# "Whither Then I Cannot Say": Epistemological Uncertainty and Tolkien's Transnational Myth

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In 1956, J.R.R. Tolkien received a letter from a fan asking a simple question: Why does Frodo falter in the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*? Tolkien's response reveals something of his cantankerous humour and Christian optimism, as well as his profound disappointment. "No," he writes, "Frodo 'failed,'" and moreover, "one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is not finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however 'good.'" He even confesses that at present "I am afraid I have the same feeling" of powerlessness in the face of evil (*Letters* 252). Tolkien endured many hardships throughout his life, ranging from his orphanhood at the age of twelve to the deaths of "all but one" of his close friends in WWI (Foreword 11), but in this letter, he attributes his disillusionment to a more mundane source: "I have been forced to publish up-side-down or backwards; and after the grand crash [in *The Lord of the Rings*] … the mythological and elvish legends of the Elder Days will not be quite the same" (*Letters* 252). Faced with the diabolic malevolence of a public more interested in Hobbits than High Elves, Sam Gamgee than Fëanor son of Finwë, Tolkien bemoans the fact that he could not convince Allen and Unwin to publish his corpus of legends chronologically. The letter is, of course, irreverently humourous, but beneath the drollery, Tolkien hints at a genuine lament. Though he hoped his works might be "perhaps read, eventually, from beginning to end in the right order," Tolkien recognized that he had "a dreadful lot of other work to do" and that his dream of a unified mythopoetic oeuvre, his legendarium, would likely never come to fruition (252).

Since the posthumous publication of Tolkien's extended legendarium, beginning in 1977 with the *The Silmarillion* and culminating nearly two decades later in the twelve-volume series *The History of Middle-earth*, fans and scholars alike have finally been able to read his works chronologically. Chronological does not, however, mean complete; the majority of Tolkien's legendarium remains, despite his best efforts, largely incomplete, a knotted web of half-finished epic poems and roughly sketched narrