrors of apocalypse, is that there may be no end. The texts are waiting for the end: but, when they achieve closure, it has a particular quality of endlessness. (Wright, 16)

Michael Ende's (163) recent bestseller exhibits this type of end-anxiety: "If the Neverending Story contains itself, then the world will end with this book." *The Lord of the Rings* also captures the sense of a continuing crisis, written as it was in the great shadow of World War II. The history of the long First Age, recounted in *The Silmarillion*, concludes with "a vision of the end of the world, its breaking and remaking. . . after a final battle" (*Letters*, 149). As the legendarium moves into the Third Age, the situation becomes just as bleak with the return of Sauron, the Dark Lord. "That name even you hobbits have heard of," Gandalf informs Frodo, "like a shadow on the borders of old stories. Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again" (64). This ever-present menace haunts all tales since "many-storied antiquity" ("Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 75n.), forming a common thread in a neverending story that always returns to its origins. Frodo complains, "I wish it need not have happened in my time," but Gandalf reacts positively:

"So do I... and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time given us" (64). To redeem the time one must be ever on the alert. Because the Shadow perpetually renews itself, the need to combat it never ceases until "the end of days" (999).

Although a great Shadow departs, as Gandalf says (988), with the destruction of the Ring, some readers still interpreted Frodo's turnabout as evidence of moral failure. Tolkien took issue with this interpretation: "Surely, it is a more significant and real event than a mere 'fairy-story' ending in which the hero is indomitable?" (*Letters*, 252). The significance of the ending lies in "the whole 'theory' of true nobility and heroism that is presented" (*Letters*, 326). Strictly speaking, Frodo "fails" as a hero; he does not endure to the very end. This supposed failure repeats one of the basic internal themes of the novel, what Bakhtin (37) describes as "the hero's inadequacy to his fate or his situation." The enormous obstacles and complex circumstances Frodo must confront, on the other hand, preclude any such *jusqu'au-boutisme*. From the start he is placed against a foe beyond his strength. At the last moment at the Cracks of Doom the pressure of the Ring reaches its maximum, making it impossible for any one to resist its lure after many months of possession and increasing torment compounded by starvation and exhaustion. By any estimate, the quest is bound to end in personal and universal disaster. That Frodo carries it out to the utmost limits — which is all he really agrees to — against such overwhelming odds shows moral courage. That he gets as far as he does is more amazing still. His tenacity, his capacity for self-sacrifice, his longanimity, and fidelity to the cause are unparalleled. Few, if any, of his contemporaries could have duplicated his feat" (*Letters*, 326, 253). Tolkien's protagonist, then, is not invincible; clay-footed as all hobbits must be, he is a hero nonetheless.

Equally admirable is Frodo's humility. Early on, Gandalf instructs him on the nature of his mission, but Frodo considers himself the least likely candidate to save Middle-earth. *Nolo heroizari* best describes his initial attitude (*Letters*, 215), given that he feels wholly inadequate to the task. "I am not made for perilous quests" (74), he acknowledges, and even wonders why he was ever chosen in the first place. His wise mentor replies that such questions cannot be answered, and adds, "You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate" (4-5). Frodo is a common hobbit whose personal shortcomings have been taken into account. Elrond later confirms the wizard's point of view: "this quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere" (287). Tolkien transvaluates Nietzsche's equation of good with the will to power and evil with weakness by alluding to St. Paul's aphorism: "God chooses weak things to confound the strong" (I Cor. 1:27). Tolkien operates as a

literary "democrat" since his characters are "all equal before the Great Author, qui deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles" (who has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the humble) (*Letters*, 215). His hobbits are literally *humilis*, of small stature. Susan Cooper has remarked about "realistic" fiction, "we small people enjoy reading — need to read — about big people." (281) The "hobbit-centric" *The Lord of the Rings* (*Letters*, 237) offers small people the opportunity to read about themselves.

Humility renders Frodo and Sam the least pretentious of heroes. They are genuinely surprised by their own exploits:

"I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course, but I mean: put into words you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: 'Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring!' And they'll say: 'Yes, that's one of my favourite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn't he, dad?' 'Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that's saying a lot.'"

