THE LORD OF THE RINGS: MYTHOPOESIS, HEROISM, AND PROVIDENCE

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J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has truly become an icon of popular culture since it was published in 1954-55.[1] It has sold millions upon millions of copies, given rise to whole industries of commentaries and an academy award winning film version, and spawned a prodigy of imitations in the "fantasy" genre. It has attained almost cult-like status in some quarters. Indeed the power of the trilogy has been so captivating for some readers with certain social or political convictions that they have felt compelled to proclaim it as an inspiration and validation for the counterculture, or environmental soteriology, or the anti-war movement (even though any discerning reader will see these interpretations as woefully one-sided). Perhaps surprisingly, given its popular standing, it has been hailed by many literary critics as a classic work of literature, one of the best—or the best—of the twentieth century. The artistry of this Oxford philologist, so the argument would go, is admirably demonstrated in his masterful creation of a complete world, Middle-earth, with its distinct peoples, tongues, and geography, and by the sheer range and rich resources of his language to portray an array of memorable and engaging characters, to describe vivid, symbolically-charged scenes of nature, and to depict action in the best style of the epic tradition. The trilogy surely has coherence as all the ends are tied together.

[1] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 3 vols. (New York: Houghton Miffflin Company, 1988). There are three volumes, and we shall refer to it as a "trilogy," but technically it is not a "trilogy" insofar as each volume is composed of two books. Hereafter the citations will be as follows: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (vol. 1) as FR; The *Two Towers* (vol. 2) as TT; *The Return of the King* (vol. 3) as RK.

1. The Story and Popular Culture

This juxtaposition of extensive popular appeal with literary acclaim marks the trilogy as a remarkable achievement. But does this leave us simply with the conclusion that it is a well-crafted work that basically reflects the sentiments of the contemporary climate of opinion at the popular level? Would, then, the most appropriate type of study of its cultural significance be that of a sociological analysis—perhaps even a critical sociological analysis of it as a reflection of the vagaries of popular cultural in the Western World in the twentieth century? Or, rather, is the trilogy what Eric Voegelin calls a work of "great literature"?[2] To fit into this category it would have to combine great artistic value with existential substance—that is, its content would be a penetrating exploration, with skilled reflective distance, of the dynamics and structure of human existence as experienced in the consciousness of the author.[3] But for Tolkien, or any author, to write "great literature," as so defined, there would have to be a human nature to explore.

But it is precisely the issue of the very existence of human nature that has become a hallmark of modern Western intellectual culture over the centuries, and this issue has insinuated itself into the texture of popular culture. It is the thesis of this paper that indeed *The Lord of the Rings* is a work of "great literature" because it explores key dimensions of human nature in an artistically subtle and compelling manner. In so doing it addresses something essentially missing from popular culture—and this is exactly its main source of appeal, in some cases a desperate source of appeal. It is also, simultaneously, as something beyond the "modern horizon," a

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[2] Eric Voegelin, *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Essays 1939-1985*, vol. 33 of the *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss ((Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 383.

[3] For Voegelin's hermeneutics of literature, see Charles R. Embry, *The Philosopher and the Storyteller: Eric Voegelin and Twentieth Century Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), pt. 1. Note the helpful diagrams on pp. 47, 55.

challenge to popular culture and to intellectual culture, and this is why it is so easy to misinterpret.

It is impossible, of course, to summarize adequately modern intellectual culture and contemporary popular culture with respect to their complexities and historical developments. Suffice it to say that modern intellectual culture has been defined by the appropriation of modern scientific method as the key to all aspects of culture. This leads inevitably to the sense that all traditional culture must be replaced, including ethics, metaphysics, theology and political theory, and that through the use of this new method humans can become, as Descartes put it, "masters and possessors of nature."[4] In the extreme this supports the conviction of scientism that all reality—and certainly human reality—is nothing but matter in motion, constituting a vast mechanistic system devoid of freedom and final causes. To be sure, there were modern reactions against this extreme position. The most notable reactions occurred in various waves of romanticism (the turn of the nineteenth-century movement of romanticism proper, the turn of the twentieth-century neo-romanticism of decadence and art for art's sake, and the neo-neo romanticism of the counter-culture of the 1960's). But romanticism accepted the Enlightenment's interpretation of reason as scientific method and opted for the irrational. The situation became exacerbated by the "crisis of historicism" in the nineteenth century, riding on the stupendous achievements of modern historiography, which seemed to plunge intellectual culture into the vortex of historical relativism. The upshot of these tendencies, to generalize, was that it became increasingly difficult for intellectuals to argue for humans living in a meaningful universe, for humans having a soul that would be a source of moral will and responsibility, and

[4] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method,* trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1956), p. 40.

for humans participating in some spiritual dimension of existence (other than as a sociological pressure or a psychic projection).[5]

Popular culture, a more recent historical phenomenon, has arisen in the past two centuries as large population shifts in the industrial and post-industrial societies have virtually ended the folk culture of the countryside, as bourgeoisie culture has been expanded and leveled, and as mass publications and mass electronic media have disseminated its content to its audience, the "masses." By no means is popular culture simply a reflection of modern intellectual culture, but it is still profoundly influenced by the latter or heading on similar tracks. For example, much as the intellectual class came to be disenchanted with the traditional religions and their seemingly stale dogmas, perhaps replacing the church with the opera house or theater, so, too, many member of the working class became alienated as well, replacing the church with the sports stadium. We might compare popular culture, nurtured as it is by the consumer society, to Plato's category of the "democratic culture," which is the social analogue of the democratic soul.[6] In this type of atmosphere all culture activities are equal. So popular culture can embrace extreme relativism and nihilism as well as entertain fragments for the old high culture of the West from the Greeks to the Renaissance. The "equality" notwithstanding, there is still present a basic human urge and yearning for meaning and value to live in a moral and spiritual universe. What is missing is a language that can speak to this urge and this yearning without seeming to be forced, or contrived, or banal.

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[5] For a detailed and nuanced of many of these trends, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[6] Plato, *Republic*, Bk 8, 557A-561E.

Tolkien speaks this language in *The Lord of the Rings*. We can call it myth. It was myth that the Enlightenment attacked on its assault on mystery (its principle targets being the dogmas of Christianity, which it reduced to myth). Romanticism attempted a resuscitation of myth but failed; the effort by the turn of the twentieth century could lead to contrived, artificial individual mythmaking in the movement of Decadence; and in the twentieth century it could be coopted by totalitarian political mythmakers. Tolkien's story is neither contrived nor artificial. Indeed, as he stated it in his famous forward to the second edition, he was just telling a tale, albeit a long one: "The prime motive was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them" (FR, 6). And in the same section he warns us that the story contains neither allegory nor a theme.[7] But what makes a good tale? Is it not the kind of content that Voegelin mentions? And if the content is presented in a truly artistic manner through the unfolding action, the interaction of characters, and the play of symbols, then we should anticipate the absence of didacticism, moralism, or any contrivance. Tolkien was able to reach a contemporary audience because he virtually created a new genre of "fantasy" and through that medium (an epic within the framework of myth) opened up the reader to a larger, richer world in which took place a primordial drama of good versus evil by the individual acts of moral will played on a larger stage of the spirit. Tolkien, we can assume, let the tale unfold: Unfettered by the chains of modernity and not blinded by its eclipse of reality, the tale itself, so to speak, had the characters take on the struggles, the triumphs, and the failures of real moral and spiritual

[7] The story, for example, is not an allegory for World War One. Although Tolkien experienced the horrors of that war, these experiences influenced his writing only to the extent that they were part of the background of life-experiences that any fiction author brings to bear on a subject matter which has its own internal development. (FR, 7-8).

beings. That is what great stories do. The reader is particularly drawn to the story because the reader gets to know and cherish real, not cardboard, characters, and the characters are real because they have souls, exhibiting basic goodness amid failings and able to make choices even when they realize these choices are but part of a larger tale. The reader participates in a mythic world of Middle-earth and encounters there—without allegory or explicit naming—*eros*, *philia*, and *agape*, the existential experiences that constituted the tradition of high civilization.

2. The Mythic Contours

The focus of the story is on the nine companions that make up the Fellowship of the Ring. Frodo, the hobbit, is the ring-bearer, who must carry on an almost impossible mission whose success is determinate for the very survival of the good societies of Middle-earth. The ring must be destroyed lest it come into the hands of its creator, the evil Sauron, who with it can succeed in obliterating all opposition and in controlling all Middle-earth. The ring evokes a symbolism of good and evil found in Norse sagas, fairy tales, Herodotus, and Plato. This ring is evil; it is the ultimate instrument of the will to power. Frodo is joined by three hobbits, Sam, his servant, and Merry and Pippin, his relatives. Hobbits seem like humans in all but size (they are "Halflings") and perhaps longevity and an innate disposition toward persistent practicality. Among the fellowship are two humans, both noble, Boromir, the brave son of the Steward of the kingdom of Gondor, and Aragorn, the legitimate and future king of Gondor, who carries the distinct bearing and temperament of sacral kingship. Gondor is the one earthly power that has any chance of confronting the tyrant Sauron and his evil domain of Mordor. Leading the Fellowship as guide and mentor is the wizard Gandalf, a kind of incarnate angelic consciousness. Rounding out the Fellowship are two sons of rulers, Gimli the dwarf and Legolas the elf. All

members of the Fellowship are rational beings. The hobbits are commoners, while the other five all carry noble stature of some sort. The story starts in earnest with a perilous journey of the hobbits out of their provincial world, the Shire, and the entire three volumes is a continuation of what becomes various journeys, ending with a final journey of Frodo and Gandalf to the sea in the West (and to the beyond). But as the story unfolds it also takes on epic proportions. There are the clashes of peoples and armies, in which the fate of societies and civilization is at stake. There are huge battles and heroic deeds. We are reminded of aspects of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, and Tolkien's language is frequently that of the epic: "Stern now was Eomer's mood, and his mind clear again. He let blow the horns…" RK, 122). "Thus came Aragorn son of Arathorn, Ellessar, Isildir's heir…" (RK, 123). He often provides a catalogues of warriors and of peoples that reminds us of Homer (especially the catalogue of ships) and Virgil. The presence of dwarfs and elves, of magical rings and phials, of tree-protecting Ents and trees that learn language—all are the stuff of fairy tales. Thus the story is an exceptional fusion of the tale of the journeys, the epic, and the fairy tale—perhaps a combination unique to literature. There is no question that on the level of the story the fusion works—it is a literary masterpiece.

But where is the mythic contour here? Indeed the story concentrates on human (or human-like) action. And unlike the *Iliad*, or the *Aeneid*, or the *Odyssey*, where gods are actors, even if secondary and in the background, there are no divinities in *The Lord of the Rings*. And the magical dimensions of the story are encompassed in what Tolkien calls the "fairy tale." In this distinct genre, Tolkien warns, we must not think that the stories are simply tales for children. We must take genuine fairy tales seriously as a depiction of hope (in the happily ending) out of

disaster, calamity, and despair.[8] And herein lays our first link to myth. What kind of reality do the Fellowship dwell in such that there are grounds for hope? So we must look at the magical and fairy-tale descriptions of nature and at some questions and statements of the characters to discern ciphers (Jaspers) or linguistic indexes (Voegelin) of a more transcendent order of things in which the characters participate, however precariously. We have no creation myth in *The Lord of the Rings*. We have no explicit statements about cosmology. Indeed what we encounter about the natural world is mysterious, known in its details, if it is, in fact, known at all, by those creatures close to the origins, those familiar with the ancient lore: elves, Ents, wizards, and Tom Bombadil. Now the readers familiar with the corpus of Tolkien are aware that there is a creation myth with a creator deity whose story-line leads up to the era of *The Lord of the Rings*.[9] This surely gives us confidence that we are on the right path in seeing the contours of myth in the trilogy. What we are looking for explicitly, then, in the absence of a creation myth, are the experiences that give rise to mythopoesis and encounter with a reality whose ultimate adequate description is in terms of myth.

Perhaps first we must first establish that Middle-earth is mythic. It may bear some resemblance to earlier ages on earth—for example to Anglo-Saxon or later medieval kingdoms. Still, there is a strong argument that Middle-earth represents no specific time or place. Certainly any historian or anthropologist would ask to see the religious institutions and edifices and rites and beliefs that are found in all cultures at all times. There are none! There is only one vague

[8] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), pp. 3-73. For insightful application of the essay to the trilogy, see John J. Davenport, "Happy endings and Religious Hope: *The Lord of the Rings* as an Epic Fairy Tale," in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All*, ed. Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson, vol. 5 Popular Culture and Philosophy Series, ed. William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), pp. 204-218.

[9] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

reference to a temple in the narrator's musing on the purpose for Dunharrow as possibly being for a "secret temple" (RK, 68). This is surely unrealistic. But it does not matter; this is myth.

The real moral human struggles at the heart of the story are inextricably linked to other beings with strange powers who participate in a strange world of nature. The "physical" world is not the mechanistic system of pre-twentieth-century physics. It is instructive to consider the Ent Treebeard and the great forest Fangorn of which he is the primordial guardian. According to the wise wizard Gandalf, "Treebeard is Fangorn, the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the sun upon Middle-earth" TT, 102, 164). This makes him older than Gandalf. Fangorn is itself akin to the forest near the Shire, both of which are, in the words of the elfin king Elrond, "the last stronghold of the Elder Days, in which the Firstborn roamed while Men slept" TT, 45). In the latter forest dwells Tom Bombadil, a preternatural being, "the oldest of the old," over whom the ring has no power (FR, 278). The hobbits Merry and Pippin are portrayed in Fangorn as "like elf-children in the deep of time peering out of the Wild Wood in wonder of their first Dawn" (TT, 62). Treebeard's eyes have behind them "ages of memories," linked to "slow thinking" (TT, 66). The elves, too, go back into time, living both in the visible and invisible worlds (FR, 234-35). Long ago the elves cured the Ents of dumbness, woke up the trees, and taught them language, while themselves learning "tree-language" (TT, 71, 76). The Ents cared for the trees, becoming more like the trees as the trees became more like the Ents (TT, 71). With just these samples we encounter a rich array of symbols: Elder Days, Firstborn, first Dawn. We are heading toward the mythic origins. There is a mysterious communion of things, elves and Ents and trees, a psychic community, a sharing of being.

The further we go back into time the closer we get to the timeless. The same applies to going farther into space. Let us explore this with more examples of time and space. When the

Frodo reaches the fabled elfin land of Lórien, he feels he has stepped over a "bridge of time to the Elder Days" (FR, 364). What does he experience? All colors are fresh and poignant; there is no blemish, or sickness, or deformity: "All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured forever" (FR, 365). It is as though Frodo had seen a purer nature than that revealed by our ordinary vision, one in which he glimpsed the eternal archetypes of things in splendid beauty and at that moment, like an Adam, "first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful" (FR, 365). Frodo "felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change of fall into forgetfulness" (FR 365-66). And Queen Galadriel is "a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of time" (FR, 389). Here Frodo is at a boundary condition of existence and experiences deeply the border of time and the timeless. Gandalf, too, reaches the boundary conditions by plunging into a bottomless space and by rising to the heights of a mountain. In his fight with the archaic and sinister Balrog, the two fell into a bottom "beyond light and knowledge," inhabited by "nameless" evil things unknown even to Sauron (TT, 105). The mystery of cosmic origins here interpenetrates with the mystery of evil. The victorious Gandalf at the top of a mountain strays "out of thought or time" and "wanders on roads" (TT, 106). As he is "sent" back with a "task," he has a vision of "wheeling stars" above and of "springing and dying, song and weeping" below in the flux of historical destiny (TT, 106). Here at the boundary of existence as we readers encounter the timeless order of the stars in juxtaposition to the order and disorder on earth, we also experience living in a meaningful, if inexplicable, universe in which Gandalf can be "sent" on a "task" to aid the Fellowship after—apparently--dying. Pippin inquires about the wither and whence of the

mysterious Gandalf, and he receives no answer about what far time and place he came into the world and when would he leave it (RK, 29).

No less explicable than timeless origins is evil Gandalf for all his wisdom cannot explain itr:

> Many that live deserve death.
>
> And some that die deserve life….
>
> For even the very wise cannot see all ends. (FR, 69, TT, 221)

The mystery of evil is present in nature. In the lair of the monstrous spider Shelab is a horrible "black vapor wrought of veritable darkness," against which Frodo fights with the phial of light given to him by the elfin queen Galadriel (TT, 327). The narrator then cautions: "But other potencies there are in Middle-earth, powers of night, and they are old and strong" TT, 329). Even mountains can "join" evil. As the Fellowship attempted to reach a mountain pass on their journey, Mount Caradhras could oppose and defeat them in collusion with their enemy the wizard Sarumon (FR, 305-07). Later Gandalf laments: "There are older and fowler things than Orcs in the deep places of the world" (FR, 323. The literal reference is to a type of snake lurking in the water, but "deep" carries the symbolic meaning of a boundary condition. The Fellowship feared the attack of Orcs, who were men-goblins mechanically designed to be evil. And they follow suit. We may think the archaic forests are free of evil, but this is far from the case. In the Forest near the Shire the hobbits are almost snared by an evil willow tree (FR, 127-130). And Treebeard speaks of the "bad trees" who had fallen under the evil of the Great Darkness in the past (TT, 71). Any attempt to "explain" evil, then, will fail. As we shall see, evil is "nothing."

We do find in nature and in some creatures the opposite of nature—light. The stars not only manifest order and permanence but radiate light. Sam experiences both of these features

when, on the verge of despair, he observes the "twinkling stars" and realizes that even the Shadow (the power of Mordor) is fleeting (RK, 199). The Elvin King Elrond, whose face is "ageless, neither old nor young" has light in his eyes "like the light of stars." (FR, 239). So, too, are the eyes of his daughter, Arwen: "… and the light of stars was in her bright eyes, grey as a cloudless night" (FR, 239). The Phial of Galadriel, mentioned above, is associated with stars. Indeed it glimmers "faint as a rising star" (TT, 329). Galadriel tells Frodo when she presents him with the phial that its light is the light from Eärendil's star (FR, 393). The reference is here is clearly to myth, for Eärendil rescued the star in the days of old, the era recounted in *The Silmarillion*, which starts with a creation myth. At the elfin stronghold of Rivendell, Frodo has a dream in which his Uncle Bilbo chants verses of a tale of Eärendil replete with references to wanderings in the heavens and on earth in the Elder Days over "countless years" (FR, 246-49).

In Bilbo's chant, his song, his tale we find an appropriate response to the experience of mystery. It is, in fact, quite remarkable how often the characters recite verse, often accompanied by singing and dancing. Frodo in leaving the Shire gazes, open-eyed, at a seemingly endless road and after silence expresses himself in verse at the amazing sight, the herald of unknown possibilities (FR, 82-83). The hobbits often feel the need for the exhilaration of songs. As they gain some respite in a dangerous part of their journey to Rivendell, having recently been attached by the deadly sinister Dark Horsemen, Merry exclaims, "We haven't had a song or tale for days" (FR, 218). When the hobbits encounter the preternatural Tom Bombodil, they first hear his song and stand "as if enchanted"; they then see him "hopping and dancing along the path" (FR, 130). Throughout their stay with him, he regales them with his tales. The hobbits listen with "delight":

> Often his voice would turn to song, and he would get out of his chair and dance about. He told them tales of bees and flowers, the ways of trees, and the strange

> creatures of the Forest, about evil things and good things, things friendly and things unfriendly, cruel things and kind things, and secret hidden under the brambles. (FR, 140-41)

His singing and dancing is part and parcel of his enchanted world: "When they caught his words again they found that he had now wandered into strange regions beyond their memory and beyond their waking thought, into times when the world was wider…" (FR, 142). It is similar with the hobbits' experience with elves. They are first aware of elves in the Shire when they hear the singing (FR, 88). At Rivendell Frodo is spell-bound by the "beauty of the melodies and of the interwoven words in elven-tongues"; as the "enchantment" grows it becomes more dreamlike until Frodo "wandered long in a dream of music…" (FR, 245-46). Later in the timeless elfin land of Lórien Sam feels like he is "*inside* a song" (FR, 365). A song is not just an expression of meaning about the cosmos; it is an appropriate expression because the cosmos itself is a song. There is a fundamental rhythm to being and hence to authentic existence in attunement with being. The song and the dance are measures of that participation. This pervades the activity of the archaic Ents. Treebeard laments the loss of the Entwives in verse and the Ent Bregelad sings at the loss of Rowan trees (TT, 78-81, 87). When Treebeard goes to the gathering of Ents, the Entmoot, he walks "humming" (TT, 82). Merry and Pippin hear in the distance at the Entmoot chanting (TT, 84). And as the Ents march to Isenguard to attack it, they are singing (TT, 88-89).

Sam and Frodo seek this participation in being through songs and tales. At the tower of Cirith Ungol within the border of Mordor Sam feels utterly defeated. How can he possibly defeat the Orcs inside the tower and rescue Frodo, if indeed Frodo is alive? But, "moved by what thought in his heart he could not tell," Sam, with "words unbidden," sang with a new

strength in him how above all the shadows over his journey's end "rides the Sun and the Stars for ever dwell" (TT, 184-85). Here he is identifying with an order larger than his own self. He can take heart by the existence of this larger, transcendent order "above the shadows." After the implosion of Mount Doom seems to seal his and Frodo's doom, Sam sighs, "What a tale we have been in" (RK, 222-23). The suggestion here is that it *was* a meaningful tale he was in and that a tale can be meaningful because it can be part of some larger Tale. He is therefore fearful when he doubts that Bilbo will be able to write his tale (RK, 266). Actually, through their suffering Sam and Frodo came earlier in their journey to some wisdom about tales. They, of course, are concerned about what might happen to them. But they express this concern in terms of what kind of tale they have fallen into. Their tale, so it seems, is not just their construction; they are not nihilistic artists fabricating their artificial selves. They have "fallen into" the tale. It is a "real tale." In real tales, the actors do not know the outcome. "And," says Frodo," you don't want them to." (TT, 321). They live the mystery of existence. Sam thinks of an example of such a "real" tale as the old story of the Silmaril (light) which eventually came to Eärendil. (Recall Bilbo's story in Frodo's dream). Suddenly Sam has an insight: "And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got—we've got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?" (TT, 321). Frodo answers emphatically that the real tales "never end as tales" even though the "people in them come, and go when their part's ended" (TT, 321). Sam and Frodo, too, will come and go; but they will participate in the larger tale, linked to the myth. Sam and Frodo's wisdom approximates Voegelin's declaration of history as a meaningful drama whose play is nevertheless unknown and the role of the actors unknown.[10]

[10] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 1, Israel and Revelation, ed. Mauric P. Hogan, vol. 14 of *Collected Works of*

What is the existential mood behind this mythopoesis? The answer is found throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. "Wonder" pervades the storyline. The tales of Tom Bombodil fill the hobbits "with wonder" (FR, 142). The words of his ancient language were mainly those of "wonder and delight" (FR, 158). At Rivendell, Frodo looked at Elrond, Glorfindel, and Gandalf "in wonder" (FR, 238-39). Sam was in "wonder" at the sight of the mountains to the east (the sublime); and Boromir, never having seen Halflings, gazed in "sudden wonder" at Bilbo and Frodo (FR, 252). At Lórien Frodo stands "lost in wonder" before the poignant and fresh colors without blemish. Pippin "wonders" about Gandalf's origin and destiny (RK, 29). The sense of wonder is openness to what is beyond the everyday, a marvel at things beyond. It can also encompass the respect and love of the old lore, as we see in the case of Gandalf's tireless search for the truth about the ring and Feramir serious interest in Gandalf's inquiries as the "wizard's pupil" (FR, 265, RK, 86). We also witness this attitude in the devoted commitment of Ioreth, the eldest woman in the House of Healing, to the wisdom of the old tradition that proclaims that "the hands of the king are the hands of a healer" (RK, 136, 141). Aristotle, we might recall, identifies wonder as the source of all science, especially the highest science, namely wisdom, and can see "the lover of myth as in a sense a lover of Wisdom, for the myth is composed of wonders."[11] None of the characters in *The Lord of the Ring*, including Gandalf, are philosophers in the classic sense. Yet there is surely some equivalence between the attitude of wonder in the trilogy and the Socratic-Platonic-Aristotelian notion of *eros*, as the loving openness and search for wisdom at the border of knowledge and ignorance.

Eric Voegelin (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), pp. 39-40.

[11] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1.1, 980a, 1.2, 982b18.

There is perhaps an even more pronounced affinity in the story with the moral and spiritual tradition of high civilization in the West.

3. Heroism and Companionship

As we have seen, the larger background for the action of the story is the tale of light against darkness, good against evil. The tale of Frodo and Sam is part of the greater tale involving, among others, Eärendil and his star. The action is set in nature, which not only has splendid beauty and orderly movement but also potentials for evil, not only awesome mountains that evoke wonder but also sinister mountains, such as Caradhras, not only glorious trees that house elves but also bad trees, such as Old Man Willow. And the play of good against evil is engulfed by the permanent mystery that many live who ought to die and others die who ought to live. So, as Gandalf recognizes, not even the wise can see all ends. But if the human, hobbit, elven, wizard, and dwarf actors cannot control the circumstances—cosmic, geographical, psychic, and historical—in which they find themselves, they are not absolutely controlled by those circumstances. They did not choose the situations, but they must choose how to respond to those situations. Frodo does not choose to have the burden of ring-bearer. He is chosen. And Gandalf cannot answer Frodo why he is chosen (FR, 70). But, as Elrond insists, Frodo must accept the burden freely (FR, 284). Once accepting it, he then has the further choice of following the moral imperative Gandalf laid out when Frodo was still in the Shire: "… use such strength and heart and wits as you have" (FR, 70). Still, if Frodo exercises his freedom in responding to the givenesss of his situation, he does not control the results. His responsibility is real but limited. As Gandalf, observes, "Only a small part is played in great deeds by any hero" ((FR, 282). Galadriel notes that Frodo is not answerable for the Fate of Lórien; what he is answerable for is the "doing of his own task" (FR, 380). Similarly, when Gandalf is faced with

the prospect of death and failure for the armies of Gondor and her allies as they do their duty by attacking the Black Gate of Mordor in a diversion, he realizes that even by succeeding in that daunting enterprise they will not rid the earth of evil. What, then, it is its worth? He has no doubt: "Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know…" RK, 155).

To carry out (or not) such free moral responsibility, whatever its limits, is clearly the centerpiece of the story. All the major characters are faced with decisions. So let us consider the main character. Frodo has to decide to leave Bag End (FR, 70-72). When he meets the elves in the Shire, he has to decide to wait for Gandalf or to move on. As the elf Gildor puts it, "You have the choice" FR, 93). On the journey to Rivendale, according to Gandalf, Frodo made three almost fatal mistaken decisions: to take a short cut through the Forest, to put on the ring at Bree, and to use the ring at Weathertop (where he was wounded by the Dark Horsemen). Frodo can fortunately learn from his mistakes, but they are his mistakes for which he bears responsibility. Of course, at the Council of Elrond, as we have seen, he freely chooses the awesome and frightening mission as ring-bearer to Mordor. At the foot of Amen Hen, Frodo faces one of his greatest decisions, and without Gandalf's advice: he alone has the "burden" to determine the direction of the Fellowship (FR, 412). As he and Sam head to Mordor in the East, he has to decide whether to kill Gollum or to trust him enough to accompany them (TT, 221). Once inside Mordor he and Sam have a flurry of life and death decisions as they near the end of their physical endurance: to jump off the bridge (RK, 194); to take the road (RK, 206); to go on the eastern road during the day (RK, 212); and to travel over the desert (RK, 213).

As the narrative unfolds involving the other characters, they, too, must make decisions that will have momentous, and perhaps irrevocable, consequences for themselves and others. Strider and the hobbits must act quickly at Bree to avoid the impending attack of the Dark Riders. No matter the compelling authority of the august Elrond and the fabled wisdom of Gandalf, all the members of the Council of Elrond in a kind of multicultural collaboration have to analyze the strategic situation and decide the most plausible course of action, even as it leads to the bizarre conclusion that the hobbit Frodo must destroy the ring to save civilization. When the Fellowship is broken by the dispersion of the hobbits, the rest of the Fellowship--Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolis--have to choose their path. Merry and Pippin must decide in the face of the terror of their capture by the Orcs whether to make any effort to resist and, if so, how to use their cunning to attain their liberation. Éomer, the captain of Rohan, must decide whether to hold back his blade and the weapons of his horsemen in the face of the strange company of a man, an elf, and a dwarf (TT, 35). The Ents deliberate—ever so slowly—while chanting at their Entmoot as they eventually choose to attack Isengard (TT, 82-89). The king of Rohan, Théoden, in the face of almost sure defeat at Helms Deep decides to go on the offensive (TT, 146). Later he musters the horsemen of his kingdom to go to the aid of Gondor in a valiant yet possibly hopeless effort. It could have made more sense to stay back and defend his kingdom. Aragorn makes a bold strategic move and chooses to follow the dreaded Path of the Dead in the Haunted Mountains in order to enlist the Dead (RK, 52). Saruman has three opportunities after his defeat for freedom or reconciliation: when Gandalf offers him "one last chance" to leave Orthanc (TT, 188), when near the Misty Mountains Gandalf again would give him one last chance and assistance (RK, 262-63), and when at the Shire Frodo would let him go in the hope of finding a "cure" (RK, 298-99). Faramir, in one of the crucial moments of the story—having learned of

Frodo's mission, has to choose whether to let Frodo and Sam continue on their journey (TT, 299). Gandalf must provide counsel to Aragorn, Prince Imrahil, and Éomer, now king of Rohan, and then persuade the lords about the proper course of action against Mordor, even if it is to embark upon a seemingly doomed attack on the Black Gate (RK, 154-58). In a chapter of *The Twin Towers* appropriately entitled "The Choices of Master Samwise," Sam facing what looks like the death of Frodo must decide on the verge of despair whether to replace his master as the ring bearer. And all the while as these decisions are made and events unfold, Sauron uses his powerful instrumental reason to determine the actions of his forces against the enemy.

What renders these decisions possible precisely as moral decisions and as free decisions is the existence of a soul. The name need not be invoked, but the reality is present and operative. However strong the determinates—the pressures, the forces, the attractions, the obsessions—the decision is ultimately made in this mysterious "free space" of a soul. It is made in the play of good and evil within each person. Even a Sauron at some time long ago had to choose to go over to the dark side. The same with his Dark Horsemen. The rest of the major characters have good in them, even if they decide to follow the lure of evil. Evil is not a thing, not some independent reality in a Manichean world. It is a nothing. But it has power as an attraction: it takes on the appearance of good. So Saruman, the wisest of the wizards and their acknowledged leader, slowly disintegrates in his moral fiber because he believes he can use the connection with Sauron (the palantír stone) and, more importantly, employ the power of the ring should it come under his possession to do good (FR, 272-73). Actually both Gandalf and Galadriel know that they would be tempted to use the ring's power for great good—and be destroyed in the process. When Frodo asks him whether he will take the ring, Gandalf cries, "Do not Tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity

for weakness and the desire of strength to do good…. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength" (FR, 70-71). Lady Galadriel conjures up a vivid image of horrid evil parading as beauty under the power of the ring. If Frodo were to freely give her the ring, she warns:

> In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm, and the Lightening! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair! (FR, 381)

The noble Faramir does not desire the ring, or he is wise enough to know "the perils form which a man must flee" (TT, 290). By contrast, poor Sméagol found the ring, and long ago under the vice of its influence this human was slowly transformed into the skeletal Gollum, more animal than human, whose sole animating principle is the desire to possess his "precious." Sauron, who forged the ring, is most under its illusory sway. He believes everyone wants to possess it. He has so long been under the grip of evil that his view of what motivates others is completely skewed. Their only true motivation, he firmly holds, is self-interest driven by the will to power. His bias makes him the measure of all. "But, according to Gandalf, "the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts" (FR, 282-83). This is his strategic weakness and fatal flaw. As Gandalf puts it, "The Enemy cannot imagine that we wish to cast him down and have no one take his place" (TT, 100).

But the object of this inordinate desire is really nothing! This is symbolized in descriptions of geographical features, of Sauron, and of his henchmen. When Frodo is in Lórien and in able to look out at a vast panorama from a tree-platform, he sees Lórien bathed in light all the way to the "pale gleam" at its eastern border, the Anduin River. This is in contrast to

the lands under the control of the Dark Lord: "Beyond the river the land appeared flat and empty, formless and vague, until far away it rose again like a wall, dark and drear. The sun that lay on Lothlórien had no power to enlighten the shadow of that distant height" (FR, 366). The territory reflects the evil of its master as it is "formless and vague, dark and drear." Without form and light it lacks direct intelligibility and goodness. Sauron's being has been reduced to that of an Eye, and when Frodo has a vision of it in the mirror of Galadriel, he peers into a "black abyss" (FR, 379). Frodo's reaction is intense: "So terrible was it that Frodo stood rooted, unable to cry out or to withdraw his gaze" (FR, 379). Quite a response to nothing! But the nothing is terrible and can effect horrible, palpable consequences; such is its negative energy. Still, when the Eye opens, it is "a window into nothing" FR, 379). This is indeed paradoxical—to the mind anticipating intelligibility. We encounter this paradox at Minas Morgul, the entrance to the territory of the Dark Lord. Not surprisingly, dark surrounds it. And yet it has its own distinct light, "wavering and blowing like a noisome exhalation of decay, a corpse-light, a light that illuminated nothing" (TT, 312). Rather than a solid body, it is like a decay, a corpse, this light that illuminates nothing. The same language of paradox describes the flowers and the water near a bridge that Frodo and Sam pass. The flowers are equally luminous and beautiful as they are "horrible in shape," like "the demented forms in an uneasy dream" (TT, 313). The appearance of beauty on the surface covers the ugliness of demented forms. On the bridge there actually are carved figures of humans and animals, but they are "all corrupt and loathsome" TT, 313). From the deadly cold water flowing beneath the bridge comes a vapor that acts like a force sending the senses reeling and darkening the mind (TT, 313). Compare this to the "black vapor" in Shelab's lair, which, "wrought of veritable darkness itself," brings blindness to body and to mind" (TT, 327). We witness the real effects of what is almost formless. Any apparent form is only surface;

it is, as Gandalf remarks of the robes of the Dark Riders, "to give shape to their nothingness" (FR, 234). Certainly the effects of the Dark Riders can be deadly. The captain of the Dark Riders, the Ringwraith, the Lord of the nazgûl (the very word can send shivers up the spine) has the outer appearance of a crown, mantle, and hauberk. This concentration of evil, however, evaporates when stabbed by Éowyn and Merry. In most dramatic fashion there is no head under the crown. We observe the nature of evil now exposed:

> But lo! The mantle and hauberk were empty. Shapeless they lay now on the ground, torn and tumbled; and a cry went up into the shuddering air, and faded to a shrill wailing, passing with the wind, a voice bodiless and thin that died, and was swallowed up, and was never heard again in that age of this world (RK, 117)

"Shapeless," "bodiless," and "thin"—these all depict evil as a privation. Tolkien clearly shares with Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas this classic view of evil as a lack of true being.[12]

This means that evil is not some independent metaphysical power, some extrinsic force that overwhelms individuals or whole society. Indeed the privation may be found in institutions and cultures. And in *The Lord of the Rings* we see embodied in Mordor, a demented kingdom and a denuded, desiccated geographical territory. Evil is visibly evident in the physical privation of the destroyed orchards of Isengard. Sauron, the Dark Lord, is truly evil, but he is not evil itself. As Gandalf points out, he is the" servant" of evil" (RK, 155). Evil arises ultimately in the tensions within the individual soul, the struggle between the search for right order and the deflection of that search by desires for false goods. We have dramatic examples of this inner

[12] This interpretation is persuasively argued by Scott A. Davison, "Tolkien and the Nature of Evil" in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, chap. 8.

struggle. These vivid portraits identify this struggle as precisely the zone of freedom in the soul. Let us consider the cases of Gollum, Denethor, and Frodo.

Gollum seems almost completely under the control of evil. By possessing the ring he has attained longevity, but in the process the ring has possessed him. Obsession with his "precious" has whittled him down both physically and mentally until he looks more like an emaciated animal than a human. Still, he possesses remarkable endurance, agility, and strength as he follows the Fellowship through the mines of Moria and down the River Anduin. It is all the more striking, then, when Sam sees the "other side" of Gollum in one of the more memorable scenes from the story. Gollum is engaged in an intense conversation with his "other" and his original self, the human Sméagol (TT, 240-41). The Gollum character argues that at all costs he must seize his "precious" from the hobbits. The Sméagol character, on the other hand, insists instead that he honor the agreement with the hobbits to guide them to Mordor in return for letting him live. What is clear is that Gollum is wrestling with his conscience. What is important is that no matter how powerful the sway of the ring, and of evil, over him Gollum still has a conscience—and thus freedom, however precarious and ineffective it may turn out to be. Gollum, it is true, eventually betrays the hobbits to the horrible spider Shelob. But in a touching moment before the betrayal Gollum, "an old starved pitiable thing," puts his hand on Frodo's knee in almost a "caress" (TT, 324). This is undoubtedly a guilty conscience, fleeting as it may have been.

In contrast to the commoner Sméagol, Denethor is of noble stock and has true nobility of soul. Denethor is from a long line of Stewards of Gondor, who are committed, above all else, to the defense of the realm. He exercises his office with conviction, intelligence, and courage. According to Gandalf, he had wisdom (RK, 132). Thus his fall is a true tragedy (unlike his

portrayal as a cardboard and cartoonish character in the movie version). As the threat to Gondor grows his wisdom fails him. Perhaps in desperation he forgets his limits and thinks he could play mind games with Sauron by communicating with him through a palantír. Indeed he is too strong to be subdued directly to the will of the Dark Lord. So he is attacked by indirection: he is effectively worn down by being given selective information emphasizing the utter might of Mordor, increasingly dashing his hopes, fueling his fears, and ultimately feeding "the despair of his heart until it overthrew his mind" (RK, 132). Denethor is guilty of pride. In an argument with Gandalf he claims that he, Denethor, could control the power of the ring and save Gondor, whereas the lowly hobbits would only hand it over to Sauron (RK, 86-87). Denethor lacks the humble wisdom of Gandalf, Galadriel, and his own son Faramir regarding the ring. This is his undoing. This lack is a privation—and hence an evil. This tragedy is all the more poignant when we contrast the despairing Denethor with the person Pippin first met: "Denethor looked indeed much more like a great wizard than Gandalf did, more kingly, beautiful, and powerful; and older" (RK, 29). And, in fact, his bleak analysis was quite correct up to a point, as Gandalf admits at the conference of the captains after Denethor's demise; Denethor's mistake was in having no faith in the hobbits (RK, 154-55). In the end Denethor identified himself too much with the fate of Gondor and, even more narrowly, with his position as Steward. His own words are telling: "But if doom denies this to me, then I will have *naught*: neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated" (RK, 130). Gandalf cannot persuade him that handing over his office to the returning king Aragorn would be an honorable thing. By having "naught"—committing suicide-- he would be choosing "nothing" (evil). Denethor exhibits what Kierkegaard calls the "sickness unto death"—constricting the horizon of his possibility and his

relation to the infinite by freezing possibility on some narrow finite object (keeping all the goods associated with his Stewardship in place).

Frodo is not a cardboard character either. As we have seen, he shows great courage (which is always acting in the face of pain, such as fear and terror), and at crucial points in the journey he makes momentous decisions. But all this is at a cost. He is the ring-bearer and thus he is subject to the same pressures and attractions as was Gollum. In a worldly sense, ultimately he fails. He is so worn down by carrying the ring and wounded by its power that at the Cracks of Doom, when he can cast down the ring to its destruction, he chooses instead to possess it (RK, 223). Recognizing the full strength of the power against which he is pitted, we can appreciate the extent of his moral heroism. It takes an incredible amount of moral will to resist the lure of the ring for as long as he does. We see this experience in almost its purest form when Frodo at Amen Hen puts on the ring to escape Boromir. It is important to note that Frodo had sought seclusion in order to deliberate (FR, 413). So the context of this experience is the exercise of moral freedom. Frodo finds himself in an internal struggle between the attractive power of the Eye (Sauron) and a "voice" within:

> The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger. (FR, 417)

Frodo is neither the will to power of the ring nor the voice; nor is he the struggle between them. He—his true self—is the relation to the struggle.[13] And herein lay his moral freedom. This is

[13] See Kierkegaard's definition of the self as a "relation that relates itself to itself." Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 13-14.

why Frodo is a hero. With the fate of civilization at stake hinging on the success of his mission and facing overwhelming force so strong that not even the wizard Gandalf could fend it off, Frodo in the fleeting moment given to him and within his small zone of freedom decides to take off the ring.

The Lord of the Rings is intensely preoccupied with heroism. Indeed it seems as though Tolkien presents something like Kantian moral autonomy or existentialist freedom of the individual self. This portrait, however, would be incomplete. There are truly individual acts of moral will. Even so the moral enterprise unfolds onto the field of friendship and is sustained by it.

Frodo does not journey alone. Behind the whole enterprise is the guiding hand of Frodo's "best of friends," Gandalf (FR, 868). Frodo is joined at the beginning by his gardener-servant Sam Gamgee, whom Gandalf, wisely assessing Sam's unshakable loyalty to Frodo, invites to accompany him (FR, 71). They meet High Elves and get sage advice from Gildor, who addresses them as "friends" (FR, 90-94). Frodo's relatives Pippin and Merry become part of the group. They are helped in their wanderings in the Shire by Farmer Maggot and Fatty Bolger, who take on personal risk against the Dark Riders (FR, 101-107, 110, 118). Outside their familiar boundaries in the Shire and caught in the dark depths of the Old Forest, they befriend the preternatural Tom Bombadil and his love the fair Goldberry, surely instilling some confidence and hope in the marvels of the world as they head for completely unknown territory. They first encounter a singing Tom Bombadil when he rescues the hobbits from Old Man Willow; later Frodo is saved from the Barrow-wight by singing the song Tom taught him, which leads to Tom's appearance (FR, 130-31, 153). In this episode Frodo's own commitment to friendship is

also evident. While he is tempted to put on the ring and escape, the "courage that has been awakened in him" leads him to stay to help his friends (FR, 152-53). He has this same loyalty when later he is reluctant to escape from the Dark Riders on the horse of the elf Glorfindel and leave behind his friends (FR, 223). At Bree the hobbits are on good terms with the comically bungling tavern owner Butterbur and meet the stranger Strider, whom they later learn is Aragorn, the legitimate king of Gondor. He guides them to Rivendell, but as the journey continues becomes their mentor second only to their beloved Gandalf. At Rivendell they meet Elrond and representatives of the different kinds of peoples of Middle Earth. There they form the Fellowship. What is obvious at this stage of the story is that the hobbits are intensely loyal to each other; that in spite of their growing moral courage they could not have made it to Rivendell without the support of good persons in numerous acts of friendship, and that they are to carry out their mission now as a Fellowship.

When the Fellowship loses Gandalf, it gains the succor and future support from the elves at Lórien. Recall how the phial of Galadriel will assist Frodo and Sam against Shelob. And when the Fellowship sunders as the Orcs capture Merry and Pippin and Frodo and Sam cross to the east of the Anduin, the members of the Fellowship will encounter yet more acts of loyalty, assistance, and sacrifice, all of which are vitally essential to the success of the Fellowship's mission. Immediately after the Orcs capture the pair of hobbits, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli decide to go after them, although, amid uncertainty and confusion, there are many other reasonable courses of action to pursue in support of the mission. Aragorn will persist even in the face of starvation (TT, 94). They later join the Riders of Rohan in an alliance cemented by the marvelous return of Gandalf the White, who is able to free the king of Rohan from the psychic debilitation imposed by Sarumon and his lapdog Wormtongue. Meanwhile Merry and Pippin,

having escaped from the Orcs, establish a remarkable bond of friendship with Treebeard and join with him and the Ents on an attack on Saruman at Isengard. It is because of the intelligence reports of the hobbits that Treebeard can arouse the trees in Fangorn and they can be persuaded by Gandalf to assist in the defense of Rowan. All these energies converge in the battle of Helm's Deep, where Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, and the forces of Rohan under brave king Théoden combine at the last moment with Gandalf and the trees of Fangorn to defeat the Orc army of Saruman. Without the defeat of Saruman the western borders of Gondor would be so precarious that the annihilation of Gondor by Sauron would almost be inevitable. In this complicated series of events and the complicated strategic situation what stands out is the network of loyalties that make possible the holding back of the political forces of evil.

As events continue to unfold in a frenzy of activity we see the same positive results of free collaboration for the common good. Aragorn with Legolas, Gimli, and a group of Rangers garner support from forces in southeast Gondor, having risked life and limb to unleash the Dead on the allies of Mordor in that region. Legolas later reveals the secret to Aragorn's success in gathering these allied forces: "For all those who come to know him come to love him after their own fashion" (RK, 150. This is *philia*. This support is crucial to the successful defense of Gondor in the Battle of the Pellenor fields, for Aragorn's forces are able to attack the army of Sauron on one flank while the horseman of Rowan attack it on the other flank. The loyalty of Rowan, then, is also decisive, even though it costs the life of king Théoden. Aragorn's charisma and Gandalf's wisdom are persuasive enough for an army to go to the Black Gate of Mordor. There forces of Gordon and Rohan and the Fellowship members Merry, Pippin, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli set themselves up facing the Black Gate on a possible suicide mission to deflect the Dark Lord from watching Frodo in order to give the ring-bearer at least one last

chance to reach Mount Doom. Frodo is able to do so only because of the incredible loyalty of Sam, whose love of Frodo is "above all other thoughts" (RK, 175). When Sam realizes that Frodo is still alive after the attack of Shelob and is a captive in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, he doggedly makes his way against all odds to the fearsome tower to rescue Frodo. Finally, as they both miraculously reach the slopes of Mount Doom but so weak they can hardly move, Sam finds somehow a last burst of energy to lift Frodo on his shoulders and carry him up for a while until Gollum attacks (RK, 220). The diversion at the Black Gate works, and Frodo has the time to reach the Cracks of Doom. In all of the numerous events described here –all intricately linked in the story—the motivation behind support and alliance is neither primarily that of momentary pleasure nor that of calculated utility. The almost suicidal mission to the Black Gate could only be sustained by deep loyalties and a heartfelt commitment to the common good, thereby going beyond any mere exercise of instrumental reason. Saruman, having his Isengard destroyed by the Ents, offers Gandalf and the other Fellowship members there a friendship of utility, cleverly cloaked in the language of "friendship" and the "common good" but masking his pride and hate; and Gandalf emphatically rejects this "false friendship" (TT, 186-87). The kind of personal relation that supports the personal acts of moral will is what Aristotle called a "friendship of virtue."[14] This is vividly illustrated in the case of Gimly the dwarf and Legolas the elf, persons so much of entirely different tastes and interest that they are naturally suspicious if not hostile toward each other in the beginning. Eventually they are riding together, protecting each other in battle, and willing, and perhaps silently eager, to visit the world of the other (the mines of Helms Deep for Gimly and the Fangorn Forest for Legolas).

[14] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 8.1-6.

Certainly one of the deep attractions of *The Lord of the Rings* is the attachment the reader forms to the members of the Fellowship, anxiously following their adventures along the dangerous path through Moira, to Lórien, and down the Anduin; stunned by the loss of Gandalf at the bridge of Khazad-Dûm; and torn by the betrayal and then sacrifice of Boromir. Once the Fellowship is broken the reader does not forget it. Of course, the reader avidly partakes in the fortunes of the individual members and their partnerships. But here is also a bond with the Fellowship itself. Indeed when Frodo's mission has been completed by Gollum and both the ring and Sauron's kingdom are destroyed, the story continues—as it must. For the reader wants to share in the joyful reunion of the eight remaining members of the Fellowship, to experience the sweet sorrow of their parting, and to see the interesting return of the now worldly-wise hobbits to the Shire. The artistry of Tolkien can invite the reader to become, in a sense, part of the Fellowship and to participate in the bonds of *philia*.

4. Providence and Faith

The tale of Frodo and Sam, as we have seen, is part of a larger tale that goes back to the mists of the beginnings. In this tale why some live who ought to die and why some die who ought to live is a mystery. Not even a wise wizard can grasp the end. There is a dimension of the story that goes beyond the moral acts of individuals and the loyalties of friendship while nonetheless finding those acts and loyalties absolutely indispensible. At the Council of Elrond Gandalf tells us, we can recall, that "only a small part is played in great deeds by any hero" (FR, 283). Elrond quips that" neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far" (FR, 283). We must pay careful attention to the language of the story to grasp the larger dimension. According to Gandalf, Frodo was saved from the wound of the Dark Riders by "fortune or fate … not to mention courage" (FR, 234). The courage is obvious; not so is the fate or fortune. But Gandalf

makes a similar claim in speaking of Merry and Pippin escaping to Fangorn. "They were brought to Fangorn," he exclaims, "their coming was like the falling of small stones that starts an avalanche in the mountains" (TT, 99). The passive voice indicates there is something involved in the events beyond the wills of the hobbits in their coming to the forest; the simile of small stones starting an avalanche indicates there is something beyond the wills of the hobbits in the consequences of their actions. Frodo uses the passive voice in a conversation with Gollum when he states that "I am commanded" to go to Mordor (TT, 246). The immediate reference, of course, is to the Council of Elrond as the authority. But surely at this stage of his journey Frodo does not feel bound by the command unless he has some intimation that behind Elrond, the high Elf of the Elder Days is a great and mysterious authority. When Faramir encounters Frodo and learns bits and pieces of his mission, he sees a larger hand in the encounter: "Wise man trusts not to chance-meeting on the road in this land" (TT, 267). Faramir goes beyond the language of aphorism after Sam accidentally mentions the ring. "If you seemed to stumble," he reassures Sam, "think that it was fated to do so" TT, 290). Notice he does not say "you were fated" but "it was fated." The "it" points directly to a much larger context of intelligible but mysterious interrelationships. Sam has to come to grips with something like this larger context after he finds Frodo apparently dead and must deliberate about whether he, Sam, should take the Ring. Sam recognizes the limits of choice: "'But you haven't put yourself forward; you've been put forward. And as for not being the right and proper person, why Mr. Frodo wasn't, as you might say, nor Mr. Bilbo. They didn't chose themselves." (TT, 341). This is a stunning verity. Bearing the ring is at the center of the story, and yet the ring-bearer does not choose to do so. At this boundary situation we are beyond any notion of complete moral autonomy. Gandalf, then,

shares something with the ring-bearers, for, we should recall, he was "sent back" for a brief time until his task was done (TT, 106).

We learn the most of this fate or fortune when we consider the role of Gollum in the play of events. While Frodo is first learning of the history of the Ring at Bag End, he also hears Gandalf make what must seem a strange claim about Gollum. Frodo at first does not pity Gollum and wishes that Biblo in his pity had not refrained from killing him. It is here that Gandalf states the those who deserve to die (as does Gollum) do not always die. He adds that while he does not have much hope that Gollum can be cured, there is "a chance." More importantly, he goes on to say, Gollum is inextricably linked to the Ring:

> And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Biblo may rule the fate of many—yours not the least. (FR, 69).

Frodo remembers Gandalf's remarks about pity and Gollum (some of them come to him verbatim as voices from the past) when he and Sam capture Gollum in the Emyn Muil (TT, 221). This recollection plays a role in his decision not to kill Gollum (TT, 222). Gandalf's remarks and Frodo's decision, then become a part of the very fate they contemplate. As Gandalf learns that Frodo and Sam are with Gollum heading toward Cirith Ungol, he tells Pippin that his "heart guessed that Frodo and Gollum would meet before the end" (RK, 89). On the stairs of Cirith Ungol Frodo and Sam reflect about tales and Sam muses that Gollum might be good in a tale if it is part of a "great tale" (TT, 222).

