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In an age when “the instability of the human subject” is constantly argued for if not presumed, there should be no problem with a poem that is woven from two such different psychic fabrics. In fact, *Beowulf* perfectly answers the early modern conception of a work of creative imagination.

(Heaney, xvii)

3 French linguist Emile Benveniste noted that

they [the active-voice inflections and middle-voice inflections] always finally come down to situating positions of the subject with respect to the process, according to whether it is exterior or interior to it, and to qualifying it as agent, depending on whether it effects, in the active, or whether it effects while being affected, in the middle.

(Benveniste, “Voice,” 149–50)

Borrowing from Benveniste, Roland Barthes in the late 1960s seized the ancient distinction to serve the discourse of the literary critic for the subject of *to write* to be “effected” and “affected”: “In the modern verb of middle voice *to write* the subject is immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it” (“*To Write*,” 143).

4 One of Austin’s students, Mats Furberg, invents the name “archetypical performative” for acts performed in an “official capacity” (Furberg, 279): “Archetypical performatives are different. Their performer shoulders no obligations for the future. He has as if it were pressed a button in a social machine” (280). Emphasizing the formal aspects of the “social machine,” Furberg notes, “Austin’s pet performatives – promises, warnings, etc. – are fairly informal compared to the archetypical ones” (282). Situating *Lord of the Rings* in the Foucauldian discourse of power and knowledge, Jane Chance notes that Tolkien in his fiction continued to expose as monstrous “the repressive speech-act” in the academy and other human communities because it threatened intellectuals in attaining the primary goal – the power of language in the pursuit of “truth” (“*Lord of the Rings*,” 22).

6 Middle-earth, the Middle Ages, and the Aryan nation

Myth and history in World War II

Christine Chism

I have in this War a burning private grudge – which would probably make me a better soldier at 49 than I was at 22: against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler . . . Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light.

(J. R. R. Tolkien, Letter to Michael Tolkien, 9 June, 1941)

This chapter examines a conflict created in Tolkien’s writing by his love for Germanic medieval sources and their (mis)appropriation by the Nazis before and during World War II, the period when Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. These medieval languages, legends, and sagas (Icelandic, Germanic, Finnish, Gothic, and Anglo-Saxon) were close to the foundations of Tolkien’s imaginative world-creating enterprise as well as of his scholarly career, and it is a fascinating topic to consider how he extends them from one area to the other. But I want to take seriously the “burning private grudge” that Tolkien describes in this 1941 letter to his son. In “ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making forever accursed” the “northern spirit” Tolkien had loved, Nordic race-mythology sharpened an ethical dilemma in the ambitions and costs of his creative writing.

This dilemma was already implicit in Tolkien’s ongoing investigation of the power of imaginative writing. Throughout his career he melds the methodologies of scholar and author by thinking metaphorically in his essays and experimenting theoretically in his fiction to scrutinize the uses and powers of both (Ugolnik, 15–31; Chance, *Tolkien’s Art*; Shippey, *Road*).¹ He castigates the textual judgmentalism of the literary criticism that places the critic above the text and often deafens her to it (Faraci).² He also questions the utility of fantasy writing, most notably in “On Fairy-Stories” and the playfully titled “A Secret Vice,” and in allegories, especially *Leaf by Niggle* and *Smith of Wootton Major*. His theories of the autonomy (but not self-sufficiency) of created worlds have sparked comparison with those of Ernst Cassirer (Lentricchia, 66–67). But Tolkien questioned the work of created mythologies with a particularly self-consuming intensity during and after the war. I argue that he came to scrutinize his own world-creating enterprise because he had before him a parallel spectacle of world-creation gone wrong – in National Socialist Germany. Tolkien’s wartime

investigation of the uses of fantasy is driven by the realization that mythmaking is not innocent, that it can become a killing tool: most dramatically in the National Socialist politicization of art, fetishization of symbols, and cannibalization of medieval narratives and histories into pseudo-historical racialist mythologies.³

The Lord of the Rings is a tale of the renunciation of mythology and the willed return to history. The Ring – that weirdly empty, weirdly powerful object around which the narrative assembles itself – interrogates the imaginative capacity for world-creation itself. Middle-earth unfolds, grows more intricate, more peopled, more culturally diverse, more deep as we wander through it, but it blooms forth only in the shadow of its own immanent destruction. The loss of the Ring consigns Middle-earth to the joys and depredations of history – and this consignment to history is costly. It is no accident that the loss of the Ring maims Frodo forever and disenchant Middle-earth – it is also, possibly, no accident that *The Lord of the Rings* is the last long narrative this author completed. And, finally, I argue, it is no accident that the writing of this renunciatory narrative occupies dark night after dark night, during a time when Germany was mobilizing and recasting heroic “‘Germanic’ ideals” to articulate and impose its own terrifying new world.

Fantasies of power

Tolkien himself ferociously resisted any attempt to historicize his work in the light of the world wars and the progressive industrialization they accelerated. When critics and reviewers began to suggest analogues for *The Lord of the Rings* in the progress of World War II and modern industrialization (Blisset, 448–56; Fifield, 841–44; Fuller, 159–96; Giddings, 7–24), Tolkien dismissed such readings as “allegories” – a form he claimed to “cordially dislike” (in this context it connotes “reductive,” “clunky,” and “enslaved to mere events”); but elsewhere he is far more nuanced about allegories – they are one of his favorite ways to think about what fantasy writing does). He snarled that if *The Lord of the Rings* had really been an allegory, it would have ended with the “allies” of Gondor, Rohan, and Eriador claiming the Ring and setting themselves up as competing little Saurons all over Middle-earth (Tolkien, *FR*, 6–7). There is no compelling reason not to believe Tolkien when he says that his narrative wasn’t influenced at all by the war, except that he made such a fuss about it. We have C. S. Lewis’s word that “no one ever influenced Tolkien – you might as well try to influence a bandersnatch” (*Biography*, 201). But I would like to ease Tolkien out of his bandersnatchery and into the texture of the twentieth century and, simultaneously, to shift consideration of the Ring from “the will to mere power,” which Tolkien asserted as its primary symbolism (J. R. R. Tolkien, *Letters*, 160) to a dark exploration of the powers of aesthetic production itself. Throughout his writing, Tolkien explicitly and persistently links the creation of fantastic and mythological worlds to the temptations of power, and never more so than during the war.

Myth and *mythology* can be understood both in formalist and sociological ways; a methodological point of this essay is that the two are inseparable.⁴ In the first formalist sense, myths are “secondary worlds,” autonomous textual entities, self-consistent, carefully formed and realized, drawing upon recognizable literary genres, but also strikingly differentiated from the “primary” world of the reader.⁵ The point of using *myth* rather than *text* in this context is to gesture at largeness – the tendency to expand beyond the borders of one book and even one author. Fantastic mythologies are nothing if not ambitious, stretching easily into trilogies, quintilogies, open-ended multiauthored series. This burgeoning is where the first sense of mythology begins to press against the second. The second, sociological sense of *mythology* understands mythologies to be cultural productions – sometimes textual, sometimes dramatic, always performative – which are nurtured, cross-fertilized, and constantly reenacted to do social work: for example, the National Socialist construction of race war. Tolkien’s textual mythologies grapple with the cultural mythologies produced in his time, not simply through what is represented or excluded, but also in how they meditate on the uses of myth-production (both textual and cultural) itself.

That Tolkien came to question the production of mythology in the shadow of World War II would not be surprising. National Socialist Germany had made myth-production into a political strategy. It mobilized myth into “a collection of themes . . . to spur crowds to action, themes that are always treated symbolically in speeches, images, and rituals” (Ayçoberry, 65). Cultivating nationalism by drawing upon the lexicon of socialist mass-movement and symbolically adapting it for race war rather than class struggle (Lukacs, 104–10), the National Socialist Party appealed to its constituencies by symbolizing *Volksgemeinschaft* (the shaping of a people into a national community) and mythologizing a leader who could incarnate their collective longings, fears, and aspirations. This mythically fired popular legitimation differentiated mid-1930s’ Nationalist Socialist government both from the totalitarianism of Stalin and from the fascism of Mussolini (Lukacs, 197–222; Schoenbaum, xi–xxii). National Socialism imparted a mythological unity to Germany’s chaotic imperial and national history. The Third Reich – the Thousand-Year Reich for the next millennium – was to accomplish what the First Reich (under Charlemagne) and the Second Reich (under Bismarck) could only dimly envisage. Through spectacles and pageants, party rallies, and staged punishments, the party enacted these history-conquering mythologies as sovereign remedies for the perception (which it also nurtured) that Germany (and the modern industrial world in general) had been pressured to the brink of national, economic, and social disintegration.

These nationalist mythologies did terrifying social work, and they did it beautifully. They helped systematize atrocities so that they could appear to be business as usual – analogizable to the industrialization of slaughterhouses and other structural brutalities of civilization. They instrumentalized violence, demagoguery, and genocide as means to larger, better, more permanent ends. To Tolkien, however, militant nationalist mythologies were not being produced only in National Socialist Germany. Tolkien marked analogous strategies – he called

them “war-hypnotism” – within wartime Britain and among the allied powers (*Letters*, 89). Late in the war, when his third son Christopher was stationed with the RAF, Tolkien condemned this “first War of the Machines” (*Letters*, 111): “Nothing can amend my grief that you, my best beloved, have any connection with it. My sentiments are more or less those that Frodo would have had if he discovered some Hobbits learning to ride Nazgûl-birds, ‘for the liberation of the Shire.’” (*Letters*, 115). National Socialism was not the only problem – militant nationalisms were spreading all over the world.