"It's saying a lot too much," said Frodo, and he laughed. "Why, Sam," he said, "to hear you makes me merry as if the story was already written. But you've left out one of the chief characters: Samwise the stouthearted. 'I want to hear more about Sam, dad. Why didn't they put in more of his talk, dad? That's what I like, it makes me laugh. And Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam, would he, dad?'" (739-740)

Despite the fact that the hobbits' heroics will eventually be celebrated in tales, Tolkien nevertheless subtly alters the epic ideal of heroism. Both Frodo and Sam, like Don Quixote before them, learn that fame is not an end in itself, nor is it finally theirs, any more than Frodo's will power is sufficient for the final test: another hand, that of Providence itself, both "writes" and is "written of," however tacitly, in the telling. In Cirith Ungol, for instance, Sam momentarily imagines himself to be a legend in his own mind: "he saw Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age, striding with a flaming sword across the darkened land, and armies flocking to his call as he marched to the overthrow of Barad-dûr" (935). Love of his master and "plain hobbit-sense" help him to quickly banish the thought. Frodo's temptation is far greater. His reluctance to return to the Shire after the long haul — his deepest longing — generates "a last flicker of pride: [a] desire to have returned as a 'hero,' not content with being a mere instrument of good" (*Letters*, 328). As a result, Frodo travels to the Grey Havens in the penultimate scene of the book to be purged of traces of personal pride (and possessiveness). Significantly, it is Aragorn, the epic figure in *The Lord of the Rings*, who enunciates the noble ideal to be striven for: "There will be need of valour without renown... Yet the deeds will not be the less valiant because they are unpraised" (816). For most of the tale, the hobbits display a hidden heroism along the *via dolorosa* of renunciation seen

only by the eyes of the Great Author. Tolkien puts his unsung heroes in the foreground by having epic or fairy-tale characters undergo a certain ironic displacement. Aragorn once again establishes the new heroic order of things: "With him [Frodo] lies the true Quest. Ours is but a small matter in the great deeds of this time" (446). The usual reasons adduced to explain a hero's greatness do not apply to Frodo. By the end of the story, he becomes "a considerable person, but of a special kind: a spiritual enlargement rather than in increase of physical or mental power" (*Letters*, 351). In other words, he remains inconspicuous but grows in magnanimity.

Frodo's nobility in littleness and in greatness makes possible the peripeteia on Mount Doom. To reach his destination, Frodo receives help from members of the fellowship, who pledge to stick to him "through thick and thin — to the bitter end" (119). In *War and Peace* (484), "honest folk" unite against the forces of evil to ensure a final victory. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the mutual support of people of good will, though essential, is not, by itself, sufficient. Salvation from ruin depends on something apparently unconnected, according to Tolkien: "the general sanctity (and humility and mercy) of the sacrificial person" (*Letters*, 252). This latent factor influences Frodo's dealings with Gollum. The vile creature had hardened in malice over countless years in his desperate hunt for the Ring, but Bilbo managed to escape misfortune at his hands by showing him compassion. Gandalf advises Frodo in the light of this script:

I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many — yours not least. (73)

Frodo later recalls this conversation and decides to treat the misshapen hobbit with the same kindness, appointing him, in spite of Sam's well-founded objections, as their guide to Mordor. The most tragic moment in the saga, in Tolkien's view, takes place when Sam fails to observe the transformation in Gollum's tone as he caresses Frodo's knee in his sleep (*Letters*, 330). He misinterprets this sign of growing affection — and possible reformation — as an attempt to attack his master: "Where have you been to — sneaking off and sneaking back, you old villain?" (742). Moments earlier, in his literary exchange with Frodo, Sam muses, "Why, even Gollum might be good in a tale. . . I wonder if he thinks he's the hero or the villain?" (740). Now, Sam offends against narrative as well as moral sense by typecasting Gollum as a villain in the piece, by writing him off, before events have run their course. (He afterwards feels pity for Slinker and Stinker, but it is then too late.) Gollum's potential for good allowed Tolkien to envisage an alternative ending:

The course of the entry into Mordor and the struggle to reach Mount Doom would have been different,

and so would the ending. The interest would have shifted to Gollum, I think, and the battle that would have gone on between his repentance and his new love on one side and the Ring. Though the love would have been strengthened daily it could not have wrested the mastery from the Ring. I think that in some queer twisted and pitiable way Gollum would have tried (not maybe with conscious design) to satisfy both. Certainly at some point not long before the end he would have stolen the Ring or taken it by violence (as he does in the actual Tale). But 'possession' satisfied, I think he would then have sacrificed himself for Frodo's sake and have voluntarily cast himself into the fiery abyss. (*Letters*, 330)

David Callaway has maintained that Gollum voluntarily sacrifices himself in the published version as well. Tolkien's remarks make it clear, however, that such a scenario would be the subject of a different story. It would require the clausal strategy Marianna Torgovnick (14) calls *linkage*, since the ending would link the novel not to its own beginning and middle, but to the body of an as yet unwritten one. As it stands, *The Lord of the Rings* does not celebrate the deeds of an anti-hero whose self-serving treachery brings about good he does not intend.⁴ Following Aristotle's teleological ethics (41), Tolkien focuses instead on Frodo's heroic exercise of virtue in extremity: happiness, as the ethical end, consists in virtuous action. When Gollum betrays his oath of service by biting off his master's ring-finger, Frodo spontaneously forgives the injury: "But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. . . So let us forgive him!" (111) Frodo's act of mercy gains him Mercy; it produces a situation which allows his moral wound — cauterized by humility — to be redressed and disaster averted. The cause (not Frodo personally) triumphs, so that "all's well as ends well" (111).

Tolkien avowed that he did not arrange or contrive Frodo's deliverance:

From the point of view of the storyteller the events on Mt Doom proceed simply from the logic of the tale up to that time. They were not deliberately worked up to nor foreseen until they occurred. (*Letters*, 325)⁵

Technically, he did not "invent" the plot: "I wait till I seem to know what really happened. Or till it writes itself" (*Letters*, 231). Frodo's mettle or natural strength brings him to the destined point, and no further. Not even Gandalf, "the mover of all that has been accomplished" (1004), can do more for his protégé since, as he himself reckons, "the very wise cannot see all ends" (73). Who, then, takes up the plot at this juncture? Tolkien calls him "the Writer of the Story (by which I do not mean myself)," or "that one everpresent Person who is never absent and never named" (*Letters*, 253). This unnamed Power is actually referred to in the appendix as "the One": he "reserves the right to intrude the finger of God into the story" (*Letters*, 235). *The Lord of the Rings* contradicts Lukács' (88) definition of the

novel as "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God." Tolkien's fictional cosmos is, in fact, the providential one evoked by Boethius (102) in which an "accidental" stumble like Gollum's is compelled by the One to take its place in the great design:

We can define chance as an unexpected event brought about by a concurrence of causes which had other purposes in view. These causes come together because of that order which proceeds from inevitable connection of things, the order which flows from the source which is Providence and which disposes all things, each in its proper time and place.

Since Frodo expends every fibre of his being in the service of the One, or "as an instrument of Providence" (Letters, 326), he draws the necessary help from that source to bear his great burden. Tolkien isolates specific instances when his hero is endowed with "grace" or the enhancement of his natural powers: first, to answer the call at the end of Elrond's Council; later, in his long resistance to the temptation of claiming the Ring; and, finally, in his endurance of fear and suffering (Letters, 326n.). As a result of Frodo's free cooperation with this supernatural aid, even his final frailty turns out well. From start to finish, Frodo discovers that a divinity shapes his ends.

Tolkien does not resort here to a facile *deus ex machina*. Gollum's doom remains consistent with his character and temperament and is foreshadowed by, among other incidents, Isildur's cutting off Sauron's ring-finger at the close of the Second Age. History repeats itself, but with a difference. Divine intervention occurs imperceptibly, heightening rather hindering narrative suspense. "It is the quality of unexpectedness," C.S. Lewis (103) observes, "not the fact that delights us." Tolkien believed he was meant to write his *legendarium* as Bilbo was meant to find the Ring (Letters, 232), and had no exact notion what shape it would take moment by moment. Writing, like reading, became the adventure of finding out what happens next. Both author and character collaborated in their own way with the overall design of the One as it unfolded before them. This image of the act of writing invites comparison with Michael Ende's:

"Couldn't you leaf ahead in your book and see what's going to happen?" [asked the Childlike Empress]

"Empty pages" was the answer [from the Old Man of Wandering Mountain]. I can only look back at what has happened. I was able to read it while I was writing it. And I wrote it because it happened. The Neverending Story writes itself by my hand." (162)

Tolkien, unlike Yeats, does not engage in automatic writing; his activity illustrates by analogy the interplay between omniscience and the future elucidated by Peter Geach (53) from a philosophical perspective:

What the Moving Finger has once writ cannot be erased. . . . But ahead of where the Moving Finger has writ there is only blank paper; no x-ray vision can reveal what is going to stand there, any more than some scientific treatment of

the paper on my desk can show what words I am going to inscribe on it."

This blank indeterminateness hints at the free will of the character in search of an Author. Just as Frodo freely accepts the onus of the Ring at the Council of Elrond, so too he freely rejects it at the end: "I have come," he said. "But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed" (981). A benevolent unseen presence works quietly behind the scenes to amend this faulty choice, but the principals of the quest are never sure of the final outcome. Nor are we. This is because the sub-creator chooses not to know the future, to adapt Nicholas Berdyaev's metaphor (cited in Madeleine L'Engle, xix), and will not write the end of the story before his characters have lived it.

The narrative does not in fact cease with the accomplishment of the quest. Loose ends, such as the whereabouts of Sam's pony, need to be tied up. For six more chapters Tolkien assumes the role of "recorder" (Letters, 289) of the end of the Third Age in much the same way Malory chronicled the passing of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The characters see themselves in history and show a keen awareness that "an end was come of the story and song of those times" (1067). Aragorn for one wants to delay the dissolution of the fellowship of the Ring: "At last all such things must end... but I would have you wait a little while longer: for the end of the deeds that you have shared in has not yet come" (1006). When Frodo learns that Aragorn will wed Arwen, he exclaims: "At last I understand why we have waited! This is the ending" (1009). But theirs is not quite a story-book ending. On their return to the Shire, the hobbits realize that Saruman has been terrorizing its inhabitants. Wormtongue's treacherous murder of the fallen wizard provides another ending of sorts:

'And that's the end of that,' said Sam. 'A nasty end, and I wish I needn't have seen it; but it's a good riddance.'

'And the very last end of the War, I hope,' said Merry.

'I hope so,' said Frodo and sighed. 'The very last stroke...'

'I shan't call it the end, till we've cleaned up the mess,' said Sam gloomily. (1058)

After this tidying up, it is only with the departure of Frodo for the Grey Havens that the end of the fellowship comes. Sam then goes back home to his beloved wife, Rosie, who promptly puts little Elanor, their daughter, on his lap. The final scene of *The Lord of the Rings* seems almost anticlimactic in comparison to what has gone before.

This low-keyed finale should not be mistaken for what Viktor Shklovsky (176) calls an "illusory ending."⁶ Nor is it a typical "return-to-reality" closure that turns against the world of fantasy and its values.⁷ Rather, the naturalness and simplicity of the setting encourages the

