

Robert T. Tally Jr.
Department of English
Texas State University
San Marcos, TX 78666
(512) 245-3016
robert.tally@txstate.edu

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Places Where the Stars Are Strange: Fantasy and Utopia in Tolkien's Middle-earth

In the opening lines of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, T.A. Shippey observes that “the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic,” and—after listing such writers as H.G. Wells, George Orwell, William Golding, Kurt Vonnegut, Ursula Le Guin, and Thomas Pynchon—Shippey notes that, “by the end of the century, even authors deeply committed to the realist novel have often found themselves unable to resist the gravitational pull of the fantastic as a literary mode.”¹ The rise of fantasy as a genre, surely the most popular genre of literature today, is itself one of the significant features of twentieth-century literary history, on par with (and, perhaps, not unrelated to) the development of modernism in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. But beyond the question of genre or subgenre, the fantastic as a discourse or mode permeates “high” literature as well as “low.” The modernism of W.B. Yeats or James Joyce finds itself infused with Celtic, Greek, or medieval mythology, just as the advent of magical realism in Gabriel García Márquez or Julio Cortázar has uncovered the inter-relations of the fantastic and the realistic in everyday life, and the postmodern extravagancies of a John Barth or Georges Perec disclose that the lines between imaginary and real are at best oscillatory, provisional, and uncertain. All of these, and many more, partake of the fantastic, sometimes in more or less obvious ways. As Kathryn Hume has made clear in her magnificent *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, the fantastic and the imitative or realistic modes “seem most usefully viewed as the twin impulses behind the creation of literature.”² In any event, the overlapping territories of fantasy and mimesis are significant features of the literary and critical landscape of our time.

The somewhat defensive tone of Shippey's arguments, as well as the implied defensiveness in Hume's, appears a bit justified when confronting critics who would insist upon more clearly mimetic or realistic literature. However, some the harshest critics of fantasy are not so much the proponents of a sober realism, but rather those whose own preferred forms of creating imaginary worlds are set in opposition to Tolkien's mythmaking and mapping of Middle-earth, not to mention the many and varied successors to such a project. In particular, I am thinking of the distinction between fantasy and utopia. Champions of the latter, as a discourse or a genre, frequently resist and even condemn fantasy as a retrograde, immature, or unworthy approach to the

otherworldly. Utopia, which had appeared to be a quintessentially modern genre and discourse, has reasserted itself in recent decades. I myself have argued for the persistence of utopia in postmodernity, and I find that the utopian impulse may have found its moment in the era of globalization.³ But I dispute the notion that fantasy and utopia are incompatible or opposed, a notion that permeates the discussions of these ostensibly related discourses. Most often the fault-line between fantasy and utopia is revealed to be political. In this essay, I wish to examine the utopian critique of fantasy, specifically with regard to Tolkien's imaginary world (or "Other-world"),⁴ and I want to take up the challenge of our age's greatest utopian critic, Fredric Jameson, who has provided perhaps the most authoritative critical voice in distinguishing utopia from fantasy. I argue that the world of Middle-earth is not so clear cut as some anti-fantasy critics would have it, and that Jameson's own critique (which appears in the context of his analysis of science fiction as the genre most suited to the utopian impulse) mistakes its subject and thereby overlooks the utopian function and potential of fantasy.

In their imaginative visions of alternative social, cultural, or historical formations, fantasy and utopia share generic aims and effects, but they are frequently set in opposition, often on political grounds. For example, in his landmark treatise on utopian discourse, *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson speaks of a "great schism" between fantasy and science fiction. Here Jameson follows Darko Suvin in seeing utopia as a "socio-economic subset of science fiction."⁵ In Jameson's view, fantasy is thought to be anti-utopian in the sense that it is escapist or that it withdraws from the "real world," rather than projecting meaningful alternatives to our present "real world" problems as utopia, or even dystopia, is supposed to do. Jameson is not alone in treating fantasy as an escapist, indeed reactionary, genre: a genre that presents a lost world of magic, a world of clear-cut morality, a world that is preferable to our own, but also unavailable to us except as "fantasy." Indeed, Jameson's discussion of this great schism is largely meant to define utopia in such a way that it can no longer be tainted by fantasy ("We must lay this misunderstanding to rest . . .").⁶ In Jameson's analysis, utopia offers the possibility of imagining a radical alternative to the present order, rather than a distant otherworldly realm which has no bearing on the actually existing conditions of our lives, or worse, which tacitly supports the status quo. For Jameson, severing utopian discourse from the follies of fantasy is a crucial step in establishing the necessity of utopianism for the project of comprehending our present, world-historical condition. Of course, one might declare that this difference in view is largely unremarkable, as Tolkien's many supporters are in no way threatened by the critique of one or more literary theorists. Nevertheless, Jameson is perhaps the most significant utopian thinker of our time, and I do think it is important to address his objections to fantasy as a genre or a discursive practice. As I will discuss further below, I question whether Tolkien-esque fantasy really is antithetical to the utopian project, and I find that the fantastic offers productive areas for literary and political criticism of the world as we experience it in the here and now. Indeed, by looking at Tolkien's Middle-earth, perhaps the archetypal and paradigmatic fantasy world, I intend to show that even Tolkien's fantasy operates with a utopian and critical force to mobilize its readers' engagement with this world . . . and its possible alternatives.

