Tolkien's Wizardry: How Metaphysics Molded Middle-Earth

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1   Introduction

Relationship between philosophy and Tolkien's literature. Five theses: two boring, three more interesting.

Boring:

1. Tolkien had philosophical views that influenced hiswriting.

2. Tolkien saw his fiction as, in part, a vehicle for propagating his philosophical views.

Not universal – but fairly common.

Bolder:

3. Tolkien's fiction as the embodiment, the incarnation, of his philosophy. His work was the imaginative equivalent of a philosophical treatise.

Unusual – closest parallel is Plato's use of myth in his dialogues. The myth of the cave – the Republic, or the myth of creation inthe Timaeus.

Other examples: Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, Blake's poetry.

4. Philosophical theory guided the construction of Tolkien's fiction. Not just a vehicle of philosophy, not just the embodiment of it – philosophy itself guided the process of embodiment.

Tolkien was not just someone who had a philosophical theory,and who then relied on common sense or common literary techniques to translatethat theory into fiction. Instead,in Tolkien's case, the translation process itself had a philosophicalfoundation, was the product of applying a philosophical theory.

Unique to Tolkien – as far as we know, not true of Dante,Blake, Milton, or even Plato.

5. To explain Tolkien's success as an author, toexplain the breadth and depth of his appeal to his readers, we must look to thephilosophical substance of the work and to the philosophical theory that guidedits construction.

Connection between the philosophical underpinnings of Tolkien's work and its power over its readers is not accidental. The success of Tolkien's fiction, both in its mass appeal and its tenacious grip on its readers, including boththe nave and the sophisticated, confirms the soundness of thephilosophical views that guided its construction.

In polls of readers in recent years, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has consistently been chosen most often as the "greatest bookof the 20th century', with Joyce's *Ulysses* a distantsecond. After fifty years,Tolkien's popularity with readers continues to grow and shows no signs ofabating. Virtually every work infantasy and science fiction in the 20th and 21stcenturies bears unmistakable marks of Tolkien's influence.

If my fifth thesis is true, we have grounds for suspicionthat Tolkien's work has been even more influential – and will continueto be still more influential – that we might otherwise have guessed. The enduring popularity ofTolkien's work is only the visible one-tenth of the iceberg –nine-tenths of the influence is invisible to the casual observer. Indeed, if I'm right, theprofound power of Tolkien's work is somewhat alarming, even to someonelike myself who largely agrees with Tolkien's philosophical opinions.

2   What was Tolkien's philosophy?

For the most part, it was not especially original or unusual(although it was somewhat unusual for his time, the mid 20th century).

Tolkien's philosophy was that of a Christianized,somewhat Aristotelianized Neo-Platonism, the so-called "perennial philosophy" that dominated Western thought from late antiquity to thelate Middle Ages. Five representative figures of this tradition: Plotinus, Augustine, Boethius,Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomas Aquinas.

Theory of good and evil. Privation theory of evil – evil is a form of non-being ornon-existence, while goodness consists in the fullness of being, a completemode of existing.

Absolute good is possible, in fact actual (God is absolutegoodness). Absolute evil is impossible, since to be absolutely evil athing would have to be absolutely non-existent, which is of courseimpossible. Evil is alwaysparasitic on goodness for its energy and efficacy. An evil thing or person canexist only by being partly good.

This Augustinian or Boethian conception of evil is clearly embodied in Sauron and the Ringwraiths, who have only an increasingly tenuoushold on reality.

Evil on this view is essentially correlated with folly, ignorance, misery, blindness and impotency. The word "wraith" is relatedetymologically to the words wrath, writhe and writhen or twisted (as in the word "wreath"). The Ring-

wraiths are twisted and distorted versionsof human beings. Not only invisible but blind, incapable of joy and of independent thought or will. Similarly, it is Sauron's blindness to the Fellowship's truepurpose that brings about his downfall – Sauron lacks the wisdom to recognizethat the Fellowship might try to destroy, rather than to use, the One Ring.