What, then, is Gollum's role? He plays two parts. He acts as guide to the hobbits to Mordor at the Dark Gate and then to another entrance at Midas Morgul, where he takes them up the steps to Cirith Ungol. While, of course, he plans for them to meet their deaths at the sting of

Shelob, the results are different than the intentions. So they eventually reach Mount Doom. Gollum follows them and plays his second—and stellar—role. He knocks down Sam, chases Frodo, bites the Ring off his finger, dances in ecstasy, and falls into the fire of Mount Doom with the Ring to his death and to the destruction of the Ring (RK, 22-224). Gollum's action seems, in itself, banal; and the consequences seem out of all proportion to the act. We are thus likely to overlook his act as we focus attention on the larger action and on what happens to the good characters with whom we have formed such strong bonds of attachment. But we must stop and assess the situation.

The role that Gollum plays is utterly astounding in its implications. Here into two-hundred pages of the third volume of the story we have experienced nothing but heroic actions on the part of individuals and groups, including large armies, all in support of Frodo's mission. And we have established a close relation with many of them. Without their efforts Frodo's mission could not succeed. But Frodo does not succeed! In the end he is too wounded and defeated and worn down; he finally succumbs to the lure of the Ring and puts it on, exclaiming, "It is mine" (RK, 223). He is truly self-sacrificing, but he is not fully a Christ-figure; he does not redeem Middle-eEarth. Neither he nor all those who supported him will succeed at this point. The craft and courage of the hobbits in leaving the Shire, the wonderful encouragement and help of Tom Bombadil, the guidance of Strider, the fortitude of the hobbits in the wearisome journey from Bree to Weathertop to Rivendell, the inner strength of Frodo to survive the wound, the wisdom of the Council of Elrond, the arduous struggle in Moira, the sacrifice of Gandalf at Khazad-Dûm, the unprecedented aid of the elves in Lórien, the bold move down the Anduin, the heroic death of Boromir, the relentless pursuit of the Orcs, the fabulous partnership with the Ents, the brave defense of Helms Deep, the charismatic work of Aragorn to gather the forces of

Southern Gondor and face the Dead, the martial virtues of Pippin and Merry, the fidelity of the Horsemen of Rohan to their neighbors in Gondor (and with it the death of Théoden), the stout defense of Minas Tirith led by Gandalf, the willingness to self-sacrifice at the Black Gate, the immense suffering of Frodo and Sam in their frightening trip to Mount Doom—all the decisions, the sufferings, the deaths, the bold planning, the moral heroism, all goes for naught unless Gollum for purely selfish reasons of obsessive gratification bites the Ring and engagers in a silly dance! His dance is a "false dance," a parody of the dance and song and tale that is in attunement with the ultimate order of things Finite rational creatures must be humbled by this incomprehensible situation. But clearly it is no accident. It is providential. So here we have echoes of the medieval notion of Providence found in Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas. The providential order of things is a higher order of things, giving rise to mythopoeic accounts.

But the providential order is not only experienced in what seem to be strangely linked extrinsic events. It is also experienced by persons as a dimension of consciousness other than, though related to, the cognitive and the moral. A symbol for this dimension is the "heart." Recall that Gandalf's "heart" "tells him" about or "guesses at" Gollum's central role in the tale. Sam, too, has much "heart." In the core of his heart" he knows that he is not large enough to bear the burden of the Ring ((RK, 177). As Sam and Frodo rest exhausted at the foot of Mount Dom and have no idea of where to go, Sam feels a "sense of urgency which he did not understand, " an urgency like unto being "called" (RK, 219). This being called is an experience of the "heart." Frodo also has "heart." Why is he chosen? It is not for his strength; after all, he is a Halfling. Nor is it for his wisdom; he is not a wizard, and he lives in the isolated Shire. Still, according to Bilbo and Gandalf, he is the "best hobbit in the Shire (FR, 151). Upon what, then, can he rely? In his confrontation with Boromir, he has a "warning of the heart" against "trust in

the strength and truth of Men" (FR, 413). This at least differentiates the "heart" from strength and wisdom. Perhaps it is in his "heart" too that he has the great bond with the Fellowship. Indeed, speaking of this bond among the Fellowship, Gandalf thinks that Elrond should "trust rather to their friendship than to great wisdom" (FR, 289). It is the "heart" that sustains friendship. Surely we see this in the friendship of Gimli and Legolas. Conversely, it may be Gimli's "heart" that will not let him be fooled by the false friendship proffered by Saruman. It is certainly not any wisdom that he possesses. And all the other stout warriors with their strength and courage have a "dark shadow" cover their hearts when Saruman plants in them fear of the destruction of Rohan lest they join him. But Gimli is not fooled by the beguiling words of Saruman (FR, 184).

The "heart" in fact, is the outlook of "faith." It is not something achieved; it is "given." It is an inexplicable openness. Its fruits are forgiveness and healing. As soon as Gollum plunges to his death, Frodo recalls Gandalf's comments that "even Gollum will have something to do." Frodo and Sam are facing what seems like "the end of all things," and yet far from being in despair, they feel a joy that the burden has been lifted. With the calmness of one at the border of existence, Frodo speaks of Gollum: "But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The quest would have been in vain, even to the bitter end. So let us forgive him!" (FR, 225). This is evil leading to good, something Frodo also saw earlier with his newly-found friendship with noble Faramir turning "evil into great good" (TT, 303). Frodo's perspective on things is permanently altered (something like a turning around or conversion). When he returns to the Shire, he urges no killing of the Ruffians (RK, 289). He will support legitimate self-defense, but he stops the killing of prisoners. He will no longer participate in violence (RK, 295-96). Frodo has taken up something like the status of the clergyman in the medieval West or the Brahmin in

India, standing above the class of warriors with a higher spiritual outlook. We see this in his treatment of Saruman, who has led the scouring of the Shire as the pernicious Sharkey. Saruman strikes Frodo on the knee. In spite of all the evil Saruman has done Frodo does not want him killed; he hopes that if freed, he might seek a "cure." In spite of Saruman's revenge visited on the Shire, Frodo does not want him slain in revenge: "It is useless to meet revenge with revenge. It will heal nothing" (RK, 298-99).

There are other examples of forgiveness and healing. When the surviving men of Dunland—wild men who had allied with Saruman and attacked Helm's Deep—are spared after the battle, they take an oath not to take up arms against Rohan and to "repair the evil in which you joined (TT, 150). The wounded from the Battle of Pellennor Fields are brought to the House of Healing (with all its symbolic overtones). There, as we have seen, Aragorn uses the hands of his sacral kingship to heal. In a moving episode, Éowyn's psyche is healed by Faramir's love in the House of Healing. Wanting the renown and glory associated with the future king of Gondor, she had an obsessive infatuation with Aragorn. His rebuff changed her into an icy cold warrior. Now under the influence of Faramirs' love she will devote herself to healing and gardening (RK, 242-43). In this complex of the heart-forgiveness-healing we can discern spiritual love, including the Christian experience of *agape*. It is testimony to Tolkien's artistry that he can weave these spiritual engendering experiences into the narrative fabric of the story without heavy-handed recourse to dogmas or sentimental pieties.

5. Conclusion: The Journey In-Between

The Lord of the Rings starts out as a classic coming-of-age story of the hobbits leaving the Shire. Frodo has just celebrated his 50th birthday, making him in the middle of life as far as hobbit longevity goes. We may be reminded of Dante at the beginning of *The Divine Comedy*.

The journey, then, is an existential one as much as a physical one. In spite of his chronological age Frodo is young in experience. When he returns to the Shire only to journey beyond it, he is no longer young. Nor are we the readers. The entire story is one of a series of journeys: the hobbits to Rivendell, the Fellowship to the Anduin, Merry and Pippin to Fangorn, Aragorn to Rohan and to Minas Tirith through the territory of the Dead, Merry and Pippin on their separate paths to Minas Tirith, Frodo and Sam to Mordor, the hobbits to the Shire, and Frodo, Gandalf and Bilbo to the Grey Havens and beyond. As we experience these journeys we learn about the fundamental existential situation of the human condition (through hobbits, elves, dwarfs, and wizards, as well as humans).

The journey starts in the Shire. Tolkien's portrait of the Shire may be one of the most memorable of a place in literature. The Shire is a wonderful settled, peaceful, and flourishing agricultural community (FR, 10-20). There is virtually no government. The "mayor" of Little Delving acts much like a postmaster. There is the office of Thain, carried on by the family of Took, which in the past took leadership in times of emergencies, but whose powers are now latent. Hobbits can blow a horn in emergencies. The hobbits have plenty of food and enjoy sharing many meals. They also like to drink, and taverns are a place of social gathering. They equally love the "weed." They cannot resist good stories. The Shire can represent to us what is fundamentally "home." This is where we are located and situated in our finitude and embodied existence; this is where vital values and intersubjective needs are met. There is not much social structure in the Shire beyond the home. Tolkien may seem to be giving us an ideal picture of anarchism and something like a counter-culture community of 1970. (And so he has been interpreted.) But clearly this is not the case. What is good about the Shire—its limited lifestyle and its protected environment) is also the source of its defects. When the hobbit Bilbo goes on a

great adventure beyond the Shire and returns with his tale, his stories generate great excitement. But we get the sense that they are too often seen as "fairy tales for children." We see the same attitude when at the *Green Dragon* tavern there is talk of strange things happening beyond the border of the Shire—the growing power of the Dark Lord—and Ted Sandyman scoffs at such fears. "But," he says to Sam, "I can hear fireside tales and children's stories at home, if I want to" (FR, 53). The lovable and common-sense Gaffer has a "bone to pick" with Frodo; he has a skeptical attitude about the seriousness of what the hobbits had been doing on their journey; in the meantime while they were gone Ruffians ruined the Gaffer's taters (RK, 293)! The perspective of the Shire is narrow. To Farmer Maggot even the Hobbiton folk, where Frodo lives, are "queer" (FR, 104). But this is what the Gaffer and Sam think of the Buckland folk (FR, 79). These are places within the Shire! There are hobbits at Bree, living in harmony with men, but to the hobbits in the Shire these Bree hobbits are "outsiders" (FR, 162). The perspective of the Shire misses much of what is going on in Middle-eEarth—both good and evil, both the wonder's and the horrors experienced by Frodo and his companions. The Shire has a limited perspective on reality and perhaps a limited participation. There are yearnings to go beyond.

The hobbits experience a transformation of horizons as they leave the Shire. Sam views lands he had never before seen (FR, 82). After encountering the elves, who themselves are on a journey and who have an openness to reality well beyond any other race of Middle-earth, Sam feels changed and now must see the journey through (FR, 96). As he looks at the other side (with its symbolism) of the Brandywine River, he has a "strange feeling as the slow gurgling stream slipped by: his old life lay behind in the mists…" (FR, 109). Frodo's reaction is more complex. At first he recites a poem that simply reflects his anxiety: "The Road goes ever on and

on…Pursuing it with weary feet… And wither then? (FR, 82-83). Frodo later recalls a poem Bilbo taught him. The great desire to follow Biblo, ever most in his mind, overcomes his fear (FR, 74, 77). Frodo's desire is indicative of a deeper yearning that may go beyond Biblo and Bilbo's adventures. The poem speaks of the journey as on a "new road," a "secret gate," or a "hidden path"; it heads toward the Moon or Sun; it leaves behind the familiar world of "Apple, thorn, and nut and sloe, … Sand and stone and pool and dell…" (FR, 86-87). It is a journey that reflects all the wonders that the hobbits will actually experience. It is a complete journey beyond the Shire, even beyond Middle-earth, and then back home:

> Home is behind, the world ahead,
> And there are many paths to tread
> Through the shadows to the edge of night,
> Until the stars are all alight.
> Then world behind, and home ahead,
> We'll wander back to home and bed. (FR, 87)

What the poem does not address are experiences of evil that may be part of the journey The poem is true as far as it goes but incomplete. And Frodo will not end his journey at home. When Frodo meets the elves in the Shire, he is told by them that he is not alone in his journey, for there are others who know of it, the Wandering Companions (FR, 94). The reference is to the Rangers, but the symbol is pregnant with meaning. The journey is not as an isolated self. If "wandering" seems to suggest aimlessness, Frodo can, and does, recall Bilbo's jingle: "All that glitters is not gold, Not all those who wander are not lost" (FR, 182). Beyond Bilbo's cute reference in the jingle to Strider, one of the Wandering Companions, the symbolism could mean that there is a directional tendency as we face the unknown on our journeys. Gandalf the wise

wizard dramatically illustrates this teleological dimension. As he guides the Fellowship in the dark intricate maze through the Mines Moria, his previous knowledge of the place is of no avail. Even so, "in the gloom and despite all windings in the road he knew wither he wished to go, and he did not falter, as long as there was a path that led towards his goal" (FR, 324). The drive to understand, the committed search for the good, the openness to being—these keep Gandalf on the path.

We have already seen in some detail what the hobbits experience on their journey as their horizons continually expand. In their wanderings to Tom Bombadil, to Elrond and the elves at Rivendell, and to Galadriel and the elves of Lórien their sense of wonder (and *eros*) is constantly excited; they learn about a mysterious reality comprehending but also beyond the Shire, Middle-earth, and even the cosmos. They also must flee and fight Orcs and the Dark Riders. Frodo will confront the Eye of Sauron and the terror of his capture by the Orcs. Sam and Frodo will have to deal with the twisted evil of Gollum. All the hobbits and their companions in the Fellowship and the friends they meet along the way (Treebeard, Theodin, Faramir) must make decisions—often instantaneous-- upon which depend not only their individual welfare but also the fate of whole peoples' and even of civilization itself. They know of the tension, agony, and imperative of moral choice. Amid the perils of their travel and the clash of arms, they experience firsthand the meaning of loyalty, trust, and friendship (*philia*). Frodo particularly brings back with him to the Shire spiritual wisdom about self-sacrificing faith (*agape),* forgiveness, and healing.

But return to the Shire they must. It is interesting to note, however, that the hobbits deliberately travel back by a circuitous route that takes them to Edoras in Rohan (with the body of Théoden), to Isengard to victim Treebeard, and to Rivendell. They are a part of these realms, too. The Shire is not the same. It is not immune to the larger forces that have engulfed Middle-

earth. "Home" is only part of our condition of being. Saruman has taken revenge on the hobbits by taking over the Shire and destroying it through outsiders, ruffians, in connivance with some locals, such as Frodo's greedy relatives the Sackville Baggins. Frodo's former home is gutted; orchards and gardens are torn up. The Shire is not immune from evil—either from without or from within. We cannot hope to retreat to "hone" to escape moral choices. The Shire becomes like Saruman's Isengard. Indeed, as Frodo, points out, "this is Mordor" (RK, 297). The fact that Mordor can be "at home" really points out how the struggle of good and evil, though it is conspicuous on the stage of politics and battlefields, is ultimately a struggle within the soul. Beyond the Shire there is government, and the ordinary kind of government seems to be monarchy (or autocracy). We see kingship among dwarfs, elves, and humans. According to Faramir, echoing Plato's tripartite division of humanity, men are of three types: true nobility (the blood of Numinor of old); warrior ethos with traces of noble blood (as in the Horsemen of Rowan); and Wild Men (TT, 286-87). It would seem to follow, then, that the return of the king is a return to good government. Frodo and Pippin can even proclaim to the hobbits in the Shire that a king has returned to Gondor—the Shire was once under the rule of Gondor and now there will a restoration (RK,284-85). But Tolkien is not a royal restorationist any more than he is a hippie anarchist. The rule of kings in Gondor ceased because over generations the rulers themselves became selfish and narrow-minded (TT, 286). The order of society really is a reflection of the order of the soul.

Merry and Pippin exhibit their martial prowess in defense of the Shire and the ruffians are defeated; Saruman and Wormtongue both die. The Shire is free. It is "healed" as trees are planted. Sam lives in Frodo's restored home with his wife Rosie and a growing family. Merry and Pippin are honored leaders. All is well now back "home." But our attention turns to Frodo.

He is no longer really at home in the Shire. His wound is too great (RK, 305-306). He goes on another journey, or, should we say, his journey continues. He joins an aging Biblo and Gandalf, who has returned from a visit with Tom Bombadil. We are not surprised where they go. The night before Frodo left the Shire he had a dream. In it he heard the sound of the Sea; he found he was "out in the open"; he smelled salt air; he saw on a high ridge a tall white tower. A great desire came over him to climb the tower and see the Sea" (FR, 119). The symbolism is rich and compelling. Frodo is in the "open" and "desires" to view the sea (images of the unknown beyond) and to climb the tall white tower on the ledge (images of transcendence and luminous intelligibility). Frodo goes to the Grey Havens, and there his hobbit friends bid him farewell on his journey beyond with Biblo, Gandalf, and the elves of Rivendell and Lórien as the Third Age of Middle-earth ends and the Age of Man begins (RK, 307-11).

The journey in *The Lord of the Rings* exhibits, above all else, the tension of home and beyond, of limitation and transcendence. The main story line is how the characters negotiate that tension. They had to negotiate the tension of limitation and transcendence. And-- we can gather from reading the story in the arena of popular culture--so do we in the Age of Man.