Following Jameson's analysis of the great schism between science fiction and fantasy in *Archaeologies of the Future*, I will focus on three elements that are thought to distinguish the genres (or, as I prefer to consider them, the discursive practices or modes)

of fantasy or utopia. The first and most general is the *fantasy world*. In fantasy, so the anti-fantasy argument goes, this world is unrelated to and incommensurable with our own “real world.” One might also characterize this fault line as that between *escape* and *extrapolation*, insofar as fantasy is viewed as a mode of escaping from the “real world” in which we live—in fairness, Tolkien himself comes to the defense of the “escapist” impulse⁷—whereas utopia or science fiction attempts to extend various aspects of our “real world” to their logical conclusions. The second element is the prevalence of *magic*, especially as distinguished from technology, in fantasy. Fantasy is thus understood as invoking an irrational, metaphysical, or non-cognitive substitute for science that “magically” avoids the material or logistical problems within the fantasy world. From this perspective, the technological or mechanical details of utopian or science-fictional schemes is preferable, since these aspects more closely relate to our own, again, “real world” experience. The third element is the perceived predominance of *ethics* or an ethical system, especially understood as a stable *good-versus-evil* binarism, in fantasy. This is contrasted with the more nebulous morality (or amorality) of the science fictional world, or—to put it more pointedly—this distinction is shown to that between ethics and politics, where the former insists upon a once-and-for-all judgement of what is or is not “good,” and the other acknowledges the contested terrain upon which humans struggle to make a life worth living. In Jameson’s view, for instance, Fantasy with a capital *F* ultimately suppresses or turns its back on the political sphere. Clearly, I believe that the political remains not only possible, but necessary and active, in the practice of fantasy, and that the utopia-versus-fantasy arguments are misplaced.⁸ Indeed, these three elements turn out to be red herrings, and that the utopian fantastic in Tolkien’s Middle-earth combines, but also troubles, these notions.

The World as It Appears under the Sun

In Jameson’s view, utopia in science fiction (as opposed to fantasy) offers the possibility of imagining a radical alternative to the present order, rather than a distant otherworldly realm that cannot affect the actually existing conditions of our lives. Jameson draws on Suvin’s rather anti-fantasy arguments in his trailblazing study, the *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, and he imagines science fiction or utopia as a genre of “cognitive estrangement.”⁹ For Suvin, fantasy is not “cognitive” but “metaphysical,” employing myth or religion or magic in the place of rational thought. At a superficial level, Tolkien’s “mythophilia” and his own religious beliefs lend themselves to Suvin’s argument, but the reality of Tolkienian fantasy is more complex than the anti-fantastic utopians would have us believe.

In truth, Tolkien’s Middle-earth would seem an archetypical example of a fantastic realm, with its elves, orcs, trolls, wizards, and dragons. Furthermore, Tolkien’s own distinction between fairy-stories and traveler’s narratives might be viewed as confirmation of his distaste for traditional utopian literature. We recall that utopia often appears in the form of the travel narrative, and Thomas More’s *Utopia* takes on the form of a second-hand reporting of a traveler’s tale, as Raphael Hythlodæus—his very name suggests that he is a “dispenser of nonsense”—encountered the island nation while taking part in one of Amerigo Vespucci’s voyages. But Tolkien’s commitment to the creation,

or “sub-creation,” of a world apart does not necessarily mean that Tolkien turns away from an engagement with the “real” world. The imaginary projection of an alternate reality combines the fantastic and the utopian in Middle-earth, where the integrated or closed *Lebenstotalität* (as Georg Lukács refers to the world of the epic)¹⁰ figures forth a kind of truth not seen in more crudely allegorical narratives. As Tolkien himself notes, “creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it.”¹¹