However, if both Britain and Germany could use “war-hypnotism” to foster popular support for political imperatives, the politicization of art set Germany apart. To an unprecedented degree the Nationalist Socialist Party aggressively conscripted art, drama, film, and literature into state service. Brutality had to be institutionally nurtured (Theweleit, 142–269), but so did the dazzling ideals that drove it. Hitler, a would-be painter and architectural visionary, took care to nurture the work of artists who suited his aims and to purge those who did not (Ayçoberry, 67–79). This mobilization of art to create a national mass culture raised crucial questions about the politics of the artistic imagination. Most famously, the Frankfurt School Marxists positioned themselves as critical theorists against National Socialist state formations and the aesthetics of mass culture (Jay, 113–218). Closer to home, Tolkien reflects the interests and even echoes many of the themes of a group of British writers and artists whom Stuart Sillers has described as twentieth-century Romantics: McNeice, Auden, Spender, and Britten.⁶ Tolkien at once expresses and critiques a similar Romanticist strain when he develops a theory of the aesthetic that both dramatizes its own laborious production – rather than mystifying it as genius or sublimity – and relentlessly questions its own power to seduce.⁷

This investigation is not simply autobiographical. Tolkien undoubtedly engaged his own experiences and ambitions as he speculated about the production and power of art. However, the sheer amplitude of heroic, aspiring, entrapped, angelic, demonic, tragic, and triumphant artists and artifacts in Tolkien’s worlds reveals them as wide-ranging thought experiments. Tolkien’s explorations of the aesthetic production show it to be both powerful and terrifying: at times shaping and immortalizing formless natural beauty (as with the *Silmarils*), at times consuming artist and viewer alike with the blank ferocity of a black hole (as with, I will argue, the *Ring*). Each of Tolkien’s created peoples opens a different set of ethical questions about the aesthetic. The angelic Valar help Eru (God) to create the world and then fall so deeply in love with their creation that they volunteer to be locked into it – a disaster for the world because the demonic Morgoth and Sauron are among them. The undying Elves “represent ... Men with greatly enhanced aesthetic and creative faculties, greater beauty and longer life” (J. R. R. Tolkien, *Letters*, 176; 85, 236). The story of their “long defeat” puts the screws on aesthetic ideologies that propose the immortality of artistic power as a consolation for the transience of world and flesh. Orcs (as Morgoth’s parody of Elves) represent art gone wrong, warped to military service, its immortality translated into invasive multiplication, perhaps

(mischievously) a nightmare version of the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction.⁸ The Dwarves express the Vala Aulë’s Frankenstein-like desire to bring insensate matter to life, and Dwarves continue to evoke Aulë in the life they pour into and draw from cold stone, gold, and jewels.⁹ Through these invented peoples, Tolkien’s mythologies theorize the work – both process and product – of art, as it calls forth, disciplines, and consumes the artist’s imaginative and manual labor. Art becomes powerful through this labor, and it repays the labor lavished upon it by radiating a dangerous desirability; *Silmarils*, *Arkenstones*, *Dwarvish halls*, *Elven sanctuaries*, and *Rings* rivet anyone who strays into the field of their beauty.¹⁰ Tolkien’s artists founder less often in failure than in the dazzlement of a long-fought-for success.

These interrogations of literary and linguistic power intensify during Tolkien’s most difficult and halting period of fantasy writing: the war and postwar years between 1938 and 1954; *The Lord of the Rings* was written from 1938 to 1949 and published in 1954–55. “On Fairy-Stories” was delivered as the Andrew Lang lecture at the University of St. Andrews on 8 March 1939 and worked up and published in a 1947 memorial collection dedicated to Charles Williams. “Leaf by Niggle” was written in 1940 and published in the *Dublin Review* in 1945. “English and Welsh” was delivered as the O’Donnell lecture at Oxford in October of 1955 (the day after *The Return of the King* was released).

Tolkien’s power-wary war and postwar writings contrast instructively with a decisively prewar essay probably written in 1931: “A Secret Vice” (Carpenter, *Biography*, 265; Tolkien, *Monsters*, 3–4). This is a Victorian striptease of an essay. It delights in attributing guilt to the otherwise almost laughably pedantic hobby of creating private languages and mythologies. Tolkien makes it a pastime, an addiction, a deeply individualizing and pleasurable self-exploration, and a defense against an unspeakable world. His most affectionate anecdote of a fellow-addict is drawn from his army training in World War I, when in the middle of some interminable training lecture a man sitting next to him suddenly remarked dreamily, “Yes, I think I shall express the accusative case by a prefix!” (*Monsters*, 199). The essay relishes the prospect of the little man hugging his private grammar to himself through the tedium and furor of the Great War, only to dismiss him with a mordant acknowledgment of the indifference of the world to such delights: “Probably he was blown to bits in the very moment of deciding upon some ravishing method of indicating the subjunctive. Wars are not favorable to delicate pleasures” (*Monsters*, 200).

Here what is delightful – what compensates for loss of agency during the war – is power over language itself. Born into language, the language creator uses knowledge of the structures and strategies of many languages to create and lay claim to a tiny, personal, symbolic territory. The invented language reveals its creator’s individualizing aesthetic explorations with a candor that becomes almost painful. Tolkien pleads indulgence as he reveals some snippets of verse in one of his own languages: “Their bare meaning is ... not full of red blood or the heat of the world such as critics demand. Be kindly. For if there is any virtue in this kind of thing, it is in its intimacy, in its peculiarly shy individualism”

(*Monsters*, 213). The narrative stance here is at once intensely mannered and revealing, stemming more from a staged shyness than from any sense of genuine defensiveness. The essay ends with a jubilant Promethean call to linguistic creation; only Tolkien's early poem "Mythopoeia" is equally optimistic about the uses of literary power. Forget the prison-house of language: "You are the heir of the ages. You have not to grope after the dazzling brilliance of invention of the free adjective . . . You may say *green sun* or *dead life* and set the imagination leaping" (*Monsters*, 219).

Eight years later, this same "free adjective" (even the same example: *green sun*) has become perilous, hedged round with suspicion and the longing for power. In "On Fairy-Stories" Tolkien theorizes how fantasy itself evolves from the free adjective. When storytellers learned to abstract the qualities from objects (the accidents from substances in medieval grammatical terms), they broke into a mother-lode both of incalculable power and potential abuse:

But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faërie is more potent . . . When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power – upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our mind awakes. *It does not follow that we shall use that power well upon any plane.*

("OFS," 22; italics mine)

This passage links aesthetics to both politics and ethics. The fantastic secondary world is divided from the external primary world, but it also bleeds into it – through the author who exerts a sorcerous power over the textual world and longs to transfer it to the great, unheeding, life-giving, treacherous stream of history that he inhabits and must continually negotiate. This uncanny and somehow transgressive shiver of longing between what a writer creates and what is "external to his mind" is one of the most productive uncertainties in Tolkien's writing. It is deep-woven through "On Fairy-Stories," where he continually insinuates the independent (and sometimes cautionary) reality of elves, dwarves, dragons – intelligences completely unconcerned with humanity – into his discussions of their fantastic or metaphoric uses in literature. This desirous slippage provokes the wariness of the last sentence. The longing for power is there; it is enmeshed in the power of writing, and it can be misused.

How could we identify such misuse? Is such power to be mistrusted by definition? Tolkien positively relishes the fearsome power of fantasy within texts ("OFS," 22).¹¹ But while famously desiring dragons "with a profound desire," he doesn't necessarily want them in his neighborhood (20), and he does not pursue the question of how the power to reshape reality might be misused in the world "external to our minds." What would that look like? Delusion? Lunacy? What if the fantasy were powerful enough to convince others? What if it sought and found the ability to remake the world in its own image? How could its use or misuse be judged? Tolkien leaves such questions unexplored

here. However, he opens a treacherous ethical no-man's land between literary and historical worlds, which his wartime writing at once patrols and irresistibly infiltrates.

Tolkien was conscious that he was sacrificing to Middle-earth his most productive years as a scholar, and that many of his colleagues at Oxford would take (and, judging from his rueful postpublication letters, did take) a dim view of his hobby gone wild (*Letters*, 278). Throughout his professional years at Oxford, during which he held two of the coveted university professorial chairs: Anglo-Saxon at Pembroke and Language and Literature at Merton College, Tolkien claimed rightly that he did not neglect his duties; indeed, he lectured, tutored, and examined more generously and conscientiously than many of his colleagues. However, his scholarly output remained slim. He grapples allegorically with this culpability in "Leaf by Niggle" (1940), ironically the only story that ever came to him, he claimed, without labor and need of revision. As Jane Chance and T. A. Shippey argue, "Leaf by Niggle" weighs fantasy (Niggle the painter) against scholarship and other duties (Parish the potato grower) (Chance, *Tolkien's Art*, 57–67; Shippey, *Road*, 39–41).¹² It is a story not of successful escape but of accountability. Niggle the artist finds justification only after death and not through his own merit. He niggles away his life (as his name suggests) and does not even complete his canvas, is freed from purgatory (the Workhouse) only through his appreciation of the fruits of scholarship (Parish's potatoes), and emerges beyond hope to find that a gorgeous and gratuitous mercy has renovated his painting into the landscape of Paradise. This gift humbles Niggle while subsuming his obsessive, painstaking, futile artistry into the work of the Creator itself. This subsumption doesn't simply justify Tolkien's fantasy-writing. More instrumentally during the 1940 intensification of the war in Britain, when his writing had stalled for over a year, it gave him the confidence to continue *The Lord of the Rings* (Carpenter, *Biography*, 196; Knowles, 32–141; Rosebury, 117).

If Tolkien's wartime explorations of fantasy-writing convey a more besieged sense of accountability, this intensified into even deeper questioning after the war ended and the vast 600,000-word *Lord of the Rings* (1954–5) was published. One of the darkest poems Tolkien ever wrote about fantasy was "The Sea-Bell" (1961), included in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*. If, as many critics have noted, Tolkien's early poem "Mythopoeia" expresses the pinnacle of his hopes for the divine nature of fantasy, "The Sea-Bell" correspondingly cries out from the depths (Rosebury, 109). It tells in first-person voice (very rare in Tolkien's poetry) the story of a traveler who finds "a white shell like a sea-bell" shining like a star on the wet shore. As he holds it, he hears "a call ringing over endless seas" and a boat slides up to him. He doesn't even hesitate: "It is later than late! Why do we wait?" / I leapt in and cried: 'Bear me away!'" (*Adventures*, 57). He is transported to a distant island where he wanders in isolation, haunted by the echo of fading music, retreating feet, and lurking terror; a sense of hidden life all around receding at his approach. Impatient with the denizens to show themselves, Ophelia-like, he assembles a madman's regalia from leaves, rushes, and flowers and addresses the silent land:

Here now I stand, king of this land,
 with gladdon-sword and reed mace.
 Answer my call! Come forth all!
 Speak to me words! Show me a face!
 (*Adventures*, 59)

The traveler's "gladdon-sword" recalls the finding of the Ring in the Gladden Fields (Shippey, *Road*, 250); his reed mace is no battle threat but a rudimentary pen. This is Tolkien's theory of fantasy in its most impatient and desperate guise: the hunger to encounter an animated world, to speak to it and to have it speak back in its own strange and wonderful languages. The traveler invokes it with flimsy majesty and commands an answer. What happens next is unclear: a black cloud shrouds him (or does he become blind?), he falls to his hands and knees and creeps into a desolate wood where he sits for a year and a day, "wandering in wit," amidst owls, beetles, spiders, and puffballs. Finally light returns, and he wakes from his stupor to discover that he has grown old. He has had enough of the eerie land: "Bent though I be, I must find the sea! / I have lost myself, and I know not the way, / But let me be gone!" After cold and hardship, he reaches the boat still waiting on the shore, to return home in it. But there he finds an even worse desolation, shuttered houses, empty roads, drizzling wind and rain, only grains of sand and a silent sea-shell recalling his journey. The traveler understands that he can never return.