reader to ponder heroism in the context of everyday life, especially domesticity. *The Lord of the Rings* contains love stories in different modes, the highest being that of Aragorn and Arwen. The simple "rustic" love of Sam and his Rosie, nowhere elaborated, is equally important. Their relationship sounds "the theme of the relation of ordinary life (breathing, eating, working, begetting) and quests, sacrifice, causes, and the 'longing for Elves,' and sheer beauty" (*Letters*, 161). The code of courtly love is not practiced in the Third Age, as it is in the time of King Arthur, because the tale deals with "a culture more primitive (sc. less corrupt) and nobler" (*Letters*, 324). Tolkien strikes a balance between the high and the low, larger-than-life actions and commonplace ones. "Without the high and noble the simple and vulgar is utterly mean," he indicates, "and without the simple and ordinary the noble and heroic is meaningless" (*Letters*, 160). Sam does not return to his wife after performing great deeds because he has time on his hands or has nothing else to do. Male domestication is practically unheard of in the epic-romance tradition. It is difficult to imagine Penelope placing a child on Odysseus' lap when he returns to Ithaca, any more than one can imagine Molly Bloom doing so on Leopold's return to Eccles Street. Little Chandler holds his child in his arms, too, at the end of Joyce's short story, *A Little Cloud*, but only begrudgingly. Tears of remorse fill his eyes because he feels family duties have prevented him from achieving greatness outside the home. Sam, in contrast, accepts his paternal responsibilities with good humor, and tries to live the unostentatious heroism of doing ordinary things extraordinarily well. "Great heroes, like great saints," Tolkien says apropos of Beowulf ("Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 86n.), "show themselves capable of dealing also with the ordinary things of life, even though they may do so with a strength more than ordinary."⁸ For such heroes the road to high adventure always leads back home.

The "ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble" (*Letters*, 237) requires each individual to be happy with the role assigned to him in the larger Story for as long as it lasts. At first Bilbo encounters this very problem. He plans to extend his role from Ring-finder to Ring-bearer but Gandalf, as noted earlier, puts the matter into proper perspective for him: "If you had really started this affair, you might be expected to finish it. But you know well enough now that *starting* is too great a claim for any, and that only a small part is played in great deeds by any hero" (287). The wizard confirms Bilbo's own homespun wisdom: "Don't adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry on the story" (248). Sam later asks the same question and receives the same answer:

'Don't the great tales never end?'

'No, they never end as tales,' said Frodo. 'But people in them come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later — or sooner.' (739)

Pippin, in particular, grapples with the deathliness of endings, first with respect to Gandalf in a conversation with Treebeard:

'You speak of Master Gandalf, as if he was in a story that had come to an end.'

'Yes, we do,' said Pippin sadly. 'The story seems to be going on, but I am afraid Gandalf has fallen out of it.' (487)

Later, in Mordor, Pippin foresees his own exit from life's stage:

'The Eagles are coming! The Eagles are coming!'

For one moment more Pippin's thought hovered. 'Bilbo!' it said. 'But no! That came in his tale, long long ago. This is my tale, and it is ended now. Good-bye! And his thought fled far away and his eyes saw no more.' (926)

His tale does not truly end, for the cry of the eagles — the eucatastrophe of *The Hobbit* — bodes well both for his personal recovery and final victory. Much earlier, Frodo also thought "he had come to the end of his adventures, and a terrible end" at the hands of the Barrow-wight (I.viii.155). The Story in each case indeed goes on, even if the character's part concludes or temporarily appears to.

Coming to terms with the conclusive end in a never-ending story forms a unique feature of *The Lord of the Rings*. Before his departure for the Grey Havens, Frodo attempts to console Sam by looking ahead to the future:

You are my heir: all that I had and might have had I leave to you. And also you have Rose, and Elanor; and Frodo-lad will come, and Rosie-lass, and Merry, and Goldilocks, and Pippin; and perhaps more that I cannot see. Your hands and your wits will be needed everywhere. You will be Mayor, of course, as long as you want to be; and the most famous gardener in history; and you will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more. And that will keep you as busy and as happy as anyone can be, as long as your part of the Story goes on. (1067)

Actually, Sam's life does not stop with the last domestic tableau. (Sam himself tells Frodo at the climax on Mount Doom, "I wonder how it will go on after our part" (VI.iv.987).) The reader's natural curiosity about what happens to the fellowship after it breaks up is satisfied by consulting the appendices, where, among other things, it is learned that Sam becomes Mayor seven times. It might be that Tolkien has difficulty letting go of his characters, but, essentially, he creates the effect of "open-endedness" described by Richard C. West (97):

The reader has the impression that the story has an existence outside the confines of the book and that the author could have begun earlier or ended later, if he chose. Since Tolkien's romance is a section only (however large) of a vast mythology, it is just such an effect he wants. Hence the appendices are a necessary adjunct, for they give us information about the earlier history of Middle-earth, happenings elsewhere at the time of the story that are not recounted in the text

proper, and what happened to the principal characters after the point at which the romance stops.