The view of the fantasy world as wholly *unrelated* to our own underlies a key objection to the genre, especially on the part of more politically minded critics. That is, so the story goes, where science fiction offers images of an alternative reality through cognitive estrangement, its world is still an extrapolation of our world. To cite the most familiar version of this, the science-fictional world is a look into our future, where certain contemporary problems (like poverty, nuclear weapons, overpopulation, and so forth) are extended to what seems their logical consequences. So, for instance, in a world of growing and rampant overpopulation and consequent food shortages or famines, of course we would find that “Soylent Green is made out of people!” (as immortalized by Charlton Heston *cri-de-coeur* in that film’s final scene). The counter-argument from fantasy’s detractors states that fantasy either creates a wholly unreal, Never-Never-Land completely unconnected to the world in which we live, or that fantasy creates a simplistic and romantic vision of our *past* that is somehow preferable to our present condition. In both cases, the political message is deemed inappropriate to effecting real social change in the here-and-now. That is, the unreal world is merely an escape into utter “fantasy,” the impossible; or, perhaps worse, the idealization of the past becomes a reactionary *nostalgia*. For example, this is a large part of Michael Moorcock’s critique of Tolkien (and more so, of Tolkien’s epigones): “Since the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, at least, people have been yearning for an ideal rural world they believe to have vanished—yearning for a mythical state of innocence [...]. This refusal to face or derive any pleasure from the realities of urban industrial life, this longing to possess, again, the infant’s eye view of the countryside, is a fundamental theme in popular English literature.”¹²

In Tolkien’s Middle-earth, there are certainly elements of both “escapism” and nostalgia. Tolkien does dispute the assumption that “escape” is a bad thing, as when he argues that the “misusers” of the word have confused “the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter”: “Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it.”¹³ Middle-earth is not *our* world, or even our *past* world. Yet the otherworldly domain, while independent of our “real” world, is not altogether incommensurable with ours. As Tolkien notes in “On Fairy-Stories,” fairy tales are not so much stories about “fairies or elves” but about the Perilous Realm itself: “*Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.”¹⁴ This world is clearly not *our* world, but it is not entirely an escape from our world either. The place where we exist (when enchanted) is also a vision of our world that, like the classical utopias and even more like the speculative fiction of modern

utopian literature, encourages us to *imagine* alternatives to our own condition, while actively exploring what might be called “real-world” problems through this imaginative activity of fantasy.

The title of my essay obliquely refers to the overall point about *fantasy worlds*, as I believe Tolkien’s view of Middle-earth as a world very much like, but not crudely homologous to, our own is figured forth in the idea of “places where the stars are strange.” As fans and scholars of *The Lord of the Rings* will recognize, the phrase comes from Aragorn’s speech during the Council of Elrond, in which he mildly rebukes Boromir (who had complained of his long journey) by noting just how far and wide he himself had traveled over the years. Indeed, if one regards the map while reading this passage, one can tell that Aragorn had sojourned to its outer limits. As Aragorn puts it: “I have had a hard life and a long; and the leagues that lie between here and Gondor are a small part in the count of my journeys. I have crossed many mountains and many rivers, and trodden many plains, even into the far countries of Rhûn and Harad where the stars are strange.”¹⁵ As beautiful or poetic as this image of lands “where the stars are strange” is, Aragorn’s comment might be reasonably viewed as stating a mere matter of fact: to wit, that he had travelled to regions which we can understand to lie south of the equator, where he could perhaps view Cetus, the Southern Cross, and other constellations not always visible in the Northern Hemisphere. And this is partly my point. Although we ought never simply graft Tolkien’s Middle-earth onto a map of “our” world,¹⁶ Tolkien is nevertheless still speaking *of* our world, albeit figuratively and in such a way as to maintain the internal coherence and “totality” of his own imaginary world. Aragorn’s journeys take place in a fantasy world, but as readers of this fantasy, we still “know” it to be akin to our own, at least as much so as the worlds of utopian or science-fiction literature.¹⁷

This is not at all to say that the fantasy world of Middle-earth *is* our real world. Tolkien plainly states that the fantasy world is an “Other-world,” and that “Fantasy” itself is “the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds.”¹⁸ And, although Suvin quotes this as a sign of Tolkien’s escapism, Tolkien’s view that “Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability” is actually closer to Jameson’s idea of “the desire called Utopia” than we typically imagine.¹⁹ In any event, Tolkien’s youthful desire *to know* a world of magic, dragons, and what not seems to me quite similar to the desire for a world of spaceships and time-travel. (Indeed, Jameson has suggested that the dragon is fantasy’s equivalent or analogue of science-fiction’s spaceship.)²⁰ It really seems that the *enchantment* of such worlds, rather than the otherworldliness of them, is what really disturbs certain utopians. But, as Tolkien indicates in several places, the very idea of “magic”—so intimately tied to the “sword-and-sorcery” form of fantasy that he helped to launch—is much closer to machinery, technology, and science than is generally supposed.

