Metaphors and Legends Spring to Life out of the Grass: Travel as a Metaphor for Story and History in Tolkien’s Fiction

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Abbreviations

BOLT 1: The Book of Lost Tales, Part I

BOLT 2: The Book of Lost Tales, Part 2

LOTR: The Lord of the Rings

“OFS”: “On Fairy-Stories”
Introduction

One of the most pervasive motifs in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, one which comes back time and again and on many different levels, is that of the journey. In the fifty years separating the mariner Eriol/Ælfwine (1916-17), on whose sea voyages Tolkien initially intended to hang his entire mythos, and “Smith of Wootton Major” (1967), marking the beginning and end of Tolkien’s journeys to the realm of Faërie, Tolkien created a “line of far-traveled figures whose procession marks a clearly discernible trail through his fiction” (Flieger, Question of Time 163). Well-known participants in this procession include such figures as Fëanor, Beren, Túrin, Eärendil, and, of course, Bilbo and Frodo – among countless other lesser-known wanderers. In a reaction to W.H. Auden’s review of The Return of the King and his reading of the journey or “Quest” as an allegory of life, Tolkien wrote that “[t]o a story-teller a journey is a marvellous device. It provides a strong thread on which a multitude of things that he has in mind may be strung to make a new thing, various, unpredictable, and yet coherent. My chief reason for using this form was simply technical” (Letters 239). While it is of course easy to follow Tolkien’s lead on this issue and to dismiss the frequent recurrence and centrality of the journey in so many of his works as a mere plot device – a straightforward way of allowing his characters to encounter all types of adventures – there is far more to the motif of the journey in Tolkien’s fiction than this pragmatic explanation suggests.
One way of interpreting travel as transcending the role of mere narrative device – and by far the most popular among critics – is to read the journey as a metaphor for characters’ internal development. Treading in the footsteps of Auden and his notion of the quest as reminiscent of “our subjective experience of life” (44), this type of criticism usually focuses on the travels and accompanying maturation process of the protagonists of Tolkien’s most straightforward quest narratives, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Titles such as “The Psychological Journey of Bilbo Baggins” and *The Hobbit: A Journey into Maturity*, in which Dorothy Matthews and William H. Green each provide a psycho-analytical reading of Bilbo’s “journey into maturity”, speak for themselves in illustrating the internalising tendency of studies of travel in *The Hobbit*. The same is true for *The Lord of the Rings*, although here, on top of the literal and psychological levels, the internal journey gains a spiritual or religious dimension as well (see, for example, Barkley and Ingham, Brown, Ford and Reid, and Garbowski). One of the few exceptions in this respect is Sue Bridgwater’s recent article “Staying Home and Travelling: Stasis Versus Movement in Tolkien’s Mythos”, which focuses on “choices to go away from home and choices to stay, their variety and similarities, as a first step toward a wider and deeper study” (19). As such, it presents a turn away from the seemingly automatic association of external travel with internal travel and towards a study of travel for its own sake. However, since her observations are still rather general and preliminary and since any “wider and deeper study” is still forthcoming, this particular area of Tolkien studies remains mostly unexplored. For the obviousness of the “life as a journey” metaphor, while
certainly a valid way of interpretation, nevertheless seems to have blinded critics to the many other metaphorical possibilities of travel, such as storytelling as a journey and time or history as a journey – linguistic realities which Tolkien, characteristically, transformed into literal realities within the context of his stories.

A school of literary criticism that expressly concerns itself with the use of metaphor in literature is that of cognitive poetics, a relatively recent movement which applies the principles of cognitive science in general and cognitive linguistics and psychology in particular to the interpretation of literature. The basic premise underlying these disciplines is that there is no clear-cut distinction between mind and body, since our conception of reality and the way we express ourselves are governed by our physical circumstances as humans (Stockwell 4). Tied in with this is the idea of conceptual metaphor, now commonly accepted among cognitive semanticists but first described by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their highly influential work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980; Crisp 99). In it they argue that our conceptual system and consequently also our language are structured by metaphor, allowing us to conceive of and express abstract notions in terms of more concrete ones: “Because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time, etc.), we need to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms” (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors* 115). Since the concepts of space and movement through space are grounded in our most basic experience as human beings – interaction with our physical surroundings – spatial metaphors are among the most
important and common ones used to denote more abstract concepts (*Metaphors* 14, 17). Emotions, for example, can be expressed using directional metaphors such as “up” or “down”, and so it is only natural that psychological development should be conceptualised in terms of a journey through space – thus conveying the idea of a beginning, an end, and gradual progress from one to the other. However, this is only one of many abstract notions that are conceived of in terms of space, and the “progress” element of the journey can be applied to many concepts other than internal development.

Cognitive literary analysis and Lakoff and Johnson’s theory are cited here (and once or twice later on in this dissertation) not because Tolkien would have agreed with them – on the contrary, as will be shown below – but because the idea of metaphorical language as only the linguistic manifestation of a much deeper conceptual connection allows insight into which metaphors Tolkien seems to have “lived by”. These are likely to be of significance in his fictional reality as well. Moreover, the theory of conceptual metaphor also offers an explanation for the pervasiveness of travel and the importance of the journey in our thought and language and, by extension, in Tolkien’s fiction. For, in essence, Tolkien’s imaginary world is based on language, rendering the centrality of travel in it perhaps no coincidence.

“For Tolkien, as for St John in the first verse of his gospel, ‘in the beginning was the Word’”, Padley and Padley conclude (92). This statement is true on many different levels. Both a medievalist and a philologist, Tolkien dedicated his entire
professional life to the study of language, tracing back the history of individual
words to find their original purpose and meaning; or, as Flieger puts it, “all of
Tolkien’s studies, the focus of his profession, was a concentration on the importance
of the word” (Splintered Light 5). It is this interest in language that eventually led to
and spilled over into his activities as a writer. In a letter to Houghton Mifflin, Tolkien
reminds that his fiction is “fundamentally linguistic in inspiration” and that “it is not a
‘hobby’, in the sense of something quite different from one’s work, taken up as a
relief-outlet. The invention of languages is the foundation. The ‘stories’ were made
rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse” (Letters 219; for details
on Tolkien’s invented languages see Hostetter, Weiner and Marshall, LOTR
Appendix E and F, and “The Etymologies” in Tolkien’s Lost Road). Quite literally,
therefore, Tolkien’s fictional universe has its roots in language, as it was originally
devised to provide a setting in which his fictional languages could plausibly have
evolved. What is more, in the same letter Tolkien also asserts that “there is a great
deal of linguistic matter … included or mythologically expressed in the book” (Letters
220, emphasis mine) – a claim which seems to justify attempts to read his fictional
realm in terms of language and linguistics.

Besides both inspiration and starting point for Tolkien’s fantasy world,
moreover, language and words are also the means by which stories are told and
therefore, in Tolkien’s view, carriers of “truth”. In order to gain a better
understanding of the importance Tolkien attributed to language, it is useful to look at
his poetics as they become apparent from his 1931 poem “Mythopoeia” and his 1947
essay “On Fairy-Stories”. Both are defences of imaginative fiction, whether in the form of fairy-story or myth, against accusations of being merely escapist attempts to flee reality or even outright lies. “Mythopoeia”, for instance, was written in response to Tolkien’s fellow Inkling C.S. Lewis, who, as becomes clear from the poem’s dedication, “said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though ‘breathed through silver’” (97). It is perhaps best to let Tolkien defend himself on this score by quoting a passage from “Mythopoeia” that also appears in slightly different form in “On Fairy-Stories” (50-1), and is chosen here for its content rather than its form:

The heart of man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act:
not his to worship the great Artefact,
man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build
gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sow the seed of dragons, ’twas our right
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we’re made. (“Mythopoeia” 98-9)

Additional clarification is offered by Tolkien’s assertion that “[f]antasy remains a
human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are
made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (“OFS”
52). For this devout Catholic, therefore, since humans were created in the image of
God, they too must be capable of “creative act” – although only of a secondary type
of “sub-creation” in the form of storytelling. And, also because humans were made in
the likeness of God, the things they create cannot wholly be lies but have to contain
“truth” of the same type as God’s creation, for humanity “draws some wisdom from
the only Wise”.

Further support for this view is provided in Tolkien’s letters, where he not
only claims that “legends and myths are largely made of ‘truth’” (Letters 147) but also
links storytellers to God by referring to the latter as “the Writer of the Story”. ¹ With
regard to Frodo’s failure to destroy the Ring, for example, Tolkien writes that “[t]he

¹ The topos of God as author is a common one in medieval texts, where God is often described as the
writer of both the Bible and the “book” of the world (see also Curtius 319-26). Seeing that Tolkien was
a professional medievalist, he is likely to have had knowledge of this.
Other Power then took over: the Writer of the Story (by which I do not mean myself)” (Letters 253). But the ultimate affirmation of Tolkien’s belief in the link between fairy-stories and history, between storytelling humanity and God, can be found in “On Fairy-Stories” just as Tolkien found it in the gospels – for these latter “contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. ... But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfilment of Creation” (“OFS” 65). In this way, Tolkien claims, “Legend and History have met and fused”, although “[s]tory, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them” (“OFS” 66).