Never again, as in sad lane,
 in blind alley and in long street
 ragged I walk. To myself I talk;
 for still they speak not, men that I meet.
 (*Adventures*, 60)

And there it ends. The sea-bell that rang with far-off echoes has become a dead shell, emptied down the drain with some grains of sand. This poem rewrites an earlier one, "Looney" (1934), where essentially the same thing happens, but with less provocation – the traveler simply wanders, without challenging the land to speak, and the black cloud comes upon him without warning. "The Sea-Bell" 's traveler is both more aggressive and more poignant – he transgresses in some way (pride?), but why is he punished so severely? Does the black cloud/blindness come from within or without? Can he be blamed for his insane claim to monarchy over the alien land when it dramatically refigures Tolkien's earlier recognition in "On Fairy-Stories" that fantasy-writing is inextricably enmeshed with longing for mastery? Tolkien is exquisitely aware, as Angela Carter muses, that "there is something odd about a grown man who devotes most of his time on the *qui vive* for the horns of elfland faintly blowing" (454). "The Sea-Bell" is Tolkien's imagined worst-case scenario: the romantic author-hero waving a fragile pen before an utterly mysterious world – and losing wits, life, and humanity for his bravado.

Shippey discusses "The Sea-Bell" as a sign of Tolkien's growing misgivings about his own tremendous investment in his fantasy worlds:

One senses that Tolkien was doubtful ... of the legitimacy of his own mental wanderings. For many years he had held to his theory of "sub-creation." ... But by the 1960s he was not so sure. It is hard not to think that by then he saw himself (perhaps only at times) as a mortal deserted by the immortals and barred from their company. He no longer imagined himself rejoining his own creations after death, like Niggle; he felt they were lost, like the Silmarils.

(Shippey, *Road*, 251)

This longing for a lost congress with a fantastic world (and was even that a delusion?) is perplexed even further by "The Sea-Bell" 's sense that the narrator should never have gone in the first place – or should have gone less hungrily. And, interestingly, the poem does not link itself most closely with the Silmarils as Shippey suggests but with something much darker: the Ring of power. We are told that in its fictional source, the Red Book of Westmarch, "The Sea-Bell" was annotated "Frodo's Dreme." This subtitle recalls the nightmares Frodo suffers in the last part of his life in Middle-earth, in which he mourns the Ring to which he has succumbed and which took his third finger – for weddings and bindings to other mortal creatures – with it. The empty shell cast away by the traveler in "The Sea-Bell" is what Frodo in his darkest moments feels he has become. Shippey suggests that Tolkien increasingly felt the same way – not only shorn of further ability to create but more and more radically questioning the legitimacy of such creation in the first place.

If the lost Ring haunts the traveler's narrative of the sea-bell, it shadows the longing for fantasy – so eagerly defended, so astonishingly pursued in Tolkien's writing – with the most powerful symbol of evil he ever came up with. This raises two questions: (1) How do we get from Promethean shaper of language to shadowy Ringbearer? – did anything ease the way for this darkening of the conception of fantasy? (2) Shouldn't we complicate our reading of the Ring accordingly? There has always been something mystified and frustrating about the emptiness of the Ring of power (what power? power over what?) – so obviously a magical symbol in a text so otherwise resistant to merely magical symbolism. What explains its allure? How does it grow on its owner even when it is not used – how can an unexercised and burdensome power corrupt? Why are Hobbits relatively immune when even Gandalf and Aragorn can't trust themselves to touch it? What, in short, makes it the Precious? The rest of this chapter treats each of these two questions in turn.

Worlds at war

Tolkien was acutely aware that the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* had mobilized and transformed the very medieval Germanic legends that he had studied

all his life and that echoed through his own imaginative worlds. In the British wartime climate of blind hatred for Germans and all their works, he wrote to his son Michael, who was undergoing military training at the Royal Military College at Sandhurst:¹³

There is a great more force (and truth) than ignorant people imagine in the "Germanic" ideal. I was much attracted by it as an undergraduate (when Hitler was, I suppose, dabbling in paint, and had not heard of it) . . . You have to understand the good in things, to detect the real evil. But no one calls upon me to "broadcast," or do a postscript! Yet I suppose I know better than most what is the truth about this "Nordic" nonsense.

(*Letters*, 55)

This letter crackles with the indignation of the territorial scholar. Tolkien claims a prior knowledge of "Germanic matters" to Hitler, the ignorant dabbler. He also claims a better knowledge than that of either the German ideologues who produced the "'Nordic' nonsense" or his British countrymen who cannot see "the good" in the Germanic ideals – let alone the "real evil." Tolkien goes on to define the heart of his animus, the "burning private grudge," quoted in the epigraph to this chapter. Tolkien's language is strong – "ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed" (*Letters*, 55). Long before the war, his fiction is obsessed with such tragic corruptions of noble and holy things: the poisoning of the two Trees, the cursing of the Silmarils, the treachery surrounding the Dwarves' treasure. Tolkien's imagination, tempered by Catholic belief in a fallen world and an Augustinian sense of historic mutability, is thoroughly primed to realize and mourn the intimacy with which cruelty and idealism, violence and beauty can come to interpenetrate.¹⁴

Tolkien's terminology in his letter to Michael ("'Nordic' nonsense") evokes the writings of Alfred Rosenberg, one-time editor of *Völkische Beobachter* (the National Socialist Party paper), ideologue of Nordic *Völkultur*, race-theorist, anti-Semite, and anti-Catholic – and therefore noxious to Tolkien on at least four fronts.¹⁵ His work both influenced Hitler and proved a useful instrument to him at an early stage in his climb through channels toward executive power in Germany. Rosenberg was sidelined (though not entirely silenced) once Hitler was ensconced in 1933; the influence of Rosenberg's wilder theories against Catholicism (and Christianity generally) needed reining in as Hitler successfully wooed opposing Catholic, Protestant, and neopagan factions to keep himself in place (Ayçoberry, 117–22). Rosenberg's vast 1930 work, *Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*Myth of the Twentieth Century*), drew upon the dregs of German Romanticism, the grand gestures of *Kulturgeschichte*, and the pseudoscientific racialist theories of Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain to brew a weird draught of racialist idealist paranoia. He rewrote world history in the light of a mythology (*Mythus*) that elevated the Nordic race-soul as a fragile wellspring of positive, creative, artistic, masculine vigor against the stifling mass of southern subhuman race chaos exemplified by democracies, Jews, blacks,

Asians, Catholics, Pauline Christians, and urbanites. Rosenberg traces the etiology of Nordic honor back to primordial times. He speculates wildly about Atlantean or Hyperborean origins, but he lights on the Vikings as the oldest Nordic migration well-documented enough for him to sink his teeth into. In his hands they become freedom-fighting individuals motivated by honor (Rosenberg, *Race*, 102).¹⁶

Most apposite to Tolkien's concerns (especially his privileging of the virtues of pity and compassion in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*) is Rosenberg's simplification of race war to an essential conflict between the organizing virtues of Nordic honor and race-chaotic love. Rosenberg shapes history into a perpetual mythological crisis in which honor must ruthlessly defend itself against the smothering flood of compassionate-seeming (actually hypocritical and dominance-seeking) race-chaos. This battle becomes both a "mythical occurrence" (101) and a constant danger: "The moment . . . in which love and pity (or, if one wants, compassion) become predominant, racial-*Völkish* and cultural degeneration begin to occur in all Nordic-conditioned states" (102).

Throughout his immense mythography, Rosenberg emblemizes particular historic moments as flashpoints of triumphant individualism and thus invigorates the Nordic with the force of those particulars. At the same time, any sense of historic accident and atomization is projected onto the enemies of the Nordic life-creative force, who repeatedly emerge in a welter of cringing ferocity and overwhelm the Nordic.¹⁷ The Nordic creative force thus emerges paradoxically as simultaneously vigorous and unbroken – and fragile and threatened, a very useful picture for provoking a crisis. To Rosenberg, this crisis comes to a head in World War I. Rosenberg drags out the heavy mythological artillery to make this clear.

A new centre of our Being – sparkling, glorious and life-filled – has come into joyful activity. This new-and-yet-old *Mythus* . . . was threatened from within our own nation . . . when once again there dawned an age when the Fenris Wolf broke his chains, when Hel, exuding an odour of decay moved over the earth and the *Midgard-schlange* [Midgard serpent or serpent of Middle-earth] stirred the oceans of the world . . . At the same time that *Mythus* of the blood, for which heroes had died, stirred anew in the bowed souls of those left behind by the departed warriors, until this *Mythus* was grasped and experienced in its final ramifications. The inner voice now demands that the myth of blood and the myth of soul, race and ego, *Völk* and personality, blood and honour; that this myth, alone and uncompromisingly, must penetrate, bear and determine all life.

(Rosenberg, 96–97)

Rosenberg here forges a chain of linked mythologies of blood, soil, and racial essence to strangle the rest of the world, and he tempers it with the medieval Germanic writings that Tolkien loved, respected, and sought to realize, both imaginatively and academically.

Tolkien's response is quite clear. Although there is no evidence that he read Rosenberg (or Feden or any other folkish racist apologists for National Socialism), he was intimately familiar with their philological antecedents. In "On Fairy-Stories," he dismisses the racist strain in Dasent as "a mishmash of bogus pre-history founded on the early surmises of Comparative Philology" (20) – a description that fits Rosenberg just as well.¹⁸ As a medievalist and a philologist exquisitely sensitive to the cultural and linguistic differences among Germanic peoples – the constant infighting between Huns and Lombards, Goths, Danes, Anglo-Saxons, and Vikings – Tolkien considered rampant lunacy the thoughtless agglomeration of even these Germanic people into a transcendent Aryan life force, let alone Rosenberg's Atlanteans, Greeks, Indians, Persians, Romans, Egyptians, and Nordic Jesus. And yet Tolkien, like Rosenberg, also wrote about the essential truth of mythology (Carpenter, *Biography*, 91–92, 147). How could Tolkien disinfest his own mythologies, his own scholarship, which drew from the same materials as Rosenberg?

This is where the philologist and scholar could come to the aid of the fantasist. In 1938 Tolkien wrote an incomparably pedantic and disingenuous letter to a German translator of *The Hobbit*, who inquired about Tolkien's own racial pedigree:

I regret that I am not clear as to what you intend by *arisch*. I am not of *Aryan* extraction: that is Indo-iranian; as far as I am aware none of my ancestors spoke Hindustani, Persian, Gypsy or any related dialects. But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of *Jewish* origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have *no* ancestors of that gifted people.

(*Letters*, 37; italics Tolkien's)

And in his lecture "English and Welsh," delivered in October of 1955 as the last volume of *The Lord of the Rings* was being published, Tolkien furiously dismantles the whole mythology of racialism in successive steps that correspond closely to Rosenberg's discursive categories for assembling his definition of the Nordic: race, blood, soil, and unchanging essence. To Tolkien, Celts and Teutons alike, first, are people not races (*Monsters*, 167); second, they are to be defined by the languages they speak not the blood they carry (169); third, they are not unchanging essences or forces but historically, linguistically, and culturally heterogeneous and changing (171); fourth, they are not indigenous (tied to the soil) within any known region in which their languages are still spoken, in England as in Germany. All were invaders and all are products of Rosenberg's shibboleth, racial miscegenation (168–70). Tolkien ends this peroration – which is actually beside the point in an essay meant to inaugurate a lecture series about Celtic language influences on English – by half apologizing and half insisting upon its relevance: "My excuse must be that, though the dogs that I have been beating may seem ... to be dead, they are still alive and barking in this land at large" (173). I would suggest that they are particularly loud to Tolkien because he is so appallingly close to them, grappling with the same problems of

mythology and history, and driven by the same consciousness of crisis that had brought them forth.¹⁹

Rosenberg was not the only mythmaker mobilized by National Socialism who struck deeply at Tolkien's work as a medievalist and writer. There was also that other dabbler in medieval saga and poetry – Richard Wagner. Like Tolkien, Wagner had transformed Germanic medieval narratives into contemporizing dramas.²⁰ Much more than Rosenberg (though without Tolkien's scholarly expertise) he searched obsessively and imaginatively among both medieval source-texts and contemporary scholarship and fiction treating them. He ransacked widely, from *The Nibelungenlied* and *The Poetic Edda* to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's German folktales and their four-volume summa, *Teutonic Mythology*. Wagner drew upon the nationalizing *mentalité* of contemporary nineteenth-century philologists to stitch together medieval sources into a rich mythology for Germany.²¹

He had his work cut out for him. During its quarter-century composition, the *Ring* cycle underwent (but did not always synthesize) many revisions. Robert W. Gutman describes how, "especially in the two final dramas, fascinating stratas of the cycle's literary formation lie pell-mell like abandoned rock in an exhausted quarry" (Gutman, 156). A powerful experiential unity is imparted by Wagner's seamlessly textured music and a supple alliterative libretto whose lexicon is derived from exclusively Germanic roots. Yet as a text, the *Ring* is still pocked with the agglomerate of its medieval sources: *The Nibelungenlied's* focus on the family feuds of medieval Austrian lordlings, the *Völsunga saga's* uneven encyclopedic energy, the glittering, disjunct, story-nuggets of *The Poetic Edda* – including the solemn and prophetic *Völuspá* – the brisk reportage of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, and the bumptious humor of *Thidreks saga* and the Grimms' story *The Boy Who Never Knew Fear*.²² Like Siegfried grinding down the fragments of his father's shattered sword, Wagner with less success struggles to consolidate his medieval sources' intractable motley, the same motley that Rosenberg overlooked in his rush toward a totalizing *Mythus*, and that Tolkien spent his scholarly career relishing and expanding upon. Adding to the confusion, Wagner shaped these medieval sources to serve as contemporary imperatives that were themselves far from self-consistent, ranging from revolution to monarchism, salvation-through-love to the will-to-power, materialism to renunciation, triumphal epiphany to fatalist apocalypse.²³ Wagner's determined cannibalization of the old to bring forth the new undoubtedly recommended him to Hitler, whose programs also yoke reactionism to revolution, *Volk*-mythology to modern nationalist reformation.²⁴ In *Mein Kampf* Hitler credits Wagner with turning him into an artistic revolutionary (16).

Tolkien knew Wagner's *Ring* cycle – and perhaps in the early 1930s had enjoyed it.²⁵ His friend C. S. Lewis was a Wagner enthusiast who collected gramophone recordings of the *Ring* cycle, treasured a copy of the text illustrated by Arthur Rackham, and in his youth had begun collaborating with his musician friend Arthur Greaves on his own opera entitled "Loki Unbound." In the early 1930s C. S. Lewis, his brother Warnie, and Tolkien spent a long evening together reading *Die Walküre* aloud in the original German and then discussing it until

almost midnight; Priscilla Tolkien remembers that Tolkien and Lewis also attended a performance of one of the *Ring* cycle operas at Covent Garden (Carpenter, *Inklings*, 5, 55–56). Despite Tolkien's curt later disavowals ("Both rings were round and there the resemblance ceases" [*Letters*, 306]), his evolving conception of his Ring's powers is arguably informed by Wagner (Shippey, *Road*, 297). Tolkien melds in his Ring the qualities that Wagner distributes between Alberich's ring and Mime's tarnhelm: like the tarnhelm, it confers invisibility, a fearsome aura, and expanded vision; like the Ring it corrupts through desire and signifies corrupted desire.

But Wagner is even more useful as a source for Tolkien to work against. Robert A. Hall, Jr., persuasively treats Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as a rejection of Wagner's *Ring* cycle ("Tolkien's Hobbit Tetralogy"). Tolkien attempts to wrest back from Hitler's Bayreuth the medieval matter of the Nibelungs and Volsungs, revealing the intensity of his dedication to these medieval sagas. In the late 1920s and early 1930s he actually recast them into his own rendition in an unfortunately unpublished poem he called "The New Volsung-Lay" (letter 295, n. 3, in *Letters*, 452; Shippey, *Road*, 277). And more generally throughout Tolkien's war and postwar writings, shadowy repudiations of Wagner's *Ring* lend a contentious vigor to his narratives. Aragorn, who explicitly rejects the chance to kill for the Ring, unwrites Siegfried, who doesn't hesitate; Wotan, the meddling All-Father who enslaves any creature he directly touches, is countered by the distant Ilúvatar of *The Silmarillion*, who enfranchises his creatures and leaves them, sometimes disastrously, to their own devices. In one other crucial area – the choice of pity over ruthlessness, compassion over vengeance – Tolkien makes his difference from Wagner a defining moment of his mythos.

This rejection gains contemporary urgency because Siegfried's dramatic ruthlessness had scripted for both Rosenberg and Hitler a foundational mythology for their own genocidal state-formation. Though it should not be underestimated, the Wagner–Hitler connection has been overdone.²⁶ For my purposes, Wagner provided a useful and gripping fantasy to Hitler without necessarily determining all his programs. A devotee from 1923 when he saw a performance of *Rienzi*, after his rise to the chancellorship in 1933, Hitler began sponsoring the Bayreuth festival, and under the directorship of Heinz Tietjen it expanded in scope to an official state event. Throughout the 1930s, international and Jewish conductors and performers were maneuvered out (or boycotted it) to make it a more exclusively German event. By the eve of the war, the festival saw itself as a nationalist teaching tool; its 1938 handbook states:

Wagner's work teaches us hardness in the figure of Lohengrin ... [T]hrough Hans Sachs, it teaches us ... to honour all things German ... In *The Ring of the Nibelungs* it brings to our consciousness with unexampled clarity the terrible seriousness of the racial problem ... [I]n *Parsifal*, it shows us that the only religion Germans can embrace is that of struggle towards a life made divine.²⁷

When the war began in 1938 and the National Socialist Party was radicalized, the festival was functionalized even further: "It became the Führer's gift to audiences of convalescent soldiers, deserving munitions workers, nurses and others" (Grunberger, 412). Karl Ritter's wartime film, *Stukas*, tells the story of a shell-shocked pilot who is told by doctors that he needs a profound experience to bring him back to health. He goes to Bayreuth and is miraculously cured during the march from *Siegfried* (386). *Stukas* sanctifies Wagner's *Siegfried* as a cultural relic, whose "profundity" reinvigorates and cures even the most war-worn.

The choice of *Siegfried* for this sanctification is significant; in it Wagner's revolutionary artistry and Hitler's need to mythologize "the terrible seriousness of the racial problem" can march hand in hand. In *Siegfried*, Mime emblemizes Wagner's low opinion of nineteenth-century artists who timidly solder together pieces of past traditions into sterile reproductions.²⁸ The dwarf becomes a failed artist who can't forge a sword strong enough for Siegfried to wield. Conversely, Siegfried's reforging of Nothung dramatizes Wagner's conception of radical artistic creation: fearless, heedless of past forms, and ruthless. Siegfried begins by filing the fragments of his dead father's sword down to a powder so that he can see them "zersponnen ... in Spähne" [spun into splinters] before melting them down completely and beating them out anew. This beating ["fegen"] is soon transferred to the body of Mime himself (*Wagner's Ring*, 206 n. 88). Just after Siegfried kills the dragon Fafnir and emerges from the hoard with the fatal ring on his finger, he hears a bird singing that Mime intends to kill him and steal both ring and hoard. A taste of the dragon's blood has given him the power to understand not only birds but also the thoughts of those who speak to him, and he questions Mime as to his intentions. In a gruesome and hilarious duet, Mime fawns upon his victorious hero-child, but what Siegfried hears is his plot to drug Siegfried and then murder him. Mime then offers Siegfried a drugged victory cup. Without a moment's hesitation, Siegfried kills him with Nothung, drags his body contemptuously onto the hoard he coveted, and never expresses any regret. He thus completes the demolition of his father's sword with the murder of his foster father.

This callous sacrifice of the old to the emergent is antithetical to Tolkien, both ethically and aesthetically.²⁹ Tolkien's writing, as Shippey argues, works to recover and imaginatively to reanimate past traditions, lost words, gap-ridden stories; it doesn't want to grind them down into splinters but wants to cherish the crippled fragments, and it justifies itself as it labors to represent them "in [their] true light" (J. R. R. Tolkien, *Letters*, 55; Shippey, *Road*, 26–50).³⁰ Thus, in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien rewrites the moment of Siegfried's murder of Mime, but he significantly alters the outcome. Just after Bilbo puts on the Ring for the first time, he, like Siegfried, is faced by a scrabbling, deceptive, dwarflike creature who wants the Ring and is willing to kill him to get it: Gollum. Bilbo is invisible and could easily dispatch Gollum with his sword, Sting, and he has a material reason to do so: Gollum is squatting across Bilbo's only escape route from the caverns. But Bilbo, unlike Siegfried, hesitates:

Bilbo almost stopped breathing ... He was desperate. He must get away, out of this horrible darkness, while he had any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. All these thoughts passed in the flash of a second. He trembled. And then quite suddenly in another flash ... he leaped.