Reflections on Magic

In his well known letter to Milton Waldman, which was reprinted as a preface to *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien essentially identifies what is called “Magic” with what he calls “the Machine.” In Tolkien’s view, both have the same function, both are means to the same

end, both are catalysts “for making the will more quickly effective.”²¹ Or, to put it more accurately, “magic” and “the machine” are really two names for the same thing. As Tolkien puts it, in using the term “the Machine (or Magic),” “I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of the development of the inherent inner powers or talents—or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills. The Machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognized.”²²

Interestingly enough, for a corpus that so influenced the sword-and-sorcery sub-genre, Tolkien’s writings include very little actual magic. Magic would seem to be the particular province of wizards, but even the named wizards in Tolkien’s world but rarely perform magical acts. In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf—who is, of course, known to hobbits for his impressive fireworks displays—uses a sort of weaponized fireworks on goblins and wolves (the pine-cones ignited with magical fire and tossed from the treetops suggest an early use of hand-grenades and incendiary bombs). In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf utters spells (famously in contesting with the Balrog in Moria, who apparently utters some curses of his own), and continues to wield fire, but in both works Gandalf is perhaps handier with the sword than with the wand or spell. Contrasted with his many epigones, such as Albus Dumbledore, Gandalf scarcely does magic at all. (But for another kind of “magic,” to which I will return shortly.)

Let us look at one example of magic in *The Lord of the Rings*: the Mirror of Galadriel. It is a memorable scene, and, by virtue of its framing, it may operate as a meditation on the nature of “magic” itself. We recall that the scene begins with Sam and Frodo remarking upon the omnipresence of “Elf-magic” in Lothlórien. “You can see and feel it everywhere,” says Frodo, but Sam notes that, unlike Gandalf with his showy fireworks displays, “you can’t see nobody working it. [...] I’d dearly love to see some Elf-magic, Mr. Frodo!”²³ Galadriel uses just this term to entice Sam to look in the mirror, although she mildly rebukes the hobbits for confusing “Elf-magic” with “the deceits of the Enemy”: “this is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not understand clearly what they mean; they seem to use the same word of the deceits of the Enemy. But this, if you will, is the magic of Galadriel. Did you not say that you wished to see Elf-magic?” Yet Galadriel has already indicated the ambiguousness of this particular magic, noting that she is able to “command the Mirror” to reveal many things, often showing “to some what they desire to see.” But it is more “profitable” to allow the Mirror to show what it will, even though—whether visions of the past, present, or future—“even the wisest cannot always tell.”²⁴

This is clearly a dangerous bit of magic, as Galadriel specifically notes when Sam becomes agitated and alarmed at the Mirror’s vision. “Remember that the Mirror shows many things, and not all have yet come to pass. Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide to deeds.”²⁵ Most famously, after Frodo has seen his own perplexing visions in the Mirror, he offers the One Ring to Galadriel, who—like, but even more so than Gandalf earlier in the Shire—admits that she is sorely tempted, but then passes the test. The wielder of this Elf-magic has survived the “deceits of the Enemy.” Hence, the Hobbits were not entirely wrong to characterize Elf-magic and the magic of Sauron with the same word. Much of Galadriel’s own magical actions involve forms of potential deceit, as the ambiguities of the Mirror suggest. Before she passes her own test, she quite

pointedly tests the members of the fellowship, causing them to see “visions” (whether “deceitful” or not is another question), visions that cause particular pain to Boromir and to Frodo. Indeed, the mirror itself—not Galadriel’s magic mirror but our own everyday one—is perhaps an apt figure for the ambiguities of magic in Tolkien’s Middle-earth, as it presents a false image (i.e., a reflection of the “real world”) that may be useful or not; it may be an accurate representation of the look of things or it may be a distortion. Certainly the mirrors can be used to trick the eye just as easily as to satisfy it. The scene in which the hobbits encounter “Elf-magic” in the Mirror of Galadriel reveals a deep ambiguity about magic in Tolkien’s world, and this ambiguous stance is not really much different from the concerns over technology in the worlds of science fiction.