The *Lord of the Rings* does not fit the category of a sprawling "meganovel" which plods on interminably towards unresolvedness or indeterminacy. Tolkien refuses, moreover, to play an elaborate endgame expressing frustration or anxiety about the ineluctability of death — and life. Rather than being "anti-closural," his work looks *hors-texte*, beyond its own covers to the world as text, and to a more hopeful endlessness. The big book with plain red leather covers, referred to in the final pages (1065), provides an apt image of this closural process. Bilbo and Frodo begin to write in it, and then leave one chapter unfinished with blank leaves for Sam to fill in. Tolkien liked to explain his approach by using Keatsian paradox: "A story must be told or there'll be no story, yet it is the untold stories that are most moving." The "sudden sense of endless untold stories" led him to contemplate "a place called 'heaven' where the good here unfinished is completed; and where the stories unwritten, and the hopes unfulfilled, are continued" (*Letters*, 110, 55). He was convinced, like John Donne (1107) before him, that "all mankind is of one author and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated. God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another." The Tree of Tales is finally never truncated, for each story is to be continued. *Finis coronat opus* (The end crowns the work). The Author and Finisher of the Story gathers the individual leaves together to compose an "open book" in a library that never closes.⁹

Notes

- The literature of the fantastic came into its own in the nineteenth century, at precisely the time that realism emerged as a dominant notion. According to Todorov (168), the rise of fantasy "is nothing but the bad conscience of this positivist era." Rosemary Jackson (25) argues that the fantastic exists as a mirror image of realism, opposing the novel's closed, narrow vision which Bakhtin termed "monological" with open, "dialogical" structures. In other words, fantasy "enters a dialogue with the 'real' and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure" (36).
- It should be noted that Jackson laments what she calls the "totalitarian effects" (156) of Tolkien's vision, preferring instead modern fantasy which "refuses to accept supernatural fictions" (179). Tolkien, of course, does not share this critical bias against the supernatural. In keeping with Terence's motto, nothing human or divine is alien to his secondary world: it partakes of Reality ("On Fairy-Stories," 70) and reflects primary truth in its own way. Providence intervenes in the lives of Tolkien's characters, cooperating with individual freedom rather than displacing it, as Jackson seems to assume. The actions of the principal hobbits, for example, come under the benevolent gaze of a "literary" Democrat (*Letters*, 215), who brings good out of evil. By contrast, most readers of *The Lord of the Rings* see in Tolkien's depiction of the machinations of Sauron the Great, the ruler of Mordor, both an image of modern totalitarianism and a warning against its horrors.
- Tolkien stated that *The Lord of the Rings* was an heroic romance, not a novel (*Letters*, 414). Yet his work borrows a number of traits from the novel, as I will try to show.
- In the prologue to *The Lord of the Rings* (13-14), Tolkien describes hobbits as "little people, smaller than Dwarves. . . Their height is variable, ranging between two and four feet of our measure. They seldom now reach three feet." Erich Auerbach (39-41) explains that the Latin *humilis* (humble) is related to *humus*, the soil, and literally means low, low-lying, of small stature. Its figurative meanings developed in various directions, forming the foundations of a Christian motif spanning the life of Christ, from the low birth, and the humiliation of the Passion, to the glory of the Resurrection: "The humility of the Incarnation derives its full force from the contrast with Christ's divine nature: man and God, lowly and sublime, *humilis et sublimis*; both the height and the depth are immeasurable and inconceivable: *peraltissima humilitas*." In *The Lord of the Rings*, the fellowship departs on December 25 and Sauron falls on March 25 (the date of the Feast of the Annunciation), both dates intimately connected with the Incarnation. Tolkien strikes a balance in his tale, as I will argue later in my text, between the high and the low, the noble and the simple, in terms of love, and heroism, and even in style, combining "the colloquialism and vulgarity of Hobbits, poetry and the highest style of prose" (*Letters*, 159-160). This modulation of the lofty style and the lowly style, based on the tradition of the *sermo humilis*, is a significant feature of Tolkien's incarnational poetics.
- Tolkien's position on the matter is unequivocal: "Gollum was pitiable, but he ended in persistent wickedness, and the fact that this wicked good was no credit to him. His marvellous courage and endurance, as great as Frodo's and Sam's or greater, being devoted to evil was portentous, but not honourable" (*Letters*, 234). In the actual tale, Gandalf puts the matter succinctly: "Treachery, treachery I fear; treachery of that miserable creature. But so it must be. Let us remember that a traitor may betray himself and do good that he does not intend" (84r).
- Tolkien also points out in a note: "Actually, since the events at the Cracks of Doom would obviously be vital to the Tale, I made several sketches or trial versions at various stages in the narrative—but none of them were used, and none of them much resembled what is actually reported in the finished story" (*Letters*, 325n.).
- Frank Kermode ("Endings, Continued," 87) remarks that such an ending "depends on obedience to a coded rhetorical gesture: 'the river ran on,' 'it was still raining,' and the like. The interest of such devices is that they induce one to believe in an end when the tale, raveled but not unraveled, might otherwise be thought to have merely stopped."
- Sarah Gilead distinguishes three basic types of return-to-reality closure in children's fantasy literature: (i) the return which completes the