This idea of fictional creation as a means towards attaining truth and even coming closer to God charges language and words with great importance and even power. “The tools of sub-creation”, Flieger writes, “are words (a sub-genre of the logos of Saint John, and thus also in imitation of God). This being the case, words are not merely for describing or reporting, but for actual making, for realizing (in the literal sense of the word) an imaginary world” (Splintered Light 42-3). In other words, language is more than a way to denote things in reality, but contains reality within itself – which is precisely where Tolkien and Lakoff and Johnson disagree, the latter regarding language only as a reflection of the way we view reality rather than as a reality in its own right. And while Lakoff and Johnson see metaphors as linguistic manifestations of how we conceive of and structure our world, Tolkien credits them with truth and even literally imbues them with physical reality in the context of his
fiction. An example of such a metaphor come to life is mentioned by Flieger, who notes that “Tolkien uses fantasy to re-invest metaphor with literality” with regard to the concept of enlightenment:

In Middle-earth, as in our own world, enlightenment is to be desired, but in Middle-earth it is a physical reality, not just a metaphor for an inner state of being, and to find it one must physically exchange darkness for light. Thus a decision to exchange one state of being for another entails action, not just a change of heart or mind. (Splintered Light 62)

Just like the metaphor of enlightenment is “re-invested with literality” in Tolkien’s fiction, then – this thesis will argue – so can the omnipresence of the journey in his oeuvre be read as having its roots in linguistic reality, not only structuring his works as it structures our language and way of thinking but also as a metaphor become reality. From Tolkien’s writings and choice of metaphor it can be deduced that he seems to have conceived of both storytelling and time or history in terms of a journey through space. It is only natural, therefore, that these conceptual metaphors should also play an important part in structuring the reality of his creation. Moreover, considering the fact that Tolkien used his fiction to give expression to his linguistic views – which in turn included ideas about the reality of language – it is not surprising that he invested these metaphors with literal truth in the context of his stories. Thus, the physical act of journeying in his fiction can at the
same time be read as indicating the process of human storytelling and, closely connected to this, the unfolding of the greater story of God: history. Besides offering a new reading of the journey in Tolkien’s fiction, therefore, this dissertation also presents a new use of this age-old literary motif in general: while the “writing as a journey” metaphor still has some significant precedents in travel literature (see Daemmrich and Daemmrich 158; Gingras 1317), this does not seem to be the case for the “history as a journey” metaphor.

In what follows, chapter 1 will explore Tolkien’s conceptual link between storytelling and travelling (thus at the same time demonstrating the necessity of taking a closer look at the role of travel in his fiction) and the way this metaphorical connection becomes a literal one in the context of his stories. This will be followed, in chapter 2, by a similar exploration of Tolkien’s conflation of time and space, of history and journey. Chapter 3, finally, will consider some of the consequences that flow from looking at travel in this manner, particularly with regard to the moral implications for choices to travel or stay at home – eventually reaching the conclusion that a refusal to travel or a decision to travel in the wrong direction are both indications and manifestations of moral misguidedness, in that they ultimately constitute a refusal or denial of God’s plan.
Chapter 1

Writing, Travelling, and the Beginning of Story

In his second-edition foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, describing the years-long and intermittent process of the book’s composition, Tolkien writes the following: “I found that the story could not now be wholly abandoned, and I plodded on, mostly by night, till I stood by Balin’s tomb in Moria. There I halted for a long while. It was almost a year later when I went on and so came to Lothlórien and the Great River late in 1941” (*LOTR* xxii). This statement, as Honegger points out, suggests that Tolkien used places rather than significant events as orientation points to navigate the story and the process of its creation (316). What is more, the verbs Tolkien uses here – plodding, standing, halting, going on – seem to liken the writing process to an act of travelling from one place to the next.

This idea of writing as a journey is characteristic of the way Tolkien liked to describe the process to others, and the above quotation is only one of several examples. In a 1955 letter to W.H. Auden in response to his request to “supply a few ‘human touches’ in the form of information about how the book came to be written”, Tolkien not only quotes the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* in saying that “I would rather, God be my witness, set out on foot for Rome than begin the work over again!” (*Letters* 211), but also remarks that
the essential Quest started at once. But I met a lot of things on the way that astonished me. Tom Bombadil I knew already; but I had never been to Bree. Strider sitting in the corner at the inn was a shock, and I had no more idea who he was than had Frodo. The Mines of Moria had been a mere name; and of Lothlórien no word had reached my mortal ears till I came there. (*Letters 216*)

As Tolkien would have us believe, it is not just readers who join the hobbits on their journey of discovery, but so did he before them – at the same time, incidentally, implying a lack of authorial control reminiscent of Tolkien’s idea that all stories eventually derive from God, the true “Writer of the Story” (see also Flieger, *Splintered Light* 157). Like the hobbits, Tolkien knows names or rumours of several far-off places, though until now he has never been there before, and some places he visits he had never even previously heard of. That the image of the writer as a traveller to unknown places was a pervasive one in his mind becomes clear, moreover, from his poetics. In “On Fairy-Stories” he describes himself as a “wandering explorer (or trespasser) in the land” of Faërie (9), and in “Mythopoeia” Tolkien twice juxtaposes “minstrels” with “mariners” who journey far and wide in search of unknown shores, expressing a wish to be like both (Huttar 17-8):

> Blessed are the men of Noah’s race that build
> their little arks, though frail and poorly filled,
and steer through winds contrary towards a wraith,

a rumour of a harbour guessed by faith.

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme

of things not found within recorded time. (“Mythopoeia” 99)

And:

I would that I might with the minstrels sing

and stir the unseen with a throbbing string.

I would be with the mariners of the deep

that cut their slender planks on mountains steep

and voyage upon a vague and wandering quest,

for some have passed beyond the fabled West. (“Mythopoeia” 100)

Like so many of his fictional characters, Tolkien sees himself as travelling away from
the familiar world of everyday life to the world of Faërie, or, as Flieger puts it, as a
“wanderer, the restless, unquiet human traveler between the worlds” (Question of
Time 236). In other words, Tolkien seems to have conceived of storytelling in terms of
travelling (among other things), and this becomes manifest in his frequent and
recurrent use of this particular image when describing the process. More than
“mere” poetic expression, the travel metaphor indicates a perceptual link between
story and journey that resurfaces in Tolkien’s oeuvre on many different levels, from structuring device to metaphor turned reality as travelling becomes an act of writing.

Without expanding travel metaphorically to embrace all fiction, travel in the traditional sense of a journey to far-off places already pervades and structures Tolkien’s works when considering only their narrative form: nearly all of his stories are travel stories, and he seems to have trouble writing, or even conceiving of, any other type of tale. *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings*, short stories such as “Leaf by Niggle”, “Smith of Wootton Major”, and the tale about the dog with the telling name of “Roverandom” – all take travel as their starting point, and the only major exception to this rule appears to be *The Silmarillion*, a collection of Tolkien’s mythopoeic writings. As to the latter, however, it should be remembered that Tolkien never finished or published it during his lifetime, and that this was mainly due to his problems with giving the various legends that make up the book “some progressive shape”, as “[n]o simple device, like a journey and a quest, is available” (*Letters* 333). Tolkien never found such a shape, and *The Silmarillion* was published posthumously and edited from the various different drafts (all of which later appeared in the *History of Middle-earth* series) by his son Christopher, without any real framing device.

Tolkien’s legendarium was not always frameless, however, and it can come as no surprise that the only framework it ever had was that of a journey – leaving it safe to say that the whole of Tolkien’s mythology began with the voyages of one man. The then-called “Lost Tales of Elfinesse” first saw the light of day in 1916-17 as they
were composed by a twenty-five-year-old Tolkien while he was serving for England in the First World War (BOLT I 8, 22). Although they were never finished and are more a collection of more or less completed drafts, rewritings, and notes than a complete and consistent body of work, these tales constitute the starting point of Tolkien’s mythology and already contain many elements that were to remain an integral part of all subsequent drafts. One aspect that was to disappear later but that did survive the revisions of the earliest stages is the framing device of a mariner who sails far into the west until he reaches the Elvish island of Tol Eressëa. There he is told, and in some versions is part of, the stories that make up Elvish history and The Book of Lost Tales alike. In early drafts this sailor goes by the name of Eriol and is said to be “a son of Eärendel, born under his beam”, a “wanderer” assuming the byname of “Wǽfre (an Old English word meaning ‘restless, wandering’)” (BOLT I 22-4). The first chapter of this scheme of The Book of Lost Tales, “The Cottage of Lost Play”, begins as follows:

Now it happened on a certain time that a traveller from far countries, a man of great curiosity, was by desire of strange lands and the ways and dwellings of unaccustomed folk brought in a ship as far west even as the Lonely Island, Tol Eressëa in the fairy speech, but which the Gnomes call Dor Faidwen, the Land of Release, and a great tale hangs thereto. (BOLT I 13)
Thus Tolkien’s entire mythos starts with the “great curiosity” of a single man – whether answering to the name of Tolkien or Eriol – a curiosity informing both his travels and his stories.