Another Platonic theme is that evil is always associatedwith disharmony and discord. In the trilogy, the good are united for the mostpart in a fellowship, a true friendship of harmony of purpose. In contrast, thewicked are constantly divided into factions, often working atcross-purposes. Sauron andSaruman, although supposedly allied, are in fact locked in mutually destructive competition. The orcs hate their masters and are ruled only by fear, and that often ineffectively.

In addition, evil is also parasitic on the good. As Frodoexplains to Sam, "the Shadow can only mock, it cannot make – not realnew things of its own."

The One Ring, which provides its bearer with invisibility,reminds us of the Ring of Gyges which Plato's characters discuss in *The Republic*. The ring gave Bilbo andFrodo the power to escape forever from the bonds of the social contract: theycould have done whatever they pleased, to their own apparent enrichment, withoutsuffering any negative repercussions. Yet, like Socrates' vision of thejust man, the Hobbits are moved by love of justice for its own sake, and Frodo is willing to sacrifice all worldly fortune for the greater good.

Another Platonic theme we found often repeated in Tolkien's work is that

of the imitation of and participation in models orparadigms. The Phial of Galadriel contains a reflection or emanation of the star of Earendil, which, as one ofthe Silmarils, contains in turn a reflection or emanation of the light of the two Trees of Valinor. The sacred tree of Gondor, similarly, is a copy of the sacred tree of Tel Eressea in theundying lands, which is also copied from the two Trees. In the Silmarillion, we are told that all of Ea (the physical universe that includes Middle-Earth) is the incarnation of a pre-existing model in the form of the Music of the Ainur, who in turn are angelic or celestial intelligences emanating, in neoplatonic fashion, from the mind of Eru, the One.

Finally, Platonists believe that the world is governed in some sense by a pervasive divine providence, that "shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we may" (as Hamlet puts it). There are many examplesof such a superintending providence in Tolkien's fiction.

Gandalf's conversation with Frodo: "Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought."

Elrond at the Council in Rivendell:

> Called, I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands. You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet is not so. Believe rather that it is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find

counsel for the peril of the world.

Providence uses acts of mercy and goodness to produce a *eucastrophe*, the unlooked-for Happy Ending.

The best example of the cooperation between divine providence and right human choice is that of the mercy repeatedly shown to the miserable creature Gollum, and the indispensable role that Gollum plays at the end of the story. Gollum's life is spared by Bilbo, Faramir, Frodo and Sam. The wood-elves release him from his imprisonment from compassion.

On Mount Doom, as Sam is about to slay Gollum, who has just betrayed and attacked Frodo, he thinks: "It would have been just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature. But deep in his heart ther was something that restrained him; he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, and utterly wretched." Sam himself had borne the Ring and "dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's shriveled mind and body,enslaved to the Ring." Sam lets him go, thereby making possible the ultimate destruction of the Ring.

Conversely, "evil works in vain, preparing always only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in." Boromir's attempt to take the Ring from Frodo by force shatters the unity of the Fellowship,allowing Frodo and Sam to undertake their mission without too large an entourage, and sending the others west to the aid of Rohan and Gondor. Gollum's attempt to betray Sam and Frodo into the hands of the murderous spider Shelob enables them to pass through the otherwise impassable fortress of Cirith Ungol. Sauron's southern allies unwittingly provide

the ships that Aragorn and his companions need to bring needed aid to the city of Gondor. The massive mustering of Sauron's army for an attack on the armies of the West provides Frodo and Sam the opportunity of passing unnoticed through the emptied crossroads of Mordor. And Gollum's unconquerable lust for the Ring leads him to bite off Frodo's ring finger, leading to the destruction of the Ring as he falls into the Cracks of Doom.

This commitment to Christianized neoplatonism (or platonized Christianity) was common to Tolkien's inner circle in Oxford, the *Inklings*, as they called themselves.

- C. S. Lewis: scholar of English literature, philosopher, apologist for Christianity, author of science fiction and children's fantasy lit.

- Charles Williams: charismatic metaphysical poet and novelist.

- The Benedictine monk and philosopher Dom Bede Griffiths.

- Dorothy L. Sayers – playwright and mystery novelist.

- Austin Farrer – philosophical theologian

- Last but not least – Owen Barfield – the unique andeccentric philosopher and linguist.

The Inklings were united in a common quest, whose aim wasnothing short of the destruction of the scientific materialism that dominatededucated thinking in the mid-20th century. At the time, this must have seemed a mad, quixotic

adventure, but in retrospect it's quite remarkable how successful they were, especially Tolkien and Lewis, who are among the most widely read and most influential authors of serious fiction and philosophical argumentation.

Tolkien clearly saw his own fiction as an essential part of this enterprise, as a vehicle for the propagation of the Christianized neoplatonism embraced by the Inklinngs.

However, we must be careful not to misunderstand what this means in Tolkien's case. I don't think there is any sense in which Tolkien prostituted his talent for the sake of propaganda. He didn'ttreat his art as a mere means rather than an end in itself. There is noperverting or twisting of the story or the characters in order to serve an extrinsic, non-artistic purpose. Gandalf never interrupts the story to deliver a didactic lecture on the principles of neo-platonism, in sharp contrast, for example, to the penchant of someone like Ayn Rand, who often did exactly this in order to make her novels more effective means for thepropagation of objectivism.

3   Tolkien's Fiction as the Embodiment of his Philosophy

In what sense, then, was Tolkien's fiction a vehicle for his philosophy? To understand this, we must also grasp the importance of my third thesis: that Tolkien's fiction was the embodiment of his philosophy, that Tolkien used a

kind of alchemy to transmute his philosophy into story, in such a way that the two are inseparable, even in principle. This is why Tolkien's fiction can be a vehicle for his propagating his philosophy without in any way being used to subserve an extrinsic end: there is in fact no distinction betweenTolkien's story as story (or as art) on the one hand, and his story a sthe embodiment of a philosophy, on the other. The philosophical and theological ideas are fully sublimated into the sotry itself, so there is no need for characters to interrupt the story in order to teach philosophical principles to the reader. The reader learns the philosophical principles simply by reading and enjoying the story as story.

No one has done this more effectively, except perhaps Plato himself. Both Plato and Tolkien understood the unique power of myth as a vehicle of philosophy. We have to think of C. S. Lewis and Tolkien as constituting a tag team, together providing us with the equivalent of Plato's dialogues. Lewis supplies the dialectic, the explicit argumentation, and Tolkien supplies the myth. Together, they are far more effective than either would have been alone.

Without the dialectic, the myth would have been barren, but without the myth, the dialectic would have been powerless. The very truths that Lewis assumes in his argumentation, Tolkien teaches through the imagination.

Twentieth century philosophy, by and large, exaggerated the importance of logic, and I say this as a logician myself. On this one point, at least, Heidegger was right: it is through the poet that we can best encounter reality itself. The

usefulness of logic depends on the fact that we have some independent access to true premises. Without true premises, logic is condemned to the law of GIGO: garbage in, garbage out. How do we discover truth, where do we gain access to the reliable "intuitions" of truth that analytic philosophy so often takes for granted? It is largely through poetry and myth that these truths are conveyed to us.

> Lewis: "Myths are lies and therefore worthless, eventhough breathed through silver."
>
> Tolkien: "No, they are not lies. Myths are the best way of conveying truths that are otherwise inexpressible. The myths we create contain asplintered fragment of the true light. The story of Christ is the True Myth, a myth that really happened. God expresses himself through the minds of poets."

Thesis 4: Tolkien had a philosophical theory that guided himin his translation or transmutation of philosophy into myth, Barfield'stheory of the "ancient semantic unity".

Tolkien in conversation with Lewis: reading Barfield's book, *Poetic Diction*, in 1928 "changed my whole outlook".

What is this "ancient semantic unity" that so changed Tolkien's viewpoint?