(H, 97)

The free indirect discourse investigates the difficulty of this decision. At first, like Siegfried, Bilbo feels repulsion for "the foul thing" and would genuinely like to kill and "put its eyes out." But a sense of fair play prevents him, and there isn't yet admissible evidence for Gollum's intentions. Then Bilbo is struck by "a sudden understanding" which leads not just to pity but to real compassion as he feels his way into the misery of Gollum's existence. Finally he leaps, not just over the lurking Gollum, but over the whole vicious Siegfriedian, Rosenbergian Nazi mindset that finds it more self-justifying to kill an enemy it views as threatening and contemptible than to try to understand him.

The Hobbit was written down from 1931 to 1937, but this scene was added in its 1947 revision in the light of developments in *The Lord of the Rings* – and, arguably, of World War II and the horrendous revelations that followed it.³¹ Both the *Hobbit*-revision and *The Lord of the Rings* make this moment of pity pivotal to the design of Tolkien's Ring cycle. At the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf tells Frodo Gollum's story and Frodo exclaims that Bilbo should have stabbed the vile creature while he had the chance. Gandalf gives him a significant glare and warns him that Bilbo's pity "may rule the fates of many – yours not least" (FR, 69). Later, when Frodo meets Gollum himself, he replays Bilbo's dilemma and attains the same sympathy. The repeated sparing of Gollum will eventually save Frodo's quest; Gollum will destroy the Ring, not Frodo.

By making this pity so significant, Tolkien negotiates the ethical dilemma that Wagner's devotees must still negotiate: how can one separate enjoyment of the complex artistic diageitic world from the political and cultural uses to which its power may be put. Can Wagner's *Ring* be experienced in quite the same way when we know that Hitler fantasized about Wagner, altered his hairstyle to evoke a picture of Wotan (Housden, 145), and spent his last days in his bunker fondling Wagner's precious holograph scores (later lost in the assault); that at the very end he scripted a Wagnerian love-death for himself? He and Eva Braun married and the next day committed joint suicide listening to *Gotterdammerung*, and within a few hours radios throughout Germany were broadcasting Siegfried's funeral march (Köhler, 6–23). In short, can the work of art remain innocent in itself though cursed in its uses? This question beset Tolkien's writing throughout his

life, but it is not until *The Lord of the Rings*, written between 1938 and 1949, that he fleshed out a negative answer.

Renouncing the Ring and returning to history

There is much to enjoy in Middle-earth: its polyglot diversity, its unexplored distances, its intoxicating sense of belatedness – all produced by the enticingly gap-ridden layering of mythological and narrative texts into which Tolkien poured his time and scholarly skills.³² But amidst all this richness, the Ring hangs, empty, symbolic, and magical. In itself it is a mere form, or Form itself, abstracted from context, content, and narrative and refined to a blank tyranny.³³ From its first appearance when Tolkien had no idea what it would become, even stolid Bilbo is provoked to wonder, "What have I got in my pocket?" The Ring engenders the last riddle Bilbo asks Gollum, which Gollum couldn't guess – a true riddle after all, which Tolkien spent fifteen hundred pages explicating. It begs for narrative explanation, and that is precisely what it produces. Alberich's ring begets gold; Tolkien's begets stories. That is what makes it precious.³⁴

Tolkien didn't know what the Ring was until surprisingly late in the process of composition (Shippey, *Road*, 259). He selected it as the link between *The Hobbit* and "The New Hobbit," his projected sequel. He gave it a capital initial. In 1938 it was still "not very dangerous, when used for good purpose. But it exacts its penalty. You must lose either it, or *yourself*" (*Shadow*, 42; italics Tolkien's). That doesn't sound dangerous at all! But up through the third draft, Tolkien was still weighing other motives for the protagonist's quest: lust for more dragon's gold, wanderlust, looking for Bilbo; ring-longing was still an afterthought. By late 1938, it was the single ring that Sauron was still missing but not yet the master Ring (*Shadow*, 227). By its fifth rewrite it was speaking its mastery with letters of fire (in the one-ring incantation that Tolkien apparently composed in the bath). By 1941 it was more or less settled. But questions continue to be asked about it all through the finished narrative. What is this Ring – "a little ring, the least of rings ... a trifle that Sauron fancies" (FR, 254) – that it should be so questioned? – at Bag End, at Bombadil's house, at Bree, and at the council of Elrond, where its eventual exhibition, tiny and trembling in Frodo's hand, seems oddly anticlimactic after the great mountain of lore that has prepared its spectators for the view. Boromir is impressed, but what does the reader think?

This contrast between empty form and burgeoning narrative is precisely the point. Tolkien's text associates the Ring with the imagination – in its etymological sense – when it grants expanded vision and insight. Merely carrying it around sharpens Frodo's perceptions of Galadriel and Boromir, and his wound from a Ring-wraith's knife allows him to see more keenly in the dark. More instrumentally, the Ring is a productive mystery, opening a space for the generation of story. Tolkien's early drafts show that formulating questions (or mysteries) and then pursuing them kept his writing going even at the microlevel and became part of a process of ongoing discovery. He doesn't come to dark conclusions easily. He will

often create a moment of suspense only immediately and reassuringly to close it again. Then he'll reconsider, reopen the question, and find some portentous way of keeping the question open – and productive.³⁵ But the questions are gradually answered, and those answers are determinative. The emptiness of the Ring calls forth the narrative, and the gradual definition of the Ring entices it into form. The form the Ring gradually takes in *The Lord of the Rings* becomes Tolkien's darkest, though still not hopeless, investigation of the powers implicit in the creation of mythologies.

In the plot to renounce the Ring, Tolkien negotiates the National Socialist poisoning of the sources of his mythology. It is not surprising that Tolkien, although no Marxist, comes to the same conclusion that Walter Benjamin does at roughly the same time. If mythology was being used by the National Socialists as the antidote to the perceived ravages of history, a return to history could counteract mythology. In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1936), Benjamin castigates the mythologizing of history in order to critique the idealism of German Romanticism while ideologues such as Rosenberg were appropriating it for National Socialist purposes. In Benjamin's study, if Romantic idealism mobilizes life-giving, organic, and (delusorily) immutable symbols, then it can be counteracted by allegory, which is entwined with history and fixated upon the symbol's fragility, slippage, arbitrariness, proliferation, and mortality. Performing the mortal contingencies of history can help subvert the shining, antihistoricist idealism of the self-proclaimed Thousand-Year Reich. Tolkien similarly takes the empty symbol of the Ring as a producer of story, and he demythologizes it into a tool of dominion, an empty allegory of the will to power that draws attention to its own emptiness as a symbol. What seems to be an equalizer for a bourgeois Hobbit hero (Shippey, *Road*, 51–86) and a giver of long life and perpetual youth is revealed to be an instrument of dominion and death.

To bring about this demystification, Tolkien works against dehistoricizing tendencies within both the National Socialist inheritors of German Romanticism (among them Rosenberg and Wagner) and the traditions of English Romanticism that so profoundly imbue his own writing. Recent critics have gone so far as to argue that the English Romantic imagination is founded on an evasion of history. In popular Romantic fantasies, the imagination is produced, set apart, and given an otherworldly power. As genius or the apprehension of sublimity, it mystifies its own historical production; as negative capability or the capacity for intimate sympathetic exchange, it professes the power to renovate the relationship between writer, nature, and the world, regenerating each in the process (Liu, 32–40).³⁶ In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien counteracts this Romantic imagination's evasion of history by returning to it a history that admits its own structural (and restructuring) violence. He demystifies the imagination's brooding, anchorless, force as an "unfathered vapor" (in Wordsworth's phrase) by giving it a demonic father who openly uses his artistry to spy and dominate. *The Lord of the Rings* transforms alluring romantic demons into monsters. Imagination degenerates to appetite; powerful speculation, to malignant dominion.

This degeneration from art to power is suggested by the circumstances of the Ring's forging in the Second Age. Sauron, a demiurge of many masks, for the first and only time poses as an artist interested in cultural uplift – and art in his hands becomes the most intimate form of domination. He seduces the Elven-smiths of Eregion by appealing to their creative ambition (*Silm*, 287–88). In the version in *Unfinished Tales*, Sauron finds an especially willing student in Celebrimbor, who "desired in his heart to rival the skill and fame of Fëanor," his grandfather and the creator of the Silmarils (*UT*, 236). Sauron exploits the Elves' creative ambition to claim the panoptical power of a writer over them – he hopes to make them his characters, transparent and manipulable. Like Wagner forging a master-Ring that cannibalizes his Germanic sources, or like Hitler forging a vicious nation-state that instrumentalizes a Wagnerian fantasy, Sauron's consummate artistry destroys what it engages, an irreversible destructive supersession. The Elves do the only thing they can do. They snatch off their rings and never use them again as long as Sauron holds his master-Ring.

The link back to the Silmarils through Celebrimbor is significant. Tolkien's conception of the Silmarils evolved as gradually as his conception of the Ring, and it darkened similarly as it evolved (Shippey, *Road*, 259–60).³⁷ As Derek Brewer says, "Tolkien is never afraid of a cliché" (in Salu and Farrell, 258) – part of his power as a writer is to reinvigorate them – and Fëanor is almost a pastiche of a fiery romantic genius. His shaping of the Silmarils gestures at Tolkien's theory of subcreation and prefigures the idea of the Ring as the tyranny of form. Fëanor takes light from the two Trees that illuminate the world and locks it into three crystals; his masterpiece transforms a brilliant, natural, perishable substance into an immortal, irresistible, and ultimately deadly work of art. Succumbing to their allure, the demonic Melkor poisons the two Trees and, unbeknownst to Fëanor, steals the Silmarils as he flees. Fëanor is begged by the Valar to break his Silmarils and give back the borrowed light in hope that it might revive the Trees. Fëanor refuses: "It may be that I can unlock my jewels, but never again shall I make their like; and if I must break them, I shall break my heart" (*Silm*, 78). This transformation of artwork into heartwork dooms Fëanor. When he discovers Melkor's theft of the Silmarils, he vows a terrible vengeance, and the rest of *The Silmarillion* tells how he and his sons destroy themselves and virtually all of the Elven kingdoms in the process of getting them back. In the meanwhile, until Melkor is finally tossed into the outer darkness by the Valar, the holy jewels adorn his iron crown – an implacable rape of the hallowed by the demonic.