The restless wandering implied by Eriol’s nickname Wǽfre applies not only to journeys but also to tales, for just as he longs to see new sights by means of travelling, so he constantly craves to hear new stories: “Continually did he thirst to know yet more of the history of the Eldar; nor did he ever fail to be among those who fared each evening to the Room of the Tale-fire” (BOLT I 140). It was this “thirst” also that led him to the Elvish island in the first place, having heard “strange tales of things beyond the Western Seas” which caused him to “sail more curiously about the western isles seeking more stories of the kind” (BOLT II 5). When in a later yet unfinished scheme of the Lost Tales Eriol is replaced by the Anglo-Saxon sailor Ælfwine or “Elf-friend”, he may have lost his name but not his boundless curiosity, his “love to sail a quest for the red sun or to tempt the dangerous seas in thirst for undiscovered things” (BOLT II 316). And while eventually the framework of this voyage was wholly abandoned, it was only to make place for – among other things – stand-alone travel stories such as the tales of Fëanor, Beren and Lúthien, and Túrin Turambar, which outgrew the frame as they grew in importance.

Taking a step down the fictional ladder from the levels of author and narrator to that of narratee, we find that all stories are a result of travelling not only in the sense that Tolkien the writer sees himself as travelling to far-off and unknown regions – crediting his fictional substitute Eriol/Ælfwine with precisely this role – but
also because in the universe of his fiction travelling becomes an act of composition in itself; to Tolkien the link between storytelling and travelling was so real that he imbued this metaphor with “literal” reality as well. In *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, travellers are very much aware of the fact that their journeys will become part of the tales and songs of their time, that they are writing them with every step they take, and that by choosing a certain course or direction they can influence the writing. A case in point is Merry, who tells Pippin: “You seem to have been doing well, Master Took … You will get almost a chapter in old Bilbo’s book, if ever I get a chance to report to him” (458) – referring here to the Red Book of Westmarch, a fictional manuscript containing the hobbit memoirs from which Tolkien claims to have derived *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (see *LOTR* 14-6). What is more, Merry is afraid of how his own story might turn out when Théoden refuses to allow him to journey to Minas Tirith with the Riders of Rohan: “I would not have it said of me in song only that I was always left behind!” (804). Similarly, Sam – of all characters the most preoccupied with stories and storytelling – realises that by deciding to travel onwards he and Frodo are continuing to write their own story. For, he says, the heroes in songs “had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on” (711). Always keeping in mind the stories of his youth, Sam constantly thinks of his own actions in terms of whether or not they are worthy of song, musing: “Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We’re in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or
read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: ‘Let’s hear about Frodo and the Ring!’” (712).

Other characters besides hobbits are aware of this connection between travel and stories as well. Fangorn, for instance, reminds Merry and Pippin that it is “likely enough that we are going to our doom: the last march of the Ents. But if we stayed at home and did nothing, doom would find us anyway, sooner or later. … Now at least the last march of the Ents may be worth a song” (LOTR 486). By finally coming out of their long stasis, travelling away from home against long habit, both hobbits and Ents are ensuring their appearance – or, in the Ents’ case, reappearance – into the songs and tales of their time. Thus, all travelling characters become authors in themselves, in likeness of Tolkien, their creator.

The periods of rest and respite from travelling, on the other hand, are used for the (re)telling of these tales. It has been suggested by Shippey that The Lord of the Rings is not so much a travel story as it is a series of comfortable retreats, seeing that “Frodo has to be dug out of no less than five ‘Homely Houses’ before his quest is properly launched” and that “there is a sense that the zest of the story goes not into the dangers but the recoveries” (Road to Middle-earth 79; see also Shippey, Author of the Century 65). He even compares Frodo’s slow start as a traveller to Tolkien’s slow start as a writer: “It seems likely that … Tolkien found the transit from familiar Shire to archaic Wilderland an inhibiting one” (Road to Middle-earth 80). Even so, this does not detract from the centrality of the theme of travel, as more than anything, these safe havens offer time and breathing space to recount traveller’s tales. Before Bilbo
sets out on his homeward journey to The Shire in *The Hobbit*, the narrator remarks that “[t]hat, however, was a little delayed, so in the meantime I will tell something of events” (349). This sentence pretty much sums up the function of such moments of repose between different stages of a journey, as do Gandalf’s words to Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli in Fangorn Forest after their superhuman feat of running: “Now sit by me and tell me the tale of your journey” (*LOTR* 496). Befittingly, the primary function and activity of Rivendell, the Last Homely House and paradigm of all safe havens, seems to be the telling of tales and singing of songs – so that, in Bilbo’s case, “[w]hen the tale of their journeyings was told, there were other tales, and yet more tales, tales of long ago, and tales of new things, and tales of no time at all” (*Hobbit* 357).

Moreover, this act of telling and listening to tales again constitutes a kind of travelling, in the same way that Tolkien saw both himself and his readers as travellers into an unknown world. Of Tom Bombadil, for example, who spends an entire day telling the hobbits all kinds of stories, it is said that he “wandered into strange regions beyond their memory and beyond their waking thought, into times when the world was wider, and the seas flowed straight to the western Shore” (*LOTR* 131). And just like the dwarves’ song already transported Bilbo to the Lonely Mountain while he was still safely in his comfortable hobbit hole, so Frodo has a similar experience in the Hall of Fire in Rivendell: “Almost it seemed that the words took shape, and visions of far lands and bright things that he had never yet imagined opened out before him” (*LOTR* 233).
The idea that all stories stem from a decision to travel away from the familiar and that travellers are therefore at the same time authors or (sub-)creators can also be found in *The Silmarillion*. The first book of this mythopoeic work, “Ainulindalë”, recounts how the fallen Vala Melkor “had gone often alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame” and that “being alone he had begun to conceive thoughts of his own unlike those of his brethren” (4). This ability for independent thought arising from his solitary travels enables Melkor to change the music of Ilúvatar and thus the story of Eä, introducing discord into harmony and, by doing so, bringing evil into the world. In a way, therefore, it can be argued that the beginning of travel – Melkor’s journeys into the unknown – at the same time marks the beginning of all stories, as Tolkien notes that “of bliss and glad life there is little to be said, before it ends” (*Silmarillion* 104) and that “things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable, palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and take a deal of telling anyway” (*Hobbit* 93). Melkor’s travels into the void, therefore, bringing an end to a kind of paradisiacal state of stasis and bliss, cannot be regarded as a wholly negative development by Tolkien the quintessential storyteller. As such, they are reminiscent of the notion of the fortunate fall: since for Tolkien “[t]here cannot be any ‘story’ without a fall – all stories are ultimately about the fall” (*Letters* 147), Melkor’s fall only adds to the glory of Ilúvatar’s creation and enriches it by introducing stories into the world. Corroborating this idea, Tolkien has Ilúvatar remark that “no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor
can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined” (*Silmarillion* 5-6).

The same is true for the banishment of the Noldor from Valinor, marking the moment “their ‘history’” becomes “storial” (*Letters* 147). Fëanor, the cause and leader of this exile as well as another one of those independent and creative minds who “travelled far and wide upon the confines of Valinor, going even to the borders of the Dark and the cold shores of the Outer Sea, seeking the unknown” (*Silmarillion* 62), departs for Middle-earth with the following words: “I say that we will go on, and this doom I add: the deeds that we shall do shall be the matter of song until the last days of Arda” (*Silmarillion* 95). And indeed, of the Elves who choose to remain in Valinor nothing is ever heard again except for a brief mention of their voyage to Middle-earth to aid in the defeat of Melkor. Similarly, the Elves who never set out on the westward journey towards Valinor in the first place do not come into any of the stories of *The Silmarillion*. As in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is those who journey who write the songs and stories; or, in the words of Bridgwater, “[t]he history of the Elves in Middle-earth begins with an invitation to a journey” (20). It is only fitting, therefore, that *The Silmarillion* closes with the last voyage of the Elves returning to Valinor, demonstrating both in word and deed that now their wandering days are over “an end was come for the Eldar of story and of song” (366).

Bridgwater’s remark that the “history” of the Elves begins with a journey is a reminder, finally, of the close relationship between story and history in Tolkien’s
works, thus in a way allowing us to apply many of the above observations also to history rather than story. Tolkien’s views regarding the link between history and story, between creation and sub-creation, have already been explained in the introduction, but can be somewhat expanded upon here in light of his mythology. In *The Silmarillion* Tolkien refers to time or history as “the unfolding of the story of the world” (338), and as early as *The Book of Lost Tales* Ilúvatar tells the Ainur: “The story that I have laid before you, and that great region of beauty that I have described unto you as the place where all that history might be unfolded and enacted, is related only as it were in outline” (*BOLT I* 53). Moreover, in a letter to Michael Straight Tolkien explains that “the One retains all ultimate authority, and (or so it seems as viewed in serial time) reserves the right to intrude the finger of God into the story”, and further that “Elves and Men were the first of these intrusions, made indeed while the ‘story’ was still only a story and not ‘realized’” (*Letters* 235-6). From these various statements the idea seems to emerge that history is a special kind of story, namely one that has been “enacted” or “realized” in time, but still a story all the same. It is this subcategory of story called history – and its relation to travel – that the next chapter is concerned with.
Chapter 2

Travelling through Space and Time: The Conflation of History and Geography

If there is one fundamental human concept that is inextricably intertwined with the concept of space – both conceptually and linguistically speaking – it is time. “The experience of time”, according to Lakoff and Johnson, “is a natural kind of experience that is understood almost entirely in metaphorical terms” (Metaphors 118). By far the most important of these metaphors is that of space, which is almost invariably used to express time in our language. Thus, for example, “the use of spatial words like in and at for time expressions (e.g., in an hour, at ten o’clock) makes sense given that TIME is metaphorically conceptualized in terms of SPACE” (Metaphors 135; small caps are used in this context to indicate concepts and conceptual metaphors). Moreover, in their 1999 book Philosophy in the Flesh Lakoff and Johnson even dedicate an entire chapter to a close examination of the conceptualisation of time, finding that “[v]ery little of our understanding of time is purely temporal. Most of our understanding of time is a metaphorical version of our understanding of motion in space” (139).