Barfield gives the example of the word 'spirit', whose counterparts in Greek, Latin, Hebrew and other ancient languages means, simultaneously wind, breath, the immaterial component of the human personality, and a supernatural person

or agency. Barfield attacks what he calls the "naturalistic" theory of meaning, which hypothesizes that such words originally designated only anobservable, physical phenomenon, like the wind, and later were adapted as metaphors to take on additional, non-natural meanings. Barfield points out that the philological evidence points in exactly the oppositedirection: as we look farther into the past, we find the meanings of words to be, from our modern perspective,more and more multiple and variegated. According to Barfield, the naturalist asks us to believe that as we move backward in time, language becomes more and more metaphor-laden, until we reach a hypothetical stage in the remote past, leaving absolutely no trace, in which language was utterly devoid of metaphor.

Barfield argues, however, that we err in thinking that themeanings of words in ancient tongues were multi-layered. He contended that thiserror, that he called "logomorphism", resulted from reading backinto the ancient mind distinctions that are in fact the product ofdistinctively modern mode of thoughts. For the ancient mind, the word 'spirit' did not have three or four distinct meanings: it had a single, unified meaning (an *ancient semantic unity*), which modern thought has broken into several distinct concepts. For the ancient mind, wind, breath, and the seat of human thought and emotion are not three different things referred to by the same, ambiguous word. They were, instead, three aspects or manifestations of what is in reality one and the same thing. And, Barfield proposed, the ancient mind was perfectly right in thinking so. These ancient semantic unities corresponded to real, ontological unities in the things themselves.

Thus, for Barfield, the movement from ancient to modern thinking is not one of simple progress and gain, a movement from confusion to clarity, but rather a movement involving both loss and gain. The modern mind is capable of more fine-grained distinctions, which is partly responsible for our greater capacity for scientific and technical power over nature and over each other, but these gains come at a real loss, an obscuring of real unities and commonalties that once were readily apparent. For Barfield, it is poetry, and especially mythopoetry, that can help us to recover and regain these lost unities.

Barfield distinguishes between two kinds of story: myth and allegory. This distinction corresponds also to a distinction between two kinds of figures: true metaphors, and adventitious and allegorical figures of speech (I'll call these "pseudo-metaphors"). In a true metaphor, the figure does not say two separate things, one literally false and the other *figuratively true*. Instead, a true metaphor merely brings back to the surface a latent meaning that was present in the words from the beginning. A true metaphor enablesus to recover an ancient semantic unity that modern sophistication has lost. It enables us to perceive a real sameness, despite a superficial difference. A pseudo-metaphor, in contrast, expresses information about one thing under the guise of speaking aboutanother. To understand the pseudo-metaphor, as in understanding an allegory, one must work out the code and decipher the statement in order to discover its hidden meaning. Pseudo-metaphors are untrue and adventitious, they do not "follow the footsteps of nature," as Barfield puts it, and the implicit comparison

always breaks down at one point or another.

The distinction between myth and allegory is analogous. A myth is a story that conveys truth tothe imagination. Understanding amyth heightens our awareness and clarifies our perception of the real world byreawakening within us a more primitive, unsophisticated mode ofconsciousness. Barfield said thatmyths are constituted by a "unity of percepts", that myths presentas unities things that really are unities but which no longer appear so to amind obsessed with the technical control of its experiences, as is the modernmind. An allegory, in contrast, isa mere "synthesis of ideas", an adventitious juxtaposing of two really different things by means of an artificially created code of correspondence or translation. Since the two things related by an allegory really are two, the allegory will always fail to make sense on its own terms as a story. The story will make sense only when the hidden meaning is uncovered. In contrast, a myth depicts what Tolkien called a "sub-created world", a fictional reality witha coherent internal logic, which is, in fact, the logic of the real world. Thus, a myth always makes perfect sense in itself and requires no decrypting.

Barfield posits two distinct principles at work in the human mind: the prosaic principle and the poetic principle. The prosaic principle is essentially pragmatic and utilitarian in orientation. It seeks to gain control over our sensory experiences and it develops into a rigid subject/object distinction, alienating us as autonomous selves from the natural objects around us. The prosaic mind distinguishes and differentiates and analyzes naturally occurring wholes into their

separate parts. When the prosaic mind unifies, it synthesizes ideas or concepts, not percepts. That is, it unifies by arbitrarily manipulating its own products.