The eventual fate of the Silmarils is an object lesson in the corruptive pursuit of art. Fëanor's last living sons become so debased in their bloody recovery that the jewels burn their hands. In despair, Maedhros flings himself and his Silmaril into a chasm of fire (foreshadowing Gollum); Maglor casts his into the sea and wanders bereft and singing on the shore (foreshadowing the narrator of "The Sea-Bell"). The last Silmaril, stolen from Melkor's crown by Beren and Lúthien and bequeathed to Elwing and Eärendil, becomes the evening star, a message both of loss and hope to Middle-earth, safe because it is untouchable. Similar

degenerations of art preoccupy Tolkien's later work. Silmarils, Arkenstones, mithril, Rings – all come to stink of power, desire, and doom. The problem is they also provoke good stories; there's something delectable in the fear and longings they stir. It is not high and sublime. It is an appetite.

The Lord of the Rings brings that message home, deromanticizing Fëanor's fierce longing for his lost (he)artworks into Gollum's more homely greed.³⁸ Even Gollum's name is a spasmodic gulp, and by the time Frodo meets him, his single remaining delight is eating fish. This delight links him revealingly to a character from the *Völsunga saga* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*: Otr. Otr is the middle brother of Fafnir the future dragon and Regin the smith who will rear Sigurd, urge him to kill Fafnir, and be killed by him. Hreidmar, a wealthy man, is their father. Otr spends his days in otter shape, catching fish, which he eats (with wonderful vividness) "alone with his eyes shut, because he could not stand seeing his food diminish" (Byock, 57).

In a brilliant gesture of corporeal demystification, the *Völsunga saga* places the self-enchancing fondness of Otr's greed at the heart of Fafnir's ring-crowned hoard; Otr's death and burial in the hoard instigates the curse of the ring and the whole ensuing tragedy. Hreidmar demands a large wergild for his son's death: to stuff Otr's skin with yellow gold and then cover it entirely with red gold. Loki steals Andvari's hoard including the ring, incurring Andvari's curse in the process. He returns with the hoard and Odin claims the ring for himself. They stuff the otter skin until it stands upright and then cover it with red gold, but when they are finished, one whisker is still protruding. Odin is forced to give up the ring to hide the whisker, thus satiating Otr's now mythically expanded greed and dooming Hreidmar, Fafnir, Regin, and eventually Sigurd himself.

When Wagner adapts the incident, he gets rid of Otr and substitutes Freia, a goddess of love and immortality whose burial within Alberich's stolen hoard figuratively prostitutes her. Tolkien does something equally interesting; he transfers Otr's oral greed to Gollum, the ring's most craving seeker. He thus demystifies the lure of the ring from a Romantic urgency to a helpless creaturely hunger. Gollum's power fantasy wonderfully disenchant the sublimities of mastery:

Perhaps we grow very strong ... Lord Sméagol? Gollum the Great? *The Gollum!* Eat fish every day, three times a day, fresh from the sea. Most Precious Gollum! Must have it. We wants it, we wants it, we wants it!

(*TT*, 241)

The longing for mastery thus darkens into addiction but also becomes more understandable and – it has to be said – terribly appealing.³⁹

Attraction to the Ring is not Gollum's only defining hunger; he catches even more intimately at his author's writerly self-conception as a myth-creating philologist. Before Gollum was Gollum he was Sméagol, "the most inquisitive and curious minded" of his family, "interested in roots and beginnings ... his head and his eyes were downwards" (*FR*, 51–52). "Sméagol" is derived from the

Anglo-Saxon *sméagan* (to scrutinize, investigate, penetrate, examine), and its adjectival form *sméah* (sagacious, sharp, crafty, subtle). When Gandalf reconstructs Gollum's origins, he discovers a significant darkness within the seemingly innocent name. Sméagol had a friend aptly enough named "Déagol" (Anglo-Saxon *diegol*, *digol* [secret, mystery, deep, profound]). In Anglo-Saxon writing *diegol* has a wide semantic range: from the mysteries of God to the dark viscosities of Grendel's mere, from the angelic to the demonic.

Déagol is the finder of the Ring – it belongs to mystery before it falls into the clutches of investigation. Tolkien's first idea was that Déagol should find the Ring at the roots of a riverside thorn tree, thus associating the Ring with roots and also with magic (thorn trees and magic are associated in Anglo-Saxon charms and in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, where the leaf of the thorn tree is one of the three leaves for working an enchanted forgetfulness). It also recalls the Anglo-Saxon rune *thorn* (Þ), of which *The Rune Poem* sententiously cautions "anfeng ys yfyl" [grasping is evil/painful] (*Rune Poem*, l. 8, in Dobbie). This is a nice shadowy origin story complete with a hint of sorcery and warning against possessiveness (seizing). But Tolkien decides against this. The published version is less realistic and more inspirational. Déagol is fishing in a boat in the river (while Sméagol roots profitlessly about on the banks). Suddenly a great fish grabs his line and drags him to the bottom. There he sees something glinting in the mud, and grabbing blindly, he makes his way back to the surface. Washing away the river slime he finds the beautiful Ring in his hand. The fish who leads to treasure evokes one of the helping creatures in folktales or Jonah's fish who acts as the terrifying instrument of God. There is a sense of triumph – to bring up brilliance in a handful of mud – that would appeal to a philologist or historian sifting patiently through the detritus of ancient writing to come up with a single crucial connection. It is a much more heroic origin story and smacks of epiphany.

Sméagol murders Déagol for the Ring. This original murder of "mystery" by "investigation" makes deadly the need to search into visibility (imagine) what is lost or hidden. It moves toward the ravenous imagination that takes its darkest shape in the visible form of Sauron himself: condensed to a single devouring Eye and a grasping hand. Yet it is clear that this investigation of mystery drives Tolkien's own artistic production. Sméagol expresses the consuming curiosity about origins that Tolkien shares with many medieval scholars; the philologist incessantly searching for roots upon which to graft imaginative reconstructions (Ugolnik, "Wordhord," 15–31; Shippey, *Road*, 53). Glimpsing the distant splendor of the Misty Mountains, Gollum surmises that "the roots of those mountains must be roots indeed; there must be great secrets buried there which have not been discovered since the beginning." But when he "worm[s] his way like a maggot into the heart of the hills," revealing another etymological affiliation with A-S *smugan* [to creep through a hole] and thus a strange brotherhood to the dragon Smaug of *The Hobbit* [Shippey, *Road*, 82], he finds that "all the 'great secrets' under the mountain had turned out to be just empty night: there was nothing more to find out, nothing worth doing, only nasty furtive eating and

resentful remembering" (FR, 53, 54). The Ring itself both catalyzes and signifies this disenchantment of curiosity into appetite, the artistic (or crafty [*sméah!*]) investigation of mystery into its murder, and Sméagol into Gollum.

This is a cautionary transformation for any writer who harnesses the skills of philological inquiry to an appetite for fantastic production. It accomplishes more self-questioning disenchantment in one stroke than the tragic rape of the Silmarils does in several hundred pages. Yet Tolkien does not lose his sympathy for his Ring-devoured creature. Instead, Gollum becomes the most incessantly spared and forgiven creature in *The Lord of the Rings*. The narrative treasures Gollum, treats him like the precious creature he names himself, puts off discarding him, tracks his consumption to its bitter end along with Frodo's. Gollum's death with the Ring imagines a suicidal end not only for imaginative production but also for its ongoing scrutiny, the yoked team of fantasy and scholarship that drives Tolkien's continued investigation of the uses of the aesthetic. The pitying disavowal that ultimately makes Gollum's fortunate fall into the Cracks of Doom both inadvertent and self-inflicted is an act of faith (or individual despair) that the Ring can be given up at all.

Gollum thus plays out not only the vicious potential of the fantastic imagination but also the cruelty of its renunciation. For Tolkien to give up mythology would be tremendously difficult – even a poisoned mythological imagination was still precious in its origins and in the labor that had gone into it. Tolkien was profoundly invested in his own mythologies – and for many of the same reasons that Rosenberg was; they had both been galvanized by crisis and the traumas of World War I. Tolkien writes of the genesis of his own love of fantasy: "A real taste for fairy-stories was awakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life by war" ("OFS," 42). He had begun inventing Middle-earth during his recovery from trench warfare at the Somme in World War I, and he had been nurturing a proliferating legendry from his own philological skill and a reimagining of medieval eddas and sagas since 1917. Even if these sources were "ruined, misapplied, perverted, and rendered forever accursed," it would be horrific to relinquish them.

But one pivotal scene makes it clear why it is crucial to do so. The most suggestive association of the Ring with imaginative vision comes aptly on the summit of Amon Hen (the Hill of the Eye). Frodo, as he looks out over the world, wearing the Ring, sees

a world of mist in which there was only shadows: the Ring was upon him. Then here and there the mist gave way and he saw many visions: small and clear as if they were under his eyes upon a table, and yet remote. There was no sound, only bright living images.

(FR, 416)

The Ring makes its wearer invisible and dematerializes the world into a pliant mist, but it also refines its wearer's vision: we see Frodo learning to see through the mist, drawing the whole of known Middle-earth into the compass of his

gaze. This intimates the shaping power of the imagination as it turns chaos into world. The affect of this scene, however, banishes ambitions of world-mastery to the faintest biblical echo of Christ's temptation by Lucifer on the heights. For Frodo, this is a world not for the taking but rather in imminent danger of being occupied by someone else. Frodo's vision shows him the extent to which this little, clear, remote, table-top world – which lies like an open manuscript before him – is under siege:

Everywhere he looked he saw the signs of war. The Misty Mountains were crawling like anthills: orcs were issuing out of a thousand holes ... The land of the Beornings was aflame ... Horsemen were galloping on the grass of Rohan; wolves poured from Isengard. From the havens of Harad ships of war put out to sea; and out of the East Men were moving endlessly: swordsmen, spearmen, bowmen upon horses, chariots of chieftains and laden wains ... Mount Doom was burning, and a great reek rising.

(FR, 416–17)

This apocalyptic panorama is at once the text's widest vision of a world overrun by war and Frodo's closest encounter with Sauron. It is also a crux where the text works through the impacts of its own cultural moment. Alan Liu appositely suggests that such moments of apocalyptic imagination offer both an escape from and an incomparably intimate encounter with history:

Apocalyptic imagination was that which suffered firsthand the most brutal facts of history and then dipped itself in the blood of those facts to etch the handwriting on the wall – the writing that says, "No, this should not be," by means of fantastic figurations saying, in essence, "No, this is not." That such figuration denies history is indisputable. But surely such denial is also the strongest kind of engagement with history.

(Liu, 35)

Tolkien's introduction to *The Lord of the Rings* denies direct allegory and strives hermetically to seal his diagetic world into a "No, this is not" – and I actually trust those denials: Sauron does not "equal" Hitler; Frodo does not "equal" Tolkien – both figures are more extendable than that. But I think that the scene of near apocalypse on Amon Hen admits to the bright, remote world of Middle-earth an oblique engagement with contemporary history that becomes more gripping for its obliquity.

In this scene, the terrifying intimacy of this pressuring history becomes a call to action and resistance. As Frodo looks out over the world that undeniably evokes the widening sweep of a world war, his gaze is drawn to the center of occupation, the black tower of Barad-dûr, a distillation not just of Hitler's Germany but of all the inexorable forces of industrial depredation at work in the twentieth century, from before the Great War forward: "wall upon wall, battlement upon battlement, black, immeasurably strong, mountain of iron, gate of

steel, tower of adamant . . . All hope left him" (FR, 417). At that point he feels the searchlight sweep of Sauron's Eye, looking for him personally, stripping away his anonymity, and, worst of all, despite his denials, finding an answering assent in his heart: "Verily, I come, I come to you" (417). Frodo writhes between the pressure of Sauron's hunger and an acerbic countervoices (who later turns out to be Gandalf): "Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the ring." Then in a moment of free will, he is aware of himself again: "Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose and with one remaining instant in which to do so" (FR, 417). He takes off the Ring and from this moment pursues the road to Mordor with suicidal single-mindedness. Frodo thus transforms his whisper of compliance to Sauron into the means of his destruction: Frodo will come to Sauron but as an infiltrator, not a slave.

This scene rescues Frodo as an agent amidst terrible historical forces. It is not a rebirth of a self essentially free from these forces; it is not a version of Rosenberg's triumphal Nordic individualism. It doesn't deny determinative pressures and penetrations; rather they inform Frodo's choice as they drive him from within. Nonetheless, it pries open a tiny, valiant middle space between historical determinism and romantic subjectivism. The subsequent narrative is unflinching in showing that this tiny space left for agency will not be enough to save Frodo – the pressures are simply too great, and Frodo will succumb to the Ring and never recover from its loss.⁴⁰ But it will help in overthrowing Sauron. This space of choice wrested from the seething trauma of war becomes exemplary, implicating not only Tolkien and his own struggle with the poisoning of the imagination but Tolkien's readers and all who, in Gandalf's terms, live to see such times. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is thus not a reflection or allegory of the war but a responsive defiance against the war and against war-hypnotism wherever it might be found. The narrative not only registers but also strategizes against the impact of the National Socialist corruption of mythology, its state conscription of aesthetics, its deft manipulation of sublimity.

And it is alert to the costs of its own strategies. They are bespoke most immediately in Frodo, who after the Ring's destruction is left crippled and will-less, worn from without and eaten from within: a tiny image of collateral damage. But Frodo is only the beginning – Middle-earth itself fades from mythology to history. After the dizzying joy of the Ringbearers' recovery at Cormallen Fields, which brought Tolkien to the point of tears in 1949 when he finally reached it (Tolkien, *Letters*, 321), Middle-earth gradually succumbs to temporality, stills, grays, and etiolates.⁴¹ We feel the force of Gollum's final long-ago riddle in *The Hobbit*: "This thing all things devours," of which the answer is Time. Every last-ditch immortality finally relinquishes its hold: Lorien fades; Rivendell is abandoned. After one celebratory summer, we seem to be perpetually in autumn. Companions are left behind; the Elves, who distill and incarnate the immortal aesthetic and creative aspects of humanity, pass away to the West. Any observer of the last conversations of Gandalf, Celeborn, Galadriel, and Elrond would have seen "grey figures, carved in stone, memorials of forgotten things now lost in unpeopled lands" (RK, 263). Finally, we are brought to the

Grey Havens, as wan a refuge as their name suggests. Frodo doesn't die; he goes west – but as the phrase suggests, it might as well be death. His healing will be possible only beyond the circles of the world in the last imaginary refuge, a glimmer of consolation that remains remote. Sam returns to the poignant embrace of family life and generation.

I don't know how I can convey the power of this ending; scholars seem to be coded at the genetic level for receptiveness (or its lack) to Tolkien. But I believe it partly comes from the intensity of *The Lord of the Rings*'s engagement with its own historic moment – which doesn't reduce the story or make it derivative but rather shows why it matters. It is a fantasy that wills its own disenchantment into history, a mythology that (unlike National Socialist visions of the Thousand-Year Reich or other nationalist mythologies) assents to its own mortality and agrees to fade.⁴² Unlike Wagner, it refuses apocalypse, laboriously carves out history's costs, pressures, and fragile delights, drags its remaining fingers through the blood and brings itself in the end to write: *This shall be*.

How does one return to mythology after that? For several years Tolkien attacked the *Silmarillion* manuscripts with enormous energy, attempting to reenvision its entire framework as the tale of Morgoth's corruption of the creation-wide artwork of the world itself – "the whole of 'Middle-earth' was Morgoth's Ring" (*Morgoth's Ring*, 400) – a tremendous task which seemed to grow larger at every turn. He involved himself in maneuvers to get *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* published together – like one long narrative journey – but *The Silmarillion* manuscripts were neither in good order nor consistent with their sequel. Tolkien was unsuccessful in playing Collins against Allen & Unwin, and so *The Lord of the Rings* was issued alone. Afterwards, revision of the many competing, inconsistent, experimental narratives of *The Silmarillion* to a single authoritative version may have seemed like a step backwards in more ways than one – though he spent a lot of time expanding the annals, genealogies, cartographies, and etymologies of his fourteen invented languages; in other words, his revisions often accentuate historical divergence and accident rather than mythological unity.

Eighteen years went by between the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's death, and while he managed to produce some long-expected scholarly projects, his capacity to bring his longer literary projects to completion seemed short-circuited. He started a sequel, "The New Shadow," but soon abandoned it; after the destruction of the greater demons of the Ring, Aragorn's regime "would contain no tales worth recounting" (J. R. R. Tolkien, *Letters*, 419). The valedictory *Smith of Wootton Major* is the only work of literature Tolkien completed subsequently, and it nostalgically glances through Tolkien's central themes from a graceful distance (Helms, *Tolkien's World*, 118–25). However, no mastery is possible in Smith's Faery; the landscape is too surreal, projectional, and expansive even for its attempt, and Smith gives up his imaginative star with a melancholy sense both of benison and defeat. In a 1967 letter to Roger Lancelyn Green (who reviewed it), Tolkien himself describes *Smith* as "an old man's book, already weighted with the presage of 'bereavement'" (*Letters*, 388). Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien's excellent biographer, writes of Tolkien's awareness during

his last years of "a perpetual discontinuity, a breaking of threads in his work which delayed achievement and frustrated him more and more" (Carpenter, *Biography*, 240). In a letter dated a month before his death, Tolkien thanks a generous reader, Lord Halsbury, for the warmth of his appreciation and the offer of his future help with manuscripts, writing of his own seeming inability to finish, "Over and above all the afflictions and obstacles I have endured since *The Lord of the Rings* came out, I have lost confidence" (*Letters*, 431). This may have paradoxically resulted from his dazzling success and his depression at his cult status. But I think also that Tolkien's war-driven, self-questioning investigation of the uses of mythology had brought him to a point with no energy to move forward and yet had worn away at the enabling presuppositions for going back.

But Tolkien did not disavow his own mythological labors just because he could not finish them. For the rest of his life he treated Middle-earth not as an allegorization of twentieth-century events but as a key to them – applying his characters' names to historical developments with gusto in letters and interviews. Subsequent readers have followed suit; Tolkien's characters exemplify recognizable tendencies and character types that are still around us. We could see Adolf Hitler as the silver-tongued Saruman, spellbinding a country with his speeches, but we could also choose to hear echoes of Winston Churchill or even George W. Bush. So used, the fantasy world bleeds into the external world in a way that is wonderfully undetermined and provocative. Its fantastic sprawl becomes shapely and exemplary, and the world of history with which it grapples becomes the strangest, shiftest, most fantastic and mysterious world of all.

When his wife, Edith Bratt Tolkien, died in 1971, Tolkien had a name from his *Silmarillion* mythologies carved upon her tombstone: Lúthien, the intrepid Elf who gave up immortality to wed the mortal Beren. Together they steal a Silmaril from Morgoth's crown and, even though they die for it, their love provides one of the few bright interludes in *The Silmarillion's* ever-darkening mythology. When Tolkien himself died two years later, he instructed that the name "Beren" be written upon his own stone. This could be read in a number of ways: a final wishful rift between fantasy and history, a delusion of heroic significance, an act of faith in the immortality of his bond to his wife throughout their sometimes troubled marriage and beyond death. But as a self-chosen appellation, "Beren" has an additional resonance. Foreshadowing the crippled and nine-fingered Frodo, Beren had lost his right hand. It was bitten off by Morgoth's devouring wolf as Beren waved the Silmaril before it in defiance. Given *The Lord of the Rings's* exploration of the costly ethics of renunciation, its willingness to question creativity to the point of disablement, it seems fitting that Tolkien should claim the mantle of a hero maimed as he defied a ravaging wolf with his half-rescued Silmaril.

Notes

1 The famous tower metaphor in "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" is one instance, while *Smith of Wootton Major* began as the introduction to a new edition of George MacDonald's *The Golden Key*. Tolkien often showed up at meetings at which he was expected to present an essay only to read a poem or story instead.

- 2 Mary Faraci's contribution to this volume (chapter 5) was initially presented at the Thirty-sixth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, May 2001.
- 3 Recent scholars have suggested other profitable ways to historicize Tolkien. T. A. Shippey's exemplary study, *The Road to Middle-earth*, draws him down from the pedestal of fantasy *ex nihilo* (or out of its ghetto) by linking him to other British writers of the postwar period such as George Orwell, William Golding, and T. H. White (Shippey, *Road*, 288). Sebastian D. G. Knowles historicizes "Leaf By Niggle" as a war text that enables Tolkien to write *The Lord of the Rings* (132–41). Brian Rosebury also convincingly situates Tolkien within twentieth-century literary history, linking him to the lost generation of World War I writers but also showing his affinities with modernism and its critical aftermaths (133–52). Lee D. Rossi attributes "a literature of political despair" to both C. S. Lewis and Tolkien but he exonerates their pessimism granted the difficulty of the historical problems with which they were faced (1–6, 89–134).
- 4 There are, of course, other useful directions to take myth in Tolkien. Anne C. Petty delineates a Lévi-Straussian structural anthropological "mythic impulse" at work in Tolkien in *One Ring to Bind Them All*; both Helms and Kocher sensitively read the Christian mythic structures and oppositions within Tolkien's work in, respectively, *Tolkien's World* and *Master of Middle-earth*.
- 5 Randel Helms carefully delineates the aesthetic principles that distinguish Middle-earth in *Tolkien's World*, 76–108.
- 6 Stuart Sillars gives Tolkien a single dismissive citation as a popularizer of one of the symbolic reflexes of twentieth-century British Romanticism ("unity with the natural world" [150]), but I think Tolkien is actually much closer to the center of Sillars's definition of this group's defining concerns, which include nature as a refuge from industrialism and a questioning of the uses of creativity in the modern world.
- 7 Daniel Hughes shows how Tolkien grapples with neoclassical and romantic theories of art; he outlines the different romanticist influences in Tolkien's fantastic writing, from Blake's mechanistic Urizen to Coleridge's linking of the imagination and the will in the *Biographia Literaria* (81–96).
- 8 About which Walter Benjamin was writing in 1936.
- 9 The most vivid example is Gimli's longing to garden the unfolding recesses of the Glittering Caves.
- 10 "On Fairy-Stories" makes this link between fantasy-production and desire very clear: "Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded" ("OFS," in *Monsters*, 40).
- 11 Jane Chance explores the centrality of monsters to Tolkien's writing in *Tolkien's Art*.
- 12 Helms reads it persuasively as staging the conflict between pursuit of art and duty to community (*Tolkien's World*, 109–18).
- 13 In letters Tolkien inveighed against the anti-German prejudice endemic in English radio broadcasts and printed media, noting the same genocidal inflections at home as abroad, especially as the prospect of victory brightened (*Letters*, 93).
- 14 An arresting instance is Galadriel's terrifying vision of herself as the beautiful Lady of the Ring culminating in "All shall love me and despair!"
- 15 Tolkien's respect for particular Jews and Jewish cultures emerges sharply in his private letters: *Letters*, 37–38 (1938), 67 (1944), 394–95 and 410 (1971) (where he considers the possible Jewish ancestry of the source of Sam Gamgee's name).
- 16 I am citing from the excerpts of *Myth* translated and collected in *Race and Race History*, which anthologizes a broad range of Rosenberg's writings.
- 17 It is easy to see why H. P. Lovecraft, with his visions of invasive, tentacled, chthonic chaos, found Rosenberg so very gripping.

- 18 Verlyn Flieger beautifully contextualized Tolkien's address to fantasy's philological, anthropological, and racialist scholarly antecedents in her address at the Thirty-sixth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, May 2001.
- 19 Many readers are, in fact, quite critical of the fascism implicit in Tolkien's creation of "good" and "bad" races (divisions he complicates), his fantasizing of historical transcendence (they don't see the critical questioning that accompanies it), and even his use of light and dark imagery (which he also complicates deliberately – Aragorn's standard is mostly black; Saruman's is white, etc.). Robert Plank addresses these issues cogently and ends with a provocative speculation about Tolkien's address to the twentieth-century growth of fascism: "Tolkien's View of Fascism," in Lobdell, *Tolkien Compass*, 107–15. Jane Chance's *Mythology of Power* contextualizes *The Lord of the Ring's* appeal to 1960s' counterculture, and outlines how Tolkien systematically undercuts fascist, authoritarian, and normalizing ideologies of power in favor of the gradual evolution of democratic mutual respect, service, and humility. For a contesting view of Tolkien's appeal as an antirevolutionary, escapist "safe trip" for 1960s' adolescents, see Walmsley, "Tolkien and the 60s," in Giddings, 73–86. I'm delighted to point out from twenty years later that Walmsley's report that Tolkien had his moment and then died a not undeserved cultural death has been exaggerated.
- 20 Ruth Noel discusses Tolkien's very different usages of ancient and medieval mythological texts in *Mythology of Middle-earth*.
- 21 Tolkien's own longing to create an English nationalist mythography is discussed at length in Jane (Nitzsche) Chance's study of Christian and medieval sources and influences in *Tolkien's Art*. More briefly, in *Road* (268–72) Shippey urges a distinction between nationalism and patriotism, making Tolkien a patriot rather than a nationalist. However, I think that Tolkien's construction of Englishness in his characterization of the Shire is to be distinguished from Hitler's Nordic nationalism, chiefly by its self-positioning as always already tiny, precarious, and half-lost. It emerges in the shadow of a destruction so inexorable that nothing could recover it – neither a triumphant political, cultural, and military nationalist program (which would destroy it further as Saruman shows) nor a past-sanctifying politics of heritage. The Red Book that Frodo bequeaths to Sam ends in blank pages open to subsequent narration. We are continually reminded that the Shire is a part of Middle-earth and that the parochialism of Hobbits is both delusory and idiotic. An open-bordered country, an open-ended history book, and a need to open the minds of parochial inhabitants to the larger world they inhabit – all offer interesting resistances to traditional nationalisms. I am grateful to Frank Grady for the trenchant questioning that prodded me toward this reading.
- 22 Elizabeth Magee outlined the scope of Wagner's problem in trying to reduce this mass of sources into a gripping narrative form:

From north to south across the spectrum he found versions of events which tallied nowhere except for Siegfried slaying the dragon, winning a hoard and marrying Gunther's sister What was Wagner to make of a hero who appears now as valiant champion, now as superman, now as a kinsman of Dennis the Menace and Desperate Dan?

(Magee, "In Pursuit of the Purely Human," in Wagner, 29–32; also Gutman, 35, 43, 62, 121–22, 159–60)

- 23 Over its twenty-five-year gestation, Wagner revised the text in the light of every philosophy he found elucidating in his progress from revolutionary republican to tragic renunciate: socialist, Romanticist, anarchist, utopian, Hegelian, Proudhonian, and Feuerbachian – all bound together with (but not quite synthesized through) a massive dose of Schopenhauer (Roger Hollinrake, "Epiphany and Apocalypse in the Ring," in Wagner, 41–47).

- 24 Martyn Housden makes the most systematic and documentary case for Hitler as revolutionary; John Lukacs sees him as imaginatively combining conservative and utopian impulses (76–112).
- 25 He came to dislike it later, when critics persisted in likening his Ring to Wagner's or to the Nibelungen ring in Wagner's medieval sources. An acerbic letter complains about his Swedish translator's wheeling and dealing in Nibelungen lore; he attacks not only the translator's assumption about the Ring's derivation but also his scholarly expertise (*Letters*, 306–7).
- 26 Joachim Köhler recently went so far as to reduce Hitler to a self-deluding instrument of the obsessive, anti-Semitic, failed-revolutionary, Wagnerian vision. Even aside from essentializing Wagner's self-conflicted and disparate corpus to an internally coherent program and giving him a sinister posthumous agency mediated unproblematically through his Bayreuth descendants, this reading seems a little romantic (even Wagnerian) in itself.
- 27 Cited in Grunberger, 412; Köhler discusses how, as early as 1925, the festival approvingly forecast Hitler's rise to power (191–94).
- 28 In Wagner's medieval sources, Mimir or Regin forges the sword instead of Siegfried (367 n. 11).
- 29 This is one of Wagner's inconsistent moments – he retains Siegfried's revolutionary triumph even after he comes to a darker recognition of the futility of any real break with the past.
- 30 This imaginative search for a lost past engendered by a fragment or ruin is another place where Tolkien connects powerfully with English Romanticism. This gesture of recreation from loss can be as underhandedly innovative as Wagner himself, but in centralizing the gap between past and present rather than hastening to smooth it over with powerful continuities, it defines itself very differently. Its movement is toward heritage, a tragic investment in the lostness of history even as it works toward the past's reanimation.
- 31 Bonniejean Christensen compares initial and revised versions of "Riddles in the Dark" to argue that Tolkien systematically deepened the nastiness of Gollum's character – which makes Bilbo's restraint more dramatic (9–28).
- 32 Rosebury beautifully discusses the "meticulously depicted expansiveness" (9) of Middle-earth as a sensuously effective aesthetic strength (7–53); his argument counters Christine Brook-Rose's frustration at the hypertrophic realism and redundancy she sees as weighing down the narrative (233–55).
- 33 I am grateful to my colleague Colin Jager for suggesting this reading.
- 34 It's also why Hobbits, immured in the everyday and the pragmatic, are relatively immune to the Ring, while Elves, Dwarves, Men, and Wizards, all endowed with stirring powers of inquiry and craft, don't dare touch it or are quickly consumed if they do.
- 35 One example (of many) is the first appearance of the Black Rider, which could be paraphrased thus: "Who is this Black Rider who just rode up out of nowhere? Oh, just Gandalf being dramatic. Wait, no. We don't know who he is. Or should that be what he is?" (J. R. R. Tolkien, *Shadow*, 47–48).
- 36 Alan Liu's excellent study, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, is the most powerful statement of this thesis (32–40). I am oversimplifying Liu's discussion and turning it inside out by foregrounding the imagination rather than nature and history.
- 37 Randel Helms explores *The Silmarillion's* Christian and theological contexts in *Tolkien and the Silmarils*; Clyde Kilby gives a revealing account of its author's attitude toward it and struggles with it in *Tolkien and the Silmarillion*.
- 38 Tolkien's 1952 recording of the Gollum passages from *The Hobbit* should not be missed. In a letter to his publisher, he boasts with justice that "I do a very pretty Gollum" (*Letters*, 164).

- 39 Shippey discusses it as the modern trope of addiction in *Road* (126–27) and at greater length in *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*.¹⁷¹
- 40 In a letter to a reviewer, Tolkien links Frodo's situation – subjected to pressures beyond his resistance – to “sacrificial situations” possible throughout history but becoming more common during and after the wars:

I did not foresee that before the tale was published we should enter a dark age in which the technique of torture and disruption of personality would rival that of Mordor and the Ring and present us with the practical problem of honest men of good will broken down into apostates and traitors.

(*Letters*, 234)

- 41 Verlyn Flieger eloquently discusses Tolkien's experiments in temporality in *Question of Time*.
- 42 It thereby follows the example of Galadriel, a character who dramatizes with particular intensity Tolkien's incessant attempts to wrest an innocence from the urge toward creative mastery – the making of eternal realms within the world as bastions against historical senescence and change. In successive versions she is variously (1) implicated in Fëanor's exile but not guilty of blood-letting, (2) stained by ambitions toward dominion (which she dramatically relinquishes in *The Lord of the Rings*), and (3) wholly innocent of anything but the bad timing with which she abandons Valinor. When Galadriel finally relinquishes Middle-earth, the reverberations of her surrender adumbrate Tolkien's own final concession to history in the narrative.

Part II

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and medieval literary and mythological texts / contexts