This tendency to think and write of time in terms of space and movement in space did not escape Tolkien, as becomes clear from his remarks in an unpublished and unfinished essay titled “Elvish time”. In this note he already voices an
observation later expressed by the American linguist Charles Fillmore (and cited by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*) that “English appears to have two contradictory organizations of time. In the first, the future is in front and the past is behind … In the second, the future is behind and the past is in front” (*Metaphors* 41).

Or, in Tolkien’s own words:

Our language is confused using *after* or *before* both (in certain circumstances) of the *future*. We sometimes think and speak of the future as what lies before us, we look ahead, are provident, forward-looking, yet our ancestors preceded us and are our fore-fathers; and any event in time is *before* one that is later. We speak as if events and a succession of human lives were an endless column moving forward into the unknown, and those born later are behind us, will *follow* us; yet also as if though facing the future we were walking backwards, and our children and heirs (*posterity!*!) were ahead of us and will in each generation go further forwards into the future than we. ... As far as a single experiencing mind goes, it seems a most natural transference of spatial to linear language to say that the past is *behind* it and that it *advances* forwards into the future, that later events are *before* or in *front* of earlier ones. At the point where the individual ceases the survivors go on further go ahead of him. All living creatures are in one mass or column marching on, and falling out individually while others go on. Those who do so are *left behind*. Our ancestors
who fell out earlier are further behind, behind us forever. (qtd. in Flieger, Question of Time 69)

Even while trying to sort out the confusion caused by the human tendency to use expressions of space to denote time, Tolkien speaks of movement in time as a column moving forwards in space or as individuals walking along a line (Flieger, Question of Time 70). Given this inclination to think of time in terms of movement in space, it is no surprise that when in 1936-37 Tolkien for the first time tried his skills at writing a time travel story, his unfinished The Lost Road, he chose to phrase Alboin’s “desire to go back” as a desire to “walk in Time, perhaps, as men walk on long roads” (Lost Road 45). Not only did Tolkien make extensive use of this particular metaphor, therefore, but he was at the same time very much aware of using it. Characteristically, this linguistic realisation is reflected in his fiction, where a journey through space can often also be read as movement in time. Thus, Tolkien invests the metaphor of time or history (or the unfolding thereof) as a journey with reality just as he did with the metaphor of storytelling as a journey: just as forward travel can be read as progress in story, so can it be read as progress in history.

A first indication of a definite link between movement in space and movement in time can be found in The Lord of the Rings, even in the motif of the road that runs as a red thread through the narrative. “Roads and paths (and waterways)”, Hammond and Scull point out, are a recurrent feature in all of Tolkien’s art, whether written or pictorial (96). The song “The Road goes ever on and on”, for example, a variation of
which was already sung by Bilbo at the end of *The Hobbit* (359), appears in *The Lord of the Rings* on three different occasions and in three different versions. It is first sung by Bilbo leaving Bag End and later taken up by Frodo on his journey to Crickhollow, with only the substitution of “eager” for “weary” feet (see left-hand version below). The third variation (printed on the right) is sung by Bilbo on the occasion of Frodo’s returning to Rivendell near the end of the tale:

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager [weary] feet,
Until it joins some larger way[,] 
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.

(LOTR 35, 73)

In this way the three songs frame the story and show in chronological order all the different stages travellers must go through: eagerness, weariness, and, at the end of the journey, rest. In addition to the literal interpretation, of course, the songs can also be read on a metaphorical level. Shippey provides the following interpretation of “the Road”:
The most obvious thought is that if the “lighted inn” means death, then “the Road” must mean life. It need not be an individual life, since in Bilbo’s second version others can take it up and follow it in their turn; however in Frodo’s and Bilbo’s first version the image of the traveller pursuing the Road looks very like a symbol of the individual pursuing his moment of consciousness down the unknown road which is everyone’s future life, to an end which no one can predict. (Road to Middle-earth 141; see also Shippey, Author of the Century 190)

According to this interpretation, the road that stretches out ahead refers to the future, and so the road can also be read as a metaphor for time. To travel down the road is to live, to turn your back on the road is to visit the “lighted inn” is to die, but the road itself signifies time, which goes ever on and on – even when life has ended. This seems to be corroborated by Sam’s remarks after tracing the story of the Silmarils from Beren to Eärendil:

And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We’ve got – you’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?’ ‘No, they never end as tales,’ said Frodo. ‘But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later – or sooner.’ (LOTR 712)
The tales which featured Beren and Eärendil – incidentally two of the most far-travelled characters of *The Silmarillion*, the latter’s travels even literally signifying the passing of time as he journeys through the sky as a star – are still “going on” just as the road “goes ever on and on”, even though other travellers have now taken up the road that Beren and Eärendil left behind. In the context of Sam and Frodo’s world and Tolkien’s beliefs, moreover, one could easily substitute “tale” for “history”, and thus we arrive at the same conclusion as before.

A final hint that the road can be read as a metaphor for time is Bilbo’s comparison of it to a river – another common variation of the “Moving Time metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy* 144). After Frodo sings the “Road” song while travelling the Shire, he mentions that it reminds him of Bilbo:

> He used often to say there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. “It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,” he used to say. “You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to. (*LOTR* 73-4)

The fact that the road is compared to a “great river” that can sweep you away is interesting because in *The Lord of the Rings*, and especially in relation to Lothlórien, the image of a river is frequently used metaphorically to denote time. Lothlórien is a realm framed by rivers, entered by crossing the Silverlode and exited by means of the
Anduin, and these waters seem to mark a kind of temporal boundary.\(^2\) Upon entering, Frodo feels “that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more” (LOTR 349). Similarly, when steering their boats down the Great River away from Lothlórien – according to the earliest-written version of this episode – the eight companions sense that “they were cast again on the grey never-halting water of time” (Treason of Isengard 284) – a choice of words suggesting simultaneously that “the river is equated with time and that the Company is once again *in* time and *outside* Lórien” (Flieger, Question of Time 94). And indeed, perceiving the phase of the moon, Sam discovers that their stay in this river-bordered realm did not follow the natural laws of time but took up more of it than he can account for, since, Aragorn explains, in Lothlórien “time flowed swiftly by us, as for the Elves” (LOTR 388).

The image of time as a river of flowing water recurs frequently in this context. Legolas says that for Elves “[t]he passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long long stream” (LOTR 388), and Galadriel predicts that if Frodo succeeds in his quest to destroy the Ring “Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away” (365). Already Galadriel seems to Frodo “a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of Time” (373). “For such is the way of it”, according to Legolas: “to find and lose, as it seems to those whose boat is on the running stream” (378) – thus describing life as travelling by boat on the

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\(^2\) This idea of the river as a boundary is reminiscent of the fourteenth-century poem “Pearl”, which Tolkien studied and later translated from the Middle English. The poem presents a dream vision of a father who finds himself separated from his deceased daughter in paradise by a river he cannot cross. See also Shippey, Road to Middle-earth 135-6; Author of the Century 196-99.
“running stream” of time and at the same time, by grace of Bilbo’s comparison of the road to a river, linking it to a journey down the road that “goes ever on and on”.

As an aside, this idea of a boat travelling on the waters of time is reminiscent of an early sketch by Tolkien in which the world “is presented as a huge ‘Viking’ ship, with mast arising from the highest point of the Great Lands, single sail on which are the Sun and Moon, sailropes fastened to Taniquetil and to a great mountain in the extreme East, and curved prow” (BOLT I 83; see figure 1 below). In his commentary, Christopher Tolkien admits himself unable to provide an explanation for what he calls “the baffling question of the representation of the world as a ship”, being able to link it to only one early passage where the sea god Ulmo says that “many secret things are there beneath the Earth’s dark keel” and finding the explanation of it as a “jeu d’esprit ... without deeper significance” both

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Figure 1: Tolkien’s I Vene Kemen or world ship (From: BOLT I 84)
“uncharacteristic and unlikely” (BOLT I 86-7). Yet the idea of the world as a ship is perhaps not so “baffling” when the water on which this ship travels can be read as time, and the ship’s physical movement through space as a temporal journey through history.

Whereas so far this discussion has remained mainly on the metaphorical level even within the narrative – with some forays into physical “reality” such as the Great River as a literal river of time and Tolkien’s early ship-shaped conception of the world – it is also possible to read the physical journeys in Tolkien’s works as journeys in time. Critics have already recognised this possibility in the sense that the theme of travel not only allows Tolkien to showcase the geography of the world he has composed but at the same time invites a dive into the history of the land. In fashioning Middle-earth, according to Sabo, Tolkien created “a culturized, a historicized geography” that is “punctuated with the material leavings of more ancient inhabitants, of lost and ruined kingdoms” (92). For this reason it is possible to map travellers’ movement through time as well as space in terms of how far a place or region reaches back in history. This is precisely what Honegger does in his article on the symbolism of place and space in The Lord of the Rings, providing a bar chart which shows the relative age of several locations along a horizontal “space axis” and a vertical “time axis” (324; see figure 2 below). As early as 1988, moreover, MacIntyre mapped Bilbo’s journey in The Hobbit in a similar way (although she uses words rather than graphs), prompted by her observation that when Bilbo “rides eastward
from the Shire, against the sun and the time the sun measures, he rides to meet in his own day what is for him the imaginary past, the past of “once upon a time” (13).

This last remark about riding east “against the time the sun measures”, though seemingly made in passing, is particularly interesting as it suggests a closer relationship between history and geography – between space and time – than that of relic and memory, of continued existence through the ages. As has already been mentioned in relation to Lakoff and Johnson, the “time as space” metaphor is only the linguistic manifestation of a much deeper conceptual link between the two, and indeed there exists an ancient human tradition of conflating geography and history. It is an old idea that the East or Orient, the direction from which the sun rises in the morning, is a place of new beginnings – an association both exemplified in and explaining the fact that the “ancient translations of the Bible take the words a principio (in the beginning) to mean ad orientem (in the East)” (Delumeau 44). As a
result, medieval Christians positioned the Garden of Eden in the far east, thus rendering this direction “the place of origin not only for the sun but also for humanity itself” (Akbari 45). Moreover, Edson explains, the “simultaneous creation of time and space as described in Genesis” caused Christians to conceive “of the world as a temporal phenomenon”, and so human history after the fall and the expulsion from Eden was often imagined as a westward (and non-cyclical) movement away from Paradise, “both in terms of time and space” (15). In the east or the beginning, it was believed, perfection was the norm, but the further one moved westward and forward in time, the more noticeable became the decline from this initial standard. What is more, this also worked the other way around: the further one travelled towards the east the closer one came to the innocence of the past. For “while the earthly paradise was now barred, there existed happy, wonder-filled lands, more or less close to paradise” both in geography and character (Delumeau 39).

In his creation story as handed down in *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien also seems to tap into some of these ideas. To begin with, Elves, Men, and Dwarves all have their origins in the east, where their respective histories begin. First of all races, the Elves “rose from the sleep of Ilúvatar” by “the starlit mere of Cuiviénen”, of which “it is said among the Elves that it lay far off in the east of Middle-earth” (45). Similarly, Men or “the Younger Children of Ilúvatar awoke in the land of Hildórien in the eastward regions of Middle-earth” (115), and while the precise location of the first awakening of the Dwarves is not mentioned in any detail, the fact that “[f]ar to the
east were the most ancient dwellings of the Naugrim” (99) suggests eastern origins for this people too. This conjecture is only reinforced, moreover, by their manner of map-drawing: with regard to Thror’s Map in *The Hobbit* Tolkien remarks that “on the Map the compass points are marked in runes, with East at the top, as usual in dwarf-maps” (*Hobbit* 50). It is more than likely that Dwarves’ preference for the East stems from their having their roots there, beginning their journey through history – alongside Elves and Men – in the east.

The natural direction of movement in Tolkien’s imaginary world, moreover, seems to be westward with the sun. The inclination of the Elves to travel towards their “home” in the west is well-known to anyone familiar with *The Lord of the Rings* and the typically Elvish “sea-longing” awakened in Legolas by the crying of the gulls (*LOTR* 873). More than just a wish to re-join long-lost kin, however, this westward yearning is a symptom of a much deeper instinct innate to both Elves and Men, who seem to be propelled towards the west by their very nature. *The Silmarillion* describes how the Elves’ “hearts were turned towards the West” and how many of them, though hesitant at first, eventually follow the Vala Oromë from their birthplace in the east on a long westward march with the ultimate destination of Valinor (51). The same goes for the race of Men, of whom it is said that their “wandering feet … were ever set westward in those days” (183) and that “ever after the ruin [of Westernesse] the hearts of the Dúnedain were still set westwards” (337) – a ruin which was, moreover, the direct result of their attempt to travel into the uttermost West even against the will of the Valar.
One way of interpreting this geographical movement as a temporal one is to read the sea separating Middle-earth from the Undying Lands of Valinor as a boundary between the transient and the eternal, to cross which is to move from one state of being to the other. This is what Wilcox does when she describes the sea as “the bridge between [the Elves’] mortal existence and eternal existence” and as “a spatial symbol of the division between mortality and immortality” (138, 141) – reminiscent of the rivers that have to be crossed in order to reach Lothlórien. In the same vein, the Númenóreans also confuse geography with immortality when in hopes of buying themselves “more time” they “[break] the Ban of the Valar, and [sail] into forbidden seas, going up with war against the Deathless, to wrest from them everlasting life within the Circles of the World” (Letters 154; Silmarillion 333). Regardless of whether or not the Númenóreans were correct in their assumption, geography is equated with immortality in this episode in the sense that Men were never meant to sail so far westward just as it is not their destiny to be immortal (see also chapter 3). Thus, the westward longing of both Elves and Men can in part be explained by the presence of the immortal Valar in the West, but this is certainly not the whole story: there must be other powers at work as well, for even the Valar show themselves subject to the general westward pull as they travel to Valinor after their dwelling on Middle-earth has been destroyed (Silmarillion 30).

A solid indication that the geographical distance represented by the sea is not just a “spatial symbol of the division between mortality and immortality” but also constitutes actual distance in time is provided by those means of long-distance
communication called Palantiri. Elvish for “those that watch from afar”, these seeing stones “were gifts of the Eldar to Amandil, father of Elendil, for the comfort of the Faithful of Númenor in their dark days, when the Elves might come no longer to that land under the shadow of Sauron” – for they could “see far away even the Tower of Avallónë upon Eressëa, where the Masterstone abode, and yet abides” (Silmarillion 350). The stones’ most remarkable feature, however, is that “those who looked therein might perceive in them things far off, whether in place or in time” (Silmarillion 350; emphasis mine). One would suppose that for the purpose for which the Palantiri were devised – to look upon the land of the Elves in the West – it would suffice to be able to look far in space, but apparently looking far in time is intricately linked to this, and possibly even a prerequisite for looking across such vast geographical distances.

In addition to the dichotomy between the temporal and the eternal, then, spatial distance in Tolkien’s world also signifies distance in time, both at sea and on land, and so to travel through his geography is at the same time to embark on a journey through history. In accordance with Christian views, Tolkien has created a universe where history is a linear (and thus non-cyclical) movement from east to west, and where different stages of the general westward journey mark different stages of historical advancement. For, contrary to the medieval perception of human history and more in keeping with modern ideas, westward movement in Tolkien’s fiction has a positive connotation and seems to be associated with progress – progress not just in time but in learning, technology, skill, art, and even (in the case
of Men) lengthening of lifespan. In *The Silmarillion*, a distinction is made between those Elves who travel to Valinor, the Calaquendi or “Elves of the Light”, and those who never leave Middle-earth, the Moriquendi or “Elves of the Darkness” (51). This division between the enlightened and those who remain in the dark, while technically based on the light of the Trees of Valinor, is reminiscent of the Western tendency to think of light as signifying progress and knowledge and of darkness as a lack thereof – as becomes apparent, for example, in the period epithets “Dark Ages” and “Enlightenment”. However, it is not just the crossing of water or the sea that signals progress and the passing of time, but the crossing of space in general. Since the Calaquendi have reached the utmost West it is only natural that their accomplishments as elaborately described in *The Silmarillion* should remain unrivalled, but it is also telling that of all Elves still dwelling in Middle-earth those who come closest to vying for the title are the ones who have travelled furthest westward. A case in point is Thingol, who has almost completed his journey to the western shores when he meets Melian and decides to stay behind and found his own great kingdom on Middle-earth.

Similarly, of the Men who travel westward (while still remaining on Middle-earth) it is said that the “years of the Edain were lengthened, according to the reckoning of Men, after their coming to Beleriand” and that they “increased in wisdom and skill, until they far surpassed all others of Mankind, who dwelt still east of the mountains” (*Silmarillion* 173). This division between east and west is even further widened as the Dúnedain travel westward even to the island of Westernesse.
The conflation of space and time in this westward movement is nicely illustrated in the following passage:

when [Felagund] questioned him concerning the arising of Men and their journeys, Bëor would say little; and indeed he knew little, for the fathers of his people had told few tales of their past and a silence had fallen upon their memory. “A darkness lies behind us,” Bëor said; “and we have turned our backs upon it, and we do not desire to return thither even in thought. Westwards our hearts have been turned, and we believe that there we shall find Light.” (Silmarillion 164)

Here, “behind us” can refer to both time and space, and “a darkness” both to their past – of which they have little memory – or to the more literal darkness of a land under the rule of Melkor. Since their first awakening in the east, Men (and Elves) have travelled westward to some extent or other, and the distance they have traversed in space seems to be directly proportional to how far they have progressed in time or, to put it differently, what “stage” they have reached in linear history.

While westward movement in space can thus at the same time be read as forward movement in time, turning away from the west to travel eastwards seems to be associated with travelling backwards in time, or at least against the natural flow of progress. The lands in the far east of Middle-earth are described as “unharvested lands, wild and lawless” (Silmarillion 310), but even when the Númenóreans sail east
to visit the western shores of Middle-earth they find themselves revered as gods by fellow Men whom they have left far behind – both in terms of geography and advancement (315). Moreover, just as westward movement is usually accompanied by progress, so eastward movement generally causes a people to regress: when the Númenóreans are forced to dwell in Middle-earth again “their lore and craft was but an echo” of that of Westernesse (336), and before departing eastward from Valinor the Noldor are warned that in Middle-earth they “shall wane, and become as shadows of regret before the younger race that cometh after” (95). This last is also illustrated in *The Lord of the Rings*. In a conversation between Galadriel and Frodo, the Lady of Lórien informs the Ring-bearer that if his quest is successful “Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave” (*LOTR* 365). That is, they must go westward with the flow of time or else remain in Middle-earth and slowly wane and assimilate to the historical stage of development consistent with the place where they have taken up their abode. So far, the Elven Rings have been able to “ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world” (*Silmarillion* 345), but any real progress is not possible in Middle-earth for those Elves who choose to remain stationary in defiance of the westward stream of time.
Chapter 3

Staying Home or Travelling: Moral Implications

Having now established the close connection in Tolkien’s works between travelling and storytelling on the one hand and travelling and time on the other, this chapter will take a closer look at the implications this realisation has for the interpretation of decisions to travel or stay at home. In her article “Staying Home and Travelling: Stasis Versus Movement in Tolkien’s Mythos”, Bridgwater already briefly touches upon this topic, eventually reaching the conclusion that

Tolkien does not come down on the side of staying or the side of going, as being right or wrong in any absolute way. Our look at examples of each choice indicates a different location of value. What Treebeard, Smith, Frodo and Bilbo, and – eventually – Niggle have in common is their willingness to embrace their fates, and this is evidenced in the quality of their staying or their going. What Boromir, Ar-Pharazôn, the voyager of “The Sea Bell,” Thingol and Fëanor have in common is the will to control, and the failure to understand the impossibility of maintaining that control. (37)

This conclusion, while certainly a useful and valid contribution to the field of Tolkien criticism in relation to travel, is mainly based on an analysis of the decisions to stay
or go of several individual characters and how these seem to be judged within the universe of Tolkien’s prose – therefore leaving lots of room for further exploration with regard to the movement or stasis of peoples as a whole, another important factor to take into account. Moreover, reading forward travel as progress both in story and in history opens up a whole new range of possibilities of interpreting decisions to stay or go, as well as adds to Bridgwater’s finding that the misguided characters are characterised by their unwillingness “to embrace their fates”. For, when taking into account the close link between travel, story, and history, a reluctance to travel or a decision to travel in the wrong direction becomes a resistance of natural progress and therefore, ultimately, a denial of God’s plan.

A good starting point to look for Tolkien’s ideas concerning stasis and movement are his letters, in which he describes hobbits, Elves, and Gondorians – all of them relatively stationary peoples at the time of the events of The Lord of the Rings – with the negative epithet of “embalmers” (Letters 197). In this 1954 letter to Naomi Mitchison Tolkien emphasises that “hobbits are not a Utopian vision, or recommended as an ideal in their own or any age” and that “the Elves are not wholly good or in the right. Not so much because they had flirted with Sauron; as because with or without his assistance they were ‘embalmers’” (Letters 197). Moreover, “[i]n their way the Men of Gondor were similar: a withering people whose only ‘hallows’ were their tombs” (Letters 197). With respect to the Elves, further explanation is offered in a letter of later date to Michael Straight:
Mere change as such is not represented as “evil”: it is the unfolding of the story and to refuse this is of course against the design of God. But the Elvish weakness is in these terms naturally to regret the past, and to become unwilling to face change: as if a man were to hate a very long book still going on, and wished to settle down in a favourite chapter. Hence they fell in a measure to Sauron’s deceits: they desired some ‘power’ over things as they are (which is quite distinct from art), to make their particular will to preservation effective: to arrest change, and keep things always fresh and fair. (Letters 236)

This passage sees the convergence of many different ideas: Tolkien’s close mental connection between story and history, his conception of history as “the unfolding of the story” written by God, and the idea that to refuse change and therefore historical progress – to refuse to read on, as it were – is to go “against the design of God” the author. Even though the Elves use their rings to preserve the good of the past, the halting of time still constitutes an act of defiance in the face of fate and should therefore be considered wrong. Thus, the Elves’ initial refusal in The Lord of the Rings to travel onwards with time towards the west becomes both physical symptom and metaphorical embodiment of their wrongful inclination towards stasis and general refusal of progress.

The Elves’ reluctance to face the progression of time can also be found in The Silmarillion, where the hesitance of Elves on their westward march stands in stark contrast with the eagerness of Men. “Long” the Elves “dwelt in their first home by
the water under stars” (45), and it is not until Oromë finds them and conveys the
summons of the Valar to journey westward that the idea of travelling even enters
their heads. Moreover, “the Elves were at first unwilling to hearken to the summons”
(49), and even after Ingwê, Finwê, and Elwê come back from their exploratory trip to
Valinor and strongly advise their kinsmen to venture upon the westward journey,
“many refused the summons, preferring the starlight and the wide spaces of Middle-
earth to the rumour of the Trees” (50). And still this is not the end of their tarrying:
not only do many of the Elves halt or turn aside at some point of the voyage or other,
but even those that do reach the journey’s end are in need of constant urging and
never move westward of their own accord:

Nor did the Eldar desire to hasten, for they were filled with wonder at all that
they saw, and by many lands and rivers they wished to abide; and though all
were yet willing to wander, many feared rather their journey’s end than
hoped for it. Therefore whenever Oromë departed, having at times other
matters to heed, they halted and went forward no more, until he returned to
guide them. (51)

This extreme reluctance even in the face of insistent urging of the higher powers
stands in shrill contrast to Men, whose hearts were instantly and spontaneously
turned towards the west from the moment they woke up. For “the opening eyes of
Men were turned towards it, and their feet as they wandered over the Earth for the
most part strayed that way” (115). Unlike the Elves, they do not need outside interference of the Valar to lead them westward, and in the case of the Númenóreans they even go west against the will of the Valar.

Of course, any discussion about fate and time in Tolkien’s fiction – and especially with regard to the difference between Elves and Men – must necessarily lead to the question of mortality versus immortality. Whereas Elves are bound to the world and can never truly die or leave it until the end of time itself, Men’s destiny is to die and depart prematurely from the world for an unknown existence elsewhere. In one sense, this difference in destiny regarding the amount of time they spend on earth is mirrored by Elves’ and Men’s respective resisting and hastening of their journey towards the west. *The Silmarillion* describes how Ilúvatar, granting Men the “gift” of death, “willed that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein” (35). Thus the restless wandering of Men is linked to their mortality, rendering their eager westward movement indeed a sign of the quick passing of time for them. Moreover, even though it is never explicitly stated where Men go after they die, it seems likely that they are allowed to be with Ilúvatar where Elves are not – leaving Men by far the most lucky or superior race and adding a negative taste to the dawdling of the Elves.

More than a sign of the races’ respective destinies, however, the decisions made by Elves and Men when it comes to the pace and direction in which they travel can also be interpreted as indications of their attitudes towards these destinies – whether immanent or transcendent. “The real theme for me”, Tolkien writes in
response to a reader’s question about the meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*, “is about something much more permanent and difficult [than war]: Death and Immortality: the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race ‘doomed’ to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts of a race ‘doomed’ not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete” (*Letters* 246). Emphasising the negative sides of both states of existence, Tolkien here seems to imply that his fiction is not just about death and immortality but about negotiating the desire for what one cannot have and accepting the hand dealt by fate: whereas Men become jealous of Elves’ eternal life and long for more time to spend on their beloved earth, the Elves eventually grow weary with the world and in turn envy Men’s chance to leave it. Thus, for example, it is a sign of their wish for mortality that the Elves linger in Middle-earth rather than depart westward for the Undying Lands of Valinor – as they should.

Since the Elves’ destiny is to keep travelling westward down the path of history until they reach the end of the world – literally so – it is an even greater defiance of God’s plan for the Elves to turn towards the east instead. In *Splintered Light* Flieger describes the east as a direction of evil, and explains this in terms of light and darkness:

in going toward the east of their world, the elves are going against the light, a movement which almost immediately assumes metaphorical dimension. What Tolkien is using here is commonly called the widdershins impulse, which in
folk belief is traditionally negative, bringing bad luck. … To go “widdershins” is to go “in a direction opposite to the course of the sun.” (111-2)

Without detracting from this explanation for the negative character of eastward travel, however, it is possible to add another dimension to it. After all, eastward movement not only goes against the light of the sun but also against the time this light measures – that is, expressly against the continuation of history and therefore against the design of God.

It can come as no surprise, therefore, that eastward movement in The Silmarillion seems to be a sign of the Elves’ moral degradation, as exemplified by the fall of the Noldor. The Noldor’s eastward travels away from Valinor are spawned by Fëanor’s wish to retrieve the Silmarils from Melkor and thus to follow in his evil footsteps – both literally and metaphorically, for in order to be able to follow Melkor on his travels into the east the Noldor first need to stoop to his level of depravity and steal the White Ships of the Teleri. As Flieger points out, this act is a “re-enacting [of] Melkor’s theft of the Silmarils” because their ships are to the Teleri “as are the gems of the Noldor: the work of our hearts, whose like we shall not make again” (Splintered Light 105; Silmarillion 93). To emphasise the immensity of the Noldor’s wrong in taking the Teleri’s ships, moreover, this act is accompanied by the First Kinslaying: while trying to stop the Noldor from stealing their ships, many of the Teleri’s mariners “were wickedly slain” (Silmarillion 93). After this there is no returning for the Noldor on their eastward road, and they are told that “the Valar will fence
Valinor against you, and shut you out, so that not even the echo of your lamentation shall pass over the mountains” (*Silmarillion* 94).

Unlike the Elves, Men are not allowed to travel all the way to Valinor and are doomed to “dwell only a short space in the world alive” (*Silmarillion* 36). A metaphor for time on the surface, “a short space” in this context can at the same time be interpreted literally to refer to geography, since Men cannot travel as far westward as Elves and are forced to stop journeying before they reach the end of the world. Whereas the Elves find it difficult to come to terms with their immortality and therefore delay their westward travels or even turn back towards the east, Men’s weakness is to yearn for eternal life and therefore to travel too far into the west, not knowing when (or where) to stop. Accordingly, the fall of the Númenóreans is caused by their resistance of the hand dealt to them by the higher powers both in terms of their mortality and the Ban of the Valar. Discussing the downfall of Númenor in a draft letter to Robert Murray, Tolkien writes:

the view of the myth is that Death – the mere shortness of human life-span – is not a punishment for the Fall, but a biologically (and therefore also spiritually, since body and spirit are integrated) inherent part of Man’s nature. The attempt to escape it is wicked because ‘unnatural’, and silly because Death in that sense is the Gift of God (envied by the Elves), release from the weariness of Time. Death, in the penal sense, is viewed as a change in attitude to it: fear,
reluctance. A good Númenórean died of free will when he felt it to be time to do so. (Letters 205)

In the universe of Tolkien’s fiction, therefore, it is a sign of goodness to accept one’s fate rather than to fight it, and to die voluntarily when the right moment has arrived. And thus, just as eastward travel back to the mortal shores of Middle-earth is a sign of defiance in the case of the Noldor, so it is a sign of humility and faith in the case of the few good Men who survive the sinking of Númenor.

Earlier in this chapter, in relation to Tolkien’s comparison of the Elves’ unwillingness “to face change” to a wish “to settle down in a favourite chapter” of a very long book, the refusal of historical progress was called a refusal to “read on”. Given the fact that in Tolkien’s eyes there is in essence no fundamental difference between the story of God (creation) and the stories of human beings (sub-creation) – both containing the same kind of truth because humans were created in the image of their maker – this must mean that a literal refusal to “read on” or a dismissal of stories also is a denial of God’s creation. It is here where the stasis of such “embalmers” as hobbits and Gondorians comes back, for in The Lord of the Rings – in accordance with the close connection between travelling and storytelling – it becomes clear that an end to travelling also means an end to storytelling and is therefore generally viewed as a negative development within the temporal boundaries of Eä.
At the time of the events of *The Lord of the Rings* there are several peoples who are described as having hardly any contact with the outside world. The most well-known of these are of course hobbits, who nearly unanimously consider adventures “[n]asty disturbing uncomfortable things” that “[m]ake you late for dinner” (*Hobbit* 32). For this reason, “maps made in the Shire showed mostly white spaces beyond its borders” (*LOTR* 43). The example of the hobbits demonstrates that to stop travelling in the physical world is to stop travelling in terms of stories as well, in the sense that stories about what lies beyond the borders of the Shire are no longer told among adults and at any rate are no longer believed in. A taste of the hobbits’ general attitude to stories is provided by Ted Sandyman during his conversation with Sam Gamgee in *The Green Dragon*:

‘Queer things you do hear these days, to be sure,’ said Sam.

‘Ah,’ said Ted, ‘you do, if you listen. But I can hear fireside-tales and children’s stories at home, if I want to.’

‘No doubt you can,’ retorted Sam, ‘and I daresay there’s more truth in some of them than you reckon. Who invented the stories anyway? Take dragons now.’

‘No thank ‘ee,’ said Ted, ‘I won’t. I heard tell of them when I was a youngster, but there’s no call to believe in them now. There’s only one Dragon in Bywater, and that’s Green,’ he said, getting a general laugh. (*LOTR* 44)
Ted, much like those of Tolkien’s contemporaries whom he addresses in “On Fairy- Stories” and “Mythopoeia”, dismisses fairy-tales as children’s stories without any truth to them, thus representing all hobbits that have stopped travelling to Faërie in the literal and the metaphorical sense alike. In light of Tolkien’s views on fairy-tales, it can be no coincidence therefore that Ted is later shown to be among the book’s evil characters in his delight of industrialisation, happy to be “cleaning wheels” in a big mill “full ‘o wheels and outlandish contraptions” (LOTR 1013). Of course, not all home-loving hobbits are evil, but as has been mentioned before, they are also “not a Utopian vision, or recommended as an ideal in their own or any age” (Tolkien, Letters 197). One of Tolkien’s reasons for this assertion could well be the hobbits’ naiveté in so casually dismissing the importance of stories.

Sam, on the other hand, comes closer to expressing Tolkien’s own views that all stories convey meaning, and throughout his travels he is constantly shown to be correct in what others regard as his absurd beliefs. An important part of the reason Sam comes out of stasis and sets out on his journey is to see in real life those things that so far he has only encountered in stories, and Tolkien makes a point of granting all his wishes: from meeting the Elves to seeing the oliphaunt from a children’s rhyme – stemming from “the old days” when “hobbits used to go on their travels now and again” (LOTR 647) – materialise in Ithilien. Thus Sam’s choice to travel away from home is linked to his belief in stories and, ultimately, a sign of his good character. In his letters Tolkien even calls Sam “the chief hero” of The Lord of the Rings and is generally very positive about him – writing in a letter to a real-life Sam
Gamgee, “I can only say, for your comfort I hope, that the ‘Sam Gamgee’ of my story is a most heroic character, now widely beloved by many readers, even though his origins are rustic” (Letters 161, 244).

While hobbits are often treated as an exception with regard to their aversion to travel and adventure, in The Lord of the Rings they are in fact not that exceptional at all, and nor is their dismissive treatment of fairy-tales. The events of The Lord of the Rings take place in a time when roads are dangerous, when most people no longer travel for pleasure, and when some have even started to retreat from the world altogether. There are at least two peoples in Middle-earth that can vie with the hobbits in their near-complete seclusion: the Elves of Lothlórien, who “dwell now in the heart of the forest, and do not willingly have dealings with any other folk” (LOTR 343), and the Ents of Fangorn, who rarely concern themselves with the affairs of the world and have not left their forest since they gave up searching for the Entwives. Incidentally, these three peoples – hobbits, Elves of Lórien, Ents – are exactly the ones that Honegger mentions as having a particularly close, almost symbiotic, relationship with their environment; or, as Sam says about the Tree-Elves of Lórien: “Whether they’ve made the land, or the land’s made them, it’s hard to say” (Honegger 325-6; LOTR 360).

It is precisely these three peoples, moreover, that are most commonly mentioned as being merely the stuff of fairy-tales by the Men of Gondor and Rohan, who since they have stopped travelling outside their borders and become only concerned with their own affairs have also stopped believing in stories. As Basney
remarks, “Frodo’s quest” is not only “a birth into knowledge for the hobbits who accompany him”, but “the races who encounter the hobbits” also “find their appearance a challenge to credulity and scepticism” (12). A case in point is the reaction of Éothain: “Halflings! But they are only a little people in old songs and children’s tales out of the North. Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?” (LOTR 434). Similarly, in the tales of Men Galadriel has been reduced to an evil sorceress only half believed in, while the tales that speak of Ents are not even granted the courtesy of half-belief. This becomes clear from the following speech by Boromir, which at the same time alludes to the relationship between stasis and disbelief in stories:

‘Indeed we have heard of Fangorn in Minas Tirith,’ said Boromir. ‘But what I have heard seems to me for the most part old wives’ tales, such as we tell to our children. All that lies north of Rohan is now to us so far away that fancy can wander freely there. Of old Fangorn lay upon the borders of our realm; but it is now many lives of men since any of us visited it, to prove or disprove the legends that have come down from distant years. (LOTR 374)

Using the voice of Celeborn, Tolkien then chides Boromir by saying: “do not despise the lore that has come down from distant years; for oft it may chance that old wives keep in memory word of things that once were needful for the wise to know” (374). In a similar vein and in response to Théoden’s questions concerning the identity of
the Ents, Gandalf asks, “Is it so long since you listened to tales by the fireside? There are children in your land who, out of the twisted threads of story, could pick the answer to your question” (549) – upon which Théoden muses:

Long we have tended our beasts and our fields, built our houses, wrought our tools, or ridden away to help in the wars of Minas Tirith. And that we called the life of Men, the way of the world. We cared little for what lay beyond the borders of our land. Songs we have that tell of these things, but we are forgetting them, teaching them only to children, as a careless custom. And now the songs have come down among us out of strange places, and walk visible under the Sun. (*LOTR* 550)

Having become self-obsessed, caring only for the modern “life of Men” and little for what lies “beyond the borders” of their land, the Rohirrim – much like hobbits and Gondorians – have not only stopped travelling to other worlds but have also stopped listening to stories, thus denying the existence of anything outside their immediate reality – including God or Ilúvatar.
Conclusion

Overall, it can be concluded that the motif of the journey touches the core of Tolkien’s fiction in expressing many of his primary thematic concerns. Stories and storytelling, time and change, death and immortality, God and fate – these are some of the great themes running through Tolkien’s oeuvre, and all of them are linked by that one basic human experience that underlies so much of our conception of the world: movement through space. Added to this list can of course be the fundamental experience of human life itself, a concept that is often expressed metaphorically in terms of a journey and which has already received a lot of critical attention with regard to Tolkien’s works (see introduction). Going beyond this standard interpretation, however, the above discussion has shown that the journey is central to Tolkien’s fiction in various other ways as well and therefore worthy of closer examination.

In light of Lakoff and Johnson’s idea of conceptual metaphor and Tolkien’s habit of using his fiction to express his linguistic views – the former placing spatial movement at the centre of our conceptual system and therefore language, the latter ensuring that language becomes literal reality in Tolkien’s mythology – it is not surprising that the travel motif in Tolkien’s works transcends the standard connotation of life as a journey and has multiple additional meanings as well. As explained in the introduction, physical movement through space is one of the most
basic human experiences, and for this reason the journey seems to be the default metaphor to describe any type of less tangible concept that entails gradual progress from one “point” to the next. One such process is writing or storytelling, and Tolkien’s frequent and consistent use of the journey metaphor when describing this act in his letters and poetics, along with his tendency to write only travel stories, indeed suggests that he conceived of storytelling as a journey and of storytellers as travellers to strange lands – whether they are called Tolkien, Eriol, Ælfwine, or even, in the case of the Red Book of Westmarch, Bilbo or Frodo (chapter 1). Another such abstract concept is the unfolding of time or history, and again Tolkien’s writings provide plenty of evidence to suggest that he primarily thought of this process in terms of a journey (chapter 2). A case in point is the motif of the road running through The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, which joins the image of the river in being a metaphor for time (chapter 2).

What is more, Tolkien not only seems to have conceived of storytelling and the passing of time in terms of travel, but in the context of his fiction he even raised these metaphorical connections to the level of literal reality. In Tolkien’s view, storytelling is an act of sub-creation not fundamentally different from God’s act of creation – humans having been created makers in the image of their maker – and as a result he elevates not only stories to a new level of reality but also the language they consist of (see introduction). This is expressed in the world of Tolkien’s fiction: just as he makes “[d]reams and legends spring to life out of the grass” to prove to sceptics the value and legitimacy of fairy-stories (LOTR 434; chapter 3), so he imbuces
metaphorical language with physical reality. Accordingly, the literal act of travelling through space becomes at the same time an act of composition, as all stories stem from characters’ decisions to travel away from the familiar and are written with every step they take (chapter 1). Similarly, spatial movement is closely connected to temporal movement not only in the sense that to cross the sea is to move between the transitory and the eternal, but also because history is geographically represented as a linear movement from east to west, with different stages of the general westward passage signifying different stages of historical development (chapter 2). Thus, to travel through Tolkien’s geography is at the same time to set out on a journey through history – whether with (westward) or against (eastward) the natural flow of progress (chapter 2). To sum up, therefore, storytelling and history are not only connected by being acts of creation ultimately derived from God, but also – and by grace of this connection, since it makes language and therefore metaphors “spring to life” – by the motif of the journey in Tolkien’s works.

Besides presenting a new and original contribution to the study of the travel motif in literature, therefore, this particular reading of the journey as a metaphor for storytelling and time also allows new insights into Tolkien’s fiction and its main themes. Since for Tolkien both story and history are linked to God and his creation, they are charged with great significance, and so are the journeys that metaphorically represent them. Thus it is possible to interpret peoples’ attitudes towards travelling as indicators of their attitudes towards such central themes as God, fate, and destiny – whether with regard to decisions to travel or stay at home. To stop travelling
altogether is to stop telling stories as well as to stop following the natural flow of history, both of which developments can ultimately be read as a denial of or resistance to the story of God (chapter 3). The same is true for the dawdling and tediously slow westward progress of the immortal Elves, which stands in stark contrast to the great eagerness of mortal Men (chapter 3). A decision to travel in the wrong direction, moreover – to deliberately go against God’s plan or one’s destiny as a mortal or immortal being – constitutes an even greater defiance of the higher powers – so great, in fact, that the two main falls of Elves and Men as described in The Silmarillion were caused by eastward and westward movement, respectively (chapter 3).

Of course, the discussion so far is nowhere near to being an exhaustive study of all cases of travel in Tolkien’s works, for to list all examples would go far beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nor does it claim that there are not also many exceptions to the observations described above, which should be regarded as trends or tendencies rather than absolute rules. Thus, with regard to the respective eastward and westward movements of Elves and Men in The Silmarillion, observing that “[t]wo great tides of movement surge across the landscape”, Flieger remarks: “This pattern is not a smooth one, for Tolkien does not write in terms of simple movements west to east and east to west. There are contrary impulses in both sweeps, eddies and swirls in which the movement swerves, checks itself, or turns back on itself. Nevertheless, the general pattern is constant” (Splintered Light 111). While this statement can immediately and without modification be applied to the above argument concerning
westward and eastward movement, it can also be interpreted more broadly to comprehend all of Tolkien’s writings. For Tolkien never wrote in terms of black and white or simple one-to-one relationships, and the only rule his works seem to obey absolutely is to always present the reader with multiple exceptions and ambiguities. Clyde Kilby even coined a new word to describe this “consistent inconsistency” of Tolkien’s: “contrasistency” (see Padley and Padley 77).

Thus, for example, while this dissertation has primarily concerned itself with the movements and destinies of peoples as a whole – the general pattern, as it were – the fates of individual characters may vary and deviate from this pattern. A case in point is Frodo, whose “doom is to go against this tide and against the westward impulse of men, to go east into the dark” (Flieger, Splintered Light 136). On the other hand, the general tendency to regard travel as good and stasis as bad is perfectly corroborated by the contrast between the two wizards Gandalf (Mithrandir) and Saruman (Curunír), the former of whom “wandered far in the North and West and made never in any land any lasting abode; but Curunír journeyed into the East, and when he returned he dwelt at Orthanc in the Ring of Isengard” (Silmarillion 360). The moment Saruman settles down in Isengard to live there permanently, a choice for stasis seemingly caused by his eastward ventures, at the same time marks the beginning of his turn towards evil and his independent scheming against the will of the Valar – by whom he was sent as an “angelos or messenger” to aid the peoples of Middle-earth in their struggles against Sauron (Letters 237). A final category, lastly – besides exceptions to and illustrations of the general pattern – includes such
seemingly contradictory figures as Tom Bombadil – who, while certainly not an evil or negative character, is called a “moss-gatherer” in juxtaposition to Gandalf the “stone doomed to rolling” (LOTR 996). Yet the example of Bombadil does not violate the general trend if, as Shippey does in another context, “one accepts that Tom is not living – as the Nazgûl and the Barrow-wight are not dead. Unlike even the oldest living creatures he has no date of birth, but seems to have been there since before the Elves awoke, a part of Creation, an exhalation of the world” (Road to Middle-earth 82).

Not a child of Ilúvatar, then, Bombadil may not be subject to the same laws as Elves and Men – just as they do not apply to Dwarves, who were created by the Vala Aulë rather than by Ilúvatar and who after death (according to the Elves) “returned to the earth and the stone of which they were made” (Silmarillion 39).

When it comes to Elves and Men (and hobbits), however, “the general pattern is constant”, although it should be mentioned that even this general pattern contains an inherent ambiguity that is central to Tolkien’s works and worldview. Chapter 1 already referred to the idea of the fortunate fall in relation to the travels of Melkor, which while being responsible for the introduction of evil into the world at the same time mark the beginning of story – a development which Tolkien cannot wholly have condemned, being the defender of storytelling that he was. Similarly, without the fall and accompanying eastward movement of the Noldor there would have been no Silmarillion just as without the fall of the Númenóreans there would have been no Lord of the Rings, and it is only because of their reluctance to travel westward that not
all Elves left Middle-earth for that storyless paradise that is Valinor ages ago that we know anything of their deeds and actions.

It is difficult to believe that Tolkien would have preferred a world without story, and in any case he does not practise what he preaches. For someone who is an advocate of change and who dislikes “embalmers”, Tolkien rather nostalgically turns to the traditions and customs of the past rather than embracing present-day’s changing society. Wilcox observes that “an elegiac tone persists through The Lord of the Rings ..., a sadness of time and change deeper than melancholia” (133), and Flieger notes:

Tolkien’s philosophical and religious outlook was that change is necessary, although his psychological and emotional yearning was for much of his world that had vanished or was vanishing. Both feelings are evident in his work. He mourns the fading of Lórien and the passing of the Entwives. “‘I should be sad,’” says Théoden to Gandalf, “‘for however the fortune of war shall go, may it not so end that much that was fair and wonderful shall pass forever out of Middle-earth?” And Gandalf replies, “‘It may.’” Then he adds, “‘But to such days we are doomed. Let us now go on with the journey we have begun!’” [LOTR 550]. Both speak for Tolkien, but Gandalf has the last word. (Splintered Light 154)
This conversation between Théoden and Gandalf voices the internal struggle present in Tolkien’s works, which on the one hand emphasise the necessity to follow God’s plan but on the other hand also wish to preserve the good of the past in the same spirit as the stationary Elves (see chapter 3). However, Gandalf’s exhortation to “go on with the journey we have begun” sums up the work’s final view on the necessity of progress – and, characteristically, it does so in terms of a journey. And so both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* end with the westward departing of the Elves from the stories of Middle-earth and the beginning of the age of Men, thus marking the end of fairy-tales and Tolkien’s ultimate acceptance, however painful, of the necessity to face change and let go of the past.
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