In contrast, the poetic principle is contemplative and participatory. It involves no distinction between self and world, and it recognizes, through perception and the synthesis of percepts, the unities that really exist in nature. The poetic principle is the source of the imagination, both the veridical imagination that gives us access to a world of things in the first place, and the creative imagination that produces myths and true metaphors. Barfield proposed that sanity and health consists in the enjoyment of a balance between these two principles, and that the modern mind (since the time of the Stoics) has suffered from an excess of the prosaic principle. Poetry and mythmaking are needed to restore the balance.

In addition to the word 'spirit', the othere xample of an ancient semantic unity discussed by Barfield was that associatedwith the words 'light' and 'shine'. According to Barfield, the ancient mind recognized the fact that physical light, intellectual light, spiritual light and the divine light are not different things accidentally named by the same word, but rather manifestations of a single reality. Physical light and spiritual light really are just different forms and manifestations of the very same thing, *light.*

The impact of Barfield's thought upon Tolkien is clearwhen we reflect on the central role which the words 'light' and 'darkness' play in Tolkien's fiction, both in *The Silmarillion* and in *The Lord of the Rings.* Light, reason, truth, goodness

and being are all inextricably connected in Tolkien's world, forming a semantic unity. The starlight kindled by Elbereth that inspires the Elves, the light of the Two Trees, still embodied in the Silmarils ,in Earendil's star, in the sun and the moon, in Galadriel's phial. Gandalf the White as anearthly manifestation of the sun (the fire of Anor that Gandalf invokes before the Balrog). In contrast, Morgoth, the Dark Enemy; Sauron the Dark Lord. Mordor, the dark land, "where the shadows lie." The dark fire of the Balrog, the intolerance of the orcs for the sunlight. Rather than creating a large number of clever, artificial pseudo-metaphors, designed to elicit our admiration for his creativity, Tolkien weaves a tale in which small number of natural or true metaphors are endlessly repeated, designed to reawaken within us a more unitive mode of thinking.

Tolkien believed that words too are a form of light. The word 'fantasy' is derived from the Indo-European root, *bha*, to shine. In his poem, "Mythopoeia", Tolkien describes the work of the human mythmaker as one of splintering the divine light into "many hues". In fact, in Indo-European, the very same sound, *bha*, is also the root of the word for 'speech' (from which we derive *phoneme* and*telephone*).

Barfield's theory of semantic unity shaped Tolkien's method for writing his myths. Thomas Shippey, who now holds the chair in linguistics at Oxford that Tolkien once held, has pointed out the archeological character ofTolkien's method. Just as philologist hypothesized unattested words and roots in Indo-European, words which linguists mark with an asterisk to show that they are

merely hypothetical, so Tolkien posited what Shippey calls "asterisk" objects, characters, landscapes, races, and story lines,seeking to reconstruct the actual myths of the prehistoric ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons, by which we can "save the appearances", explain thefragmentary data that has survived from the Dark Ages and early Middle Ages. These asterisk elements provide the skeletal framework around which all of Middle-Earth is constructed.Thus, Tolkien attempted, to the best of his very considerable ability, to recreate for us the experience the ancient Anglo-Saxons had listening to their own myths around the hearth fire.

For example, orcs, dwarves, elves, both light elves and dark elves, the Silmarils, ents and wraiths, the Valar, the Blessed Realm in the West, Numenor/Atlantis – all of these are drawn by Tolkien from ancient and medieval records of prehistoric myths. The language, personal andplace names and customs of the Rohirrim have origins in Anglo-Saxon sources, including the Beowulf poem.

Tolkien's exploitation of his specialized knowledge of ancient mythologies is a puzzling method for a creative artist to employ, until we recognize that Tolkien is attempting to achieve the reconstitution in the modern mind of an ancient mode of consciousness, as Barfield recommended. Only by reconstructing actual myths in words derived from the actual languages used can Tolkien be sure that he will be successful in recreating the cognitive structures of the primitive, poetic mode of thinking associated with the prehistoric mind.

Moreover, Tolkien's repeated use of the metaphors oflight and darkness is

clearly prefigured in Barfield's discussion of the ancient semantic unity associated with the words for light and shining.