Although Tolkien wishes to distinguish the so-called “magic” of the elves from the magic or machinery of others, this distinction does not really hold. As we have just seen, the Mirror of Galadriel is a not wholly reliable or salutary form of magic, but this is not atypical. Other examples in *The Lord of the Rings* include the *palantíri*, whose manifest usefulness is revealed to cause far greater dangers to those who (like Saruman or Denethor) who employ them, and of course the *rings* themselves, which ultimately are shown to cause harm (even the “Three Rings for the Elven-kings,” as Galadriel notes sadly). While Tom Bombadil and the elves use a type of homeopathic or nature-based “magic” (speaking to trees, for example, or commanding the river to flood), the agents of evil, as they are imagined, use a more artificial or technological form, as with the One Ring or even bombs (such as Saruman contrives for blowing a hole in Helm’s Deep). But again, for all of the magical power of the white wizard and the “Necromancer” Sauron, very little actual magic is wielded. Indeed, for the most part (as Tolkien’s letter to Waldman had indicated), the real force of this “black” magic lies in its influence or domination over other wills; that is, to impose one’s will upon orcs, trolls, and corruptible men. However, in a more positive sense, this is also the power wielded by a Gandalf or a Galadriel, although we would prefer to think of theirs as the power of inspiration—kindling men’s hearts—rather than domination . . . the results, however, are similar. Indeed, once it is known that Gandalf himself is wearing “the Third Ring, Narya the Great,” it becomes apparent that his real magical power is the ability to “rekindle hearts in a world that grows chill.”²⁶ Like Galadriel (who does not claim to offer counsel, but who clearly offers some anyway), Gandalf’s greatest magic is in motivating and guiding others, a more beneficent—but not dissimilar—form of “making the will more quickly effective.”

The difference, for Tolkien, comes down to the intent of the magic user and the effect of the magic used, it seems. The fundamental issue is Art itself, which Tolkien characterizes as “sub-creation” (since, what Tolkien calls the “real primary world” of creation has only one Creator) and its relation to the “primary world.” In a reflection on the natural desire for art, for sub-creation, Tolkien observes the origins of “the Machine (or Magic),” as he explains in the letter to Waldman.

This desire [to create Art] is at once wedded to a passionate love of the real primary world, and hence filled with the sense of mortality, and yet unsatisfied by it. It has various opportunities of “Fall.” It may become possessive, clinging to the things made as “its own,” the sub-creator wishes to be Lord and God of his private creation. He will rebel against the laws of the Creator—especially against

mortality. Both of these (alone and together) will lead to a desire for Power, for making the will more quickly effective,—and so to the Machine (or Magic).²⁷

Hence, art itself, when combined with the usual sin of pride, quickly leads to power and the use of “un-natural” devices. However, in attempting to distinguish the “good” magic of the elves from this baleful form, Tolkien avers that “its object is Art not Power, sub-creation not domination and tyrannous re-forming of Creation.” But, as the entire tragic history of *The Silmarillion* recounts, the problem is “that this whole frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others—speedily and according to the benefactor’s own plans—is a recurrent motive.”²⁸

Thus magic, which is supposed to infuse the fantasy world, is really related to the broader question of ethics. In other words, the distinction between magic and technology dissolves in Tolkien’s world—and, more generally, in fantasy at large—as they become names for the same thing: means of enhancing the aesthetic ability of the artist or sub-creator. (Perhaps this is why so many would-be Saurons or Gandalfs appear as hybrids of the magician and the scientist, like Faust, Frankenstein, Ahab, and so on.) What counts, then, is not the mythological versus the cognitive estrangements in the world, but the *ethical* approach to being in the world. This is the seemingly inevitable problem of good versus evil.

Fantasy Beyond Good and Evil

The anti-fantasy arguments of those favoring science fiction or utopia frequently cite the simplistic ethical system that undergirds the fantastic realm. That is, to use Jameson’s words here, one of the “structural characteristics of fantasy which contrast sharply with SF and which can serve as *differentiae specifica*e for this genre” is “the organization of fantasy around the ethical binary of good and evil,” in addition to “the fundamental role it assigns to magic.”²⁹ Some of Tolkien’s detractors cite this seemingly simplistic, good-versus-evil ethical code as a primary objection to the world of Middle-earth. It is not just that Tolkien seems to have adopted a strictly Manichean worldview, but his world also establishes once and forever just who is good (elves, for instance, or noble men and well bred hobbits) and who is evil (Sauron above all, but then the various monsters like orcs, trolls, dragons, and so on). From this ethics, a reactionary politics must inevitably emerge. For instance (in what I take to be a serious misreading, by the way), Moorcock objects that “*The Lord of the Rings* is a pernicious confirmation of the values of a morally bankrupt middle-class. [. . .] If the Shire is a suburban garden, Sauron and his henchmen are that old bourgeois bugaboo, the Mob—mindless football supporters throwing their beer-bottles over the fence—the worst aspects of modern urban society represented as the whole by a fearful, backward-yearning class for whom ‘good taste’ is synonymous with ‘restraint’ (pastel colours, murmured protest) and ‘civilized’ behaviour means ‘conventional behaviour in all circumstances.’³⁰