- protagonist's history of psychic growth; (ii) the return which rejects the subversive force of the fantasy; and (iii) the return which also turns against fantasy but does so in a tragic mode.
- 8 Tolkien speaks of his own strategy in *The Lord of the Rings* when he says that the *Beowulf*-poet wants to assure the reader of the connection between the ordinary and the extraordinary without the reader demanding that "he should put such things in the centre, when they are not the centre of his thought" (*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, '86n'). Tolkien does not put ordinary life front and centre in his tale, but he does put ordinary creatures there. The relation between heroism and ordinary life remains indissolubly linked in his mind.
- 9 Tolkien's literary practice stands at odds with recent theoretical pronouncements about "the death of the author." Roland Barthes (1970), for example, will not allow that the author expresses insight into what he writes: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." Tolkien also discouraged reductively empiricist or "authorized" readings of his work: "As for any inner meaning or 'message,' it has in the intention of the author none" (Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, 10). At the same time, he cordially disliked allegory in all its manifestations, preferring history, true or feigned, precisely because it tallied with the thought and experience of readers: "I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author" (Foreword, 11). Accordingly, he did not privilege his own *post scriptum* interpretations over those of other readers, finding them all in the end "quite amusing" (*Letters*, 211). Openness to a variety of interpretations, however, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion (as in Umberto Eco's concept of the "open work" or in Derrida's proposition, *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*) that the author loses his *auctoritas*, his authority as source of the meaning of a text. Since any good tale has some relevance to the "human situation," Tolkien admits that "something of the teller's own reflections or 'values' will inevitably get worked in" (*Letters*, 233). Barthes' substitution for the Author-God, the "modern scriptor," attempts to "bury" the author and his theological values; he is "born simultaneously with the text... and every text is eternally written here and now." He is a self-generated "hand... born by a pure gesture of inscription" (1970), a kind of "Abominable Autocscribe," to borrow the term for a mechanical writing machine in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Tolkien, on the other hand, revitalizes the idea of the author as scribe, a collaborator with the plot devised by the One for the human Story, not a conspirator against it as he is for Barthes (1971):
- by refusing to assign... an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), [writing] liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases — reason, law, science.
- Needless to say, Tolkien does not share Barthes' anti-theological bias, not least because it would lead to a vast "library of Babel," as in Borges' short story, containing all possible books and all possible commentaries but with no reference either to an origin or to a *telos*, and with no one interpretation claiming authority over the others. I have assumed, with Tolkien (and E.D. Hirsch), that there exists a certain validity in interpretation. As opposed to an infinitely self-referential, and even solipsistic, library of Babel that would result in the death of meaning, Tolkien's (and Donne's) open-ended library in the transcendent order would bring about a hermeneutic "recovery."
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