Thirdly, the characters of Tolkien's fantasy embody exactly the kind of primitive, poetic mode of thinking that Tolkien, under Barfield's guidance, was attempting to inspire in his readers. Tolkien's characters, especially the sympathetic characters like Gandalf, Aragorn and Sam, lack a modern sense of the subject/object distinction. They identify fully with their role and their natural place in the order of things. They lack that sort of self-consciousness that could alienate themfrom that role and that place. Tolkien's narrative contains virtually none of the introspection or inner stream of consciousness that we have come to expect of modern authors.

Fourthly and finally, Barfield's poetic principle is incarnated in Tolkien's story in the form of the Elves. The Elves' power to enchant mortals through their story and song it iself a theme borrowed by Tolkien fromancient sources. As Tolkien explained in his essay "On Fairy Stories", Elvish enchantment is the model or paradigm toward which man-made fantasy, including Tolkien's, aspires. When the Hobbits visit the Elves in Rivendell and Lothlorien, the experience an elevation of consciousness that removes them from their ordinary, timebound lives. Like so many characters in ancient fairystories, Frodo and Sam lose all sense of the passage of time while in the Elvish havens (Sam can count only three nights, although in fact a whole month has passed). Sam describes his experience in Lothlorien as one of "living in a song". When they

leave Lothlorien, Frodo and Sam struggle to remember exactly what had happened there, echoing another Barfieldian theme: the challenge of bringing the insights acquired through the primitive, unitive mode of consciousness intoone's everyday life, dominated as it is by the utilitarian, prosaic principle.

Tolkien believed, once again in imitation of his ancient sources, that to be effective, fantasy must represent itself within the story. The depiction of the Elvish enchantment through poetry and song of mortal characters is itself an essential means to effecting something like enchantment in the modern reader. As we read about Frodo and Sam's experience with the Elves, we find ourselves imitating their experiences under the influence of Tolkien's philological magic.

Thus, Tolkien's philosophy is not only transmuted into story, but the transmutation itself is effected by means of philosophy. And, it's important to bear inmind here that the philosophy that is transmuted and the philosophy that does the transmuting are one and the same. Barfield's theory of the power of poetry and the reality of anancient semantic unity is itself thoroughly grounded in Platonic and Neo-Platonic sources. It is precisely because Barfield believed in Platonic Forms or Ideas that he concluded that metaphor could re-connect us with those transcendent unities. As Aristotle put it in the Poetics and the Rhetoric, the construction of "appropriate metaphors" is the work of genius, enabling us to theorize or contemplate samenesses in the world, real but not always apparent unities. This is why, for Aristotle as for Barfield and Tolkien, poetry is more philosophical than history. For Aristotle, poetry imitates "nature",

but this is not the dead and inert nature of the modern man, a meaningless assemblage of brute facts, but an organic whole, objectively ordered to a real good.

4   The Explanation of Tolkien's Success

We finally reach my fifth thesis: that to understand thesuccess that Tolkien's work has enjoyed, we must explain that literary and popular success in terms of the successful completion of this philosophical project. It is precisely because Tolkien's work is the philosophical transmutation of philosophy into story that it resonates as it does with so many readers, many of whom have noprior familiarity with neo-platonic theory. What Tolkien's work does is to enable the modern reader to recover that ancient, more unitive mode of consciousness that modern science and modern cosmopolitanism and sophistication have suppressed. Reading Tolkien won't by itself make you into a Christian neo-platonist, but it does prepare the soil of the mind for the fruitful implantation of such ideas. Those who read and re-read and love Tolkien will find the philosophical writings of the Inklings, of Lewis, Barfield and Farrer, and their many students and disciples, far more plausible and believable than they otherwise would.

There's a remarkable fact about Tolkien that has not yet received sufficient attention. Tolkien's fiction anticipates and foreshadows a number of significant trends and movements of the late 20th century, specifically:

- The disillusionment with science, technology andprogress, and the downfall of the dominance of scientific materialism.

- The ecological movement, and the "greening" of the Western mind.

- New Age spirituality, and the concomitant revival of interest in ancient pagan practices.

- The rebirth and rapid growth of traditional, fundamentalist versions of the Biblical religions.

- Rise of fantasy as a major literary genre.

- The rejection of bourgeois conformity and complacency, and the appetite for escape into the world of the imagination, astypified by the hippies and the other counter-cultural movements of the 60s'.

- The collapse of totalitarian regimes in the 40's and again in the late 80's.

This foreshadowing of future trends in Tolkien's workin the 30's and 40's demands one of three or four explanations:

1. Coincidence

2. Prescience: a uniquely brilliant prognostication of incipient trends.

3. Common causation

4. Some combination of these three

To rely exclusively on 1 or 2, coincidence or prognostication, strains our credulity. No one could be that lucky, or that clever. I think of no one in the 30's or 40's who predicted even one of these trends, much less all seven. I really believe, as crazy as this sounds, that we must rely, at least to some extent, on explanation 3: that Tolkien's work was, in many of these case, the critical factor responsible for producing the cultural and social phenomena we've observed. And there is some collateral evidence for this claim.

- *The Lord of the Rings* was a favorite book of LSD guru Timothy Leary. The books became a vital part of the hippie culture.

- A Tolkien-inspired environmental group, the Environmental Liberation Front (or ELF) burned down a house in Bloomington, Indiana in 2000.

- Go to Barnes & Noble or any other book store and peruse the fantasy and science fiction section. Virtually every book you find there will bear the marks of Tolkien's influence. This is certainly true of some of the most successful and important works, such as those of Ursula LeGuin or the Star Wars films.

When Tolkien was writing in the mid 20th-century,scientific materialism was enjoying its heyday. Marxism and logical positivism were overwhelmingly dominant in the academy. The effort of the Inklings to change all that, at a time-when Christianized Neoplatonism seemed a mere historical curiosity, seemed atthe time a mad, quixotic quest. In retrospect from our post-modern world,

in which Christian and theistic philosophy has enjoyed a remarkable renaissance, they would appear to have been successful far beyond the wildest hopes imaginable.

Tolkien's works have been in print continuously for nearly sixty years. The *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy has sold well over fifty million copies pervolume, and the new twelve-volume history of Middle-Earth by Tolkien'sson, Christopher, is selling at an astonishing rate. Tolkien's works were banned in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe before the fall of Communism, but typewritten copies circulated widely through the so-called samizdat press.

In a series of readers' polls taken in the1990's that sought to discover which book readers believed to be thegreatest fictional work of the 20th century, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was consistently the winner, with Joyce's Ulysses a distinct second. The *The Lord of the Rings* came in second place in onlyone of these polls, one commissioned by Nestle in 1999: first place was claimed by the Bible. I think the Nestle poll got things exactly right: the *The Lord of the Rings* is second only to the Bible in its contemporary influence.

And, finally, let's consider Peter Jackson's films. What I find most remarkable about them is their faithfulness to Tolkien's vision. This too requires an explanation. Films that cleave closely to the language, plot, characters and themes of their original inspirations are very much the exception rather than the rule. Nothing in Jackson's earlier films indicated in special sympathy with Tolkien's philosophy or literary ideals. The best explanation for Jackson's in-

ability to deviate far from Tolkien's world is again one of enchantment: Jackson is simply under Tolkien's spell. Jackson's films, thanks to their faithful transcription of Tolkien's ideas to cinema, will yield an exponential explosion in the breadth and depth of Tolkien's influence.

I have to admit that I'm beginning to find all this more than a little alarming, even though I am largely in agreement with the NeoPlatonism of the Inklings. The law of unintended consequences holds universally in the realm of social and cultural action, and Tolkien's influence had already in his lifetime taken directions that he himself disapproved of: Tolkien couldn't stand his many hippy fans, and I'm sure that Tolkien would have been uncomfortable with the impetus his fantasy has given to neo-pagan spirituality. Lewis and Tolkien both believed that ancient paganism could be a critical ally of Christianity against the then-dominant scientific materialism, but Christian Platonists may have reason to fear that this quondam ally may turn out, in the long run, to be a more dangerous and implacable foe.