This view of Tolkien’s world cannot long withstand scrutiny, and any careful reading of Tolkien’s texts reveals a far more nuanced ethical framework, whatever Tolkien’s own personal religious or moral tenets. Shippey has quite rightly undercut Edwin Muir’s notion that *The Lord of the Rings* contains a simplistic happy ending in

which “The good boys, having fought a deadly battle, emerge at the end of it well, triumphant and happy, as boys would naturally expect to do.” As any serious reader would recognize, the ending not nearly so simple: Frodo is literally and figuratively scarred for life (Shippey calls him a “burnt-out case”),³¹ Théoden’s prophetic words—“much that was fair and wonderful shall pass for ever out of Middle-earth”—come true,³² Elrond’s and Galadriel’s powers wane, and so forth. Far from presenting a neat victory for good over evil, Tolkien introduces us to Galadriel’s concept of the “long defeat.” Indeed, as the magic of Galadriel’s Mirror or of Denethor’s *palantír* suggests, things are not so clear cut in Tolkien’s world. Whatever Tolkien’s own view on the matter, the ethical framework of his Middle-earth cannot be reduced to a good-versus-evil caricature.

As I have pointed out in “Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs,” the representatives of “evil” in Tolkien’s world are far more complex and ambiguous than generally supposed.³³ The problem of any inherent orcish evil troubled Tolkien, and he felt that their mere existence meant that they could not be beyond redemption. But then, this is the case with all “evil” beings in this world, right? Indeed, so many of the “evil ones”—Sauron, Saruman, and even the great original Satan-figure, Melkor or Morgoth—are really the Fallen, figures of pity rather than pure hatred. Gollum, of course, is the very avatar of this concept of pitiable “evil.” Similarly, with the Ringwraiths and Denethor and Feanor and so on. Furthermore, as Tolkien had indicated in his letter to Waldman, in almost every case (Morgoth would seem to be the exception), this so-called evil emerges out of a desire to do good. This is of course why both Gandalf and Galadriel decline Frodo’s offer of the ring; as Gandalf puts it, the Ring would corrupt him precisely because of his “pity of weakness and the desire for strength to do good.”³⁴ But, as Tolkien makes clear in his identification of Magic with the Machine, all the ring really does is enhance the inherent power of the user. The very desire to do good is at the root of all evil, for Tolkien.

Tolkien is no moral relativist, but he does invite the possibility of a kind of Nietzschean perspectivism that certainly undermines the simplistic binary ethical model. Famously, in *The Two Towers*, Sam sees the slain Harad soldier, and wonders “what the man’s name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace.”³⁵ Of course, Sam—who frequently longs for home and peace—never asks what possible “lies and threats” have led him so far from the Shire, but his sympathy for the enemy soldiers suggests a far more interesting ethical framework than most give Tolkien credit for maintaining.

Shippey has made much of how evil in Tolkien is characterized by the ambiguous figure of “the Shadow.”³⁶ A shadow is, of course, a presence *and* an absence, existing and nonexistent at the same time, much like the reflections in Galadriel’s mirror. It seems to me that this evocative figure is well suited to the depiction of evil in Tolkien’s world, since it both is and is not present, and when visible, it is largely seen in its effects; moreover, those effects may not be recognizable or able to be evaluated until much later. (The “ruse of history” does not spare Middle-earth, and Jameson’s view of the dialectical reversal might also bear on the events in this imaginary place.) Tolkien’s contention that “evil” arises largely out of a desire to do good—that the human, all-too-human desire for sub-creation, for Art itself, is what makes possible, if not *inevitable*, the Fall—seems applicable to this world.

In the end, the ethical framework of Tolkien's Middle-earth is much more complex, even muddled, than either his detractors or his champions frequently believe. Tolkien's apparently idealized elves turn out to have much to find fault with, and even in their most noble images, they do not always stand for what is good, as seen most clearly in *The Silmarillion*. Hobbits and dwarves are somewhat more nuanced, which also makes them more interesting, and men are far more complex in their tendencies toward good or evil or that which lies beyond good and evil. The fact is, as the angelic (*Maia*) Gandalf says at the very outset of the adventure, the ethical argument does not involve some adherence to an abstract and unchanging ideal or to the repulsion of an ever-nefarious evil, but to the basic ways we comport ourselves in our world. Echoing a sentiment felt by everyone at some point (or rather at many points) in his or her life, Frodo wishes this "evil" had not arisen in his own lifetime; Gandalf replies, "So do I [...] and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."³⁷

The wisdom here lies partly in a recognition of the degree to which all we are doing is muddling through. We are undoubtedly doing our best with the materials at hand in the time available, but nothing can prove to us in this time and place that we are doing some transcendent "good." Indeed, even the good we feel pretty sure we are doing will have consequences that are to our minds baleful, as when Galadriel notes that the destruction of the One Ring will inevitably lead to the disintegration of Lothlórien and of elven culture more generally. The end of Sauron, which is followed a bit later by the end of Saruman, is not at all the Hollywood happy ending some would suppose. The catastrophic transformation of Middle-earth resembles (dare I say) the more realistic vision of a world altered by the forces of history.³⁸ As with "real" history, in Gandalf's words, "Even the very wise cannot see all ends."³⁹ Hence, the only apparently "good-versus-evil" worldview gives way to a more nuanced (and, I will dare once more, *realistic*) ethics, one which shares a great deal with the aims, if not always the methods, of politics, insofar as the political realm is always understood to be a site of contest, compromise, second-looks, and reevaluation. This too helps in transforming the image of the real world by establishing an imaginary space in which to envision our own world in a new light.

Conclusion

Just as the simplistic "good-versus-evil" binary is not an apt model for Tolkien's ethics in Middle-earth, so too it seems that the "fantasy-versus-utopia" opposition does not hold. The misplaced preposition misleadingly opposes two discursive formations whose defining territories often overlap. The real value of utopia lies not in its presentation of a blueprint for an ideal society, but in the ways that it enables us to imagine radical alternatives to the present society. In other words, utopia is a critical practice, and I agree with China Miéville, who sees utopia or science fiction as a subset of fantasy.⁴⁰ Hence, fantasy is also a critical practice. In a world made mystified and false by ideology and alienation, the fantastic might actually be a better way to gain access to the "real" world, which can no longer be simply read off the page of realistic fiction.

The interrelations of fantasy and utopia in Tolkien's world serve to establish a sense of radical difference from our own everyday world which is nevertheless also a ground upon which we may reflect upon our world. Indeed, one might even note how much the reverse might also be true: that is, how realism partakes of fantasy, as in the marvelous anecdote of the "MOOR EEFLOC" (also cited by Tolkien) which, according to G.K. Chesterton, reveals "that elvish kind of realism Dickens adopted everywhere."⁴¹ In this case, even the distinction between fantasy and realism might be blurred, since both modes interact in various ways to open up our perspectives on our world, including of course the world made visible through acts of the imagination. As Eric Rabkin summarizes it, "Fantasy represents a basic mode of human knowing; its polar opposite is Reality. Reality is that collection of perspectives and expectations that we learn in order to survive in the here and now. But the here and now becomes tomorrow; a child grows, a culture develops, a person dreams. In every area of human thought, civilization has evolved a functioning reality, but the universe has suffered no reality to maintain itself unchanged. The glory of man is that he is not bound by reality. Man travels in fantastic worlds."⁴²

In the end, the real question is not whether a sober realism or a critical utopianism or a creative fantasy offers the best mode in which to engage artistically with the world, but rather how we are to engage at all. Otherworldliness may indeed be the best way of seeing our own world with fresh eyes, and, in an age which seems to have forgotten how to think critically, historically, or speculatively, the sort of literary work accomplished by a Tolkien in Middle-earth—be it labeled fantasy, utopia, or other—is all the more necessary. As Shippey notes well, the opposition to fantasy often corresponds to the poverty of one's imagination. Speaking of Nokes (a character in Tolkien's "Smith of Wooten Major"), Shippey writes: "He has only a weak [...] notion of fantasy himself, but assumes that this is all there can ever be; and since he is well aware of the feebleness of his own imagination, he assumes all images of the fantastic, of Faerie, must be feeble too."⁴³ Ironically, perhaps, Jameson has said something similar about our own postmodern condition, in which for many it is easier to envision the end of the world than an end to the present economic system: "perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations."⁴⁴ With strengthened imaginations, the utopian impulse may indeed find realization in the form of fantasy, and we may again look upon our own world with fresh eyes, having visited places where the stars are strange.

Notes

¹ T.A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), vii–viii.

² Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 195.

³ See my "Radical Alternatives: The Persistence of Utopia in the Postmodern," in Alfred Drake, ed., *New Essays on the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 118–20.

⁴ See J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tree and Leaf* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 41.

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- ⁵ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 61.
- ⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 56.
- ⁷ See Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 60–68.
- ⁸ Here it should be acknowledged that there are in fact many practitioners and theorists of fantasy who do not nicely fit into these stereotypes, and one could easily list many liberal, left-wing, or Marxist fantasists, from Mervyn Peake to China Miéville, Alan Moore to Neil Gaiman, and so on. Indeed, Miéville has noted a certain rapprochement between Marxism and fantasy, visible in the special issue of *Historical Materialism* devoted to the subject (see note 40 below). See also Marc Bould and China Miéville’s edited collection, *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2009). In an afterword to this volume, Miéville notes that—and this reinforces my own argument somewhat—Marxist critics remain skeptical of fantasy and committed to science-fiction/utopia, largely because of the “ideology of cognition” established by Suvin, Jameson, and others, and that these critics have ignored the revolutionary potential of the fantastic. As Miéville concludes, “*Red Planets* we have. We should not neglect the red dragons” (245).
- ⁹ Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 4.
- ¹⁰ See Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).
- ¹¹ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 55.
- ¹² Michael Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1987), 126.
- ¹³ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 60–61.
- ¹⁴ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 9.
- ¹⁵ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballentine, 1966), II, ii, 278.
- ¹⁶ Hence, I am not speaking of the “real world” history and geography that Brian Bates has explored in his *The Real Middle-earth: Exploring the Magic and Mystery of the Middle Ages, J.R.R. Tolkien, and “The Lord of the Rings”* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).
- ¹⁷ It is perhaps worth noting that Shippey, quite rightly, has identified Tolkien’s “cartographic plot” as the basis for *The Lord of the Rings*, especially insofar as this work is made far more complex—far more “real”—than its predecessor *The Hobbit*. Establishing an imaginary geography is thus crucial to the tale that grew in the telling. See Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 94–134.
- ¹⁸ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 41.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40–41.
- ²⁰ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 63.
- ²¹ Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 145.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 145–46.
- ²³ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballentine, 1966), II, vii, 405.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 406.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 407.

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- ²⁶ Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballentine, 1966), VI, ix, 339 and Appendix B, 403.
- ²⁷ Tolkien, *Letters*, 145.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.
- ²⁹ Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 58.
- ³⁰ Moorcock, *Wizardry*, 125.
- ³¹ Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 148. Shippey quotes Muir’s review, “A Boy’s World,” *Observer* (November 21, 1955), 11.
- ³² Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: Ballentine, 1965), III, viii, 169.
- ³³ See my “Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs.” *Mythlore* 111/112 (Fall/Winter 2010): 17–28.
- ³⁴ Tolkien, *Fellowship*, I, ii, 67.
- ³⁵ Tolkien, *Two Towers*, IV, iv, 301.
- ³⁶ See, e.g., Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 128–29.
- ³⁷ Tolkien, *Fellowship*, I, ii, 55–56.
- ³⁸ Thoroughly analyzing the notes, drafts, and other unpublished writings (some of which are available in *The History of Middle-earth* volumes), Dimitra Fimi has argued that Tolkien’s shift from the materials that became *The Silmarillion* to *The Hobbit* represented a movement from myth to history; see her excellent *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). In an essay I am writing, tentatively titled “Waverley in the Shire: *The Hobbit* as Historical Novel,” I read *The Hobbit* in the context of Lukács’s *The Historical Novel*, arguing that the form of the novel incorporates and transcends the traditionally fantastic content, making its otherworldliness all the more critical to understanding the “real” world.
- ³⁹ Tolkien, *Fellowship*, I, ii, 65.
- ⁴⁰ See China Miéville, “Editorial Introduction,” *Symposium: Marxism and Fantasy*, in *Historical Materialism* 10.4 (2002), 42–43.
- ⁴¹ According to Chesterton, a young Charles Dickens discovered these magical words by seeing the sign “Coffee Room” from the other side of a glass door. Chesterton concludes that “it is the masterpiece of the good realistic principle—the principle that the most fantastic of all is often the precise fact.” See G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1906), 47–48. Tolkien notes this moment in “On Fairy-Stories,” but finds this sort of “fantasy”—i.e., observing “the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle”—is rather limited when compared to truly creative fantasy; see “On Fairy-Stories,” 58–59.
- ⁴² Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 227.
- ⁴³ Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 299.
- ⁴⁴ Jameson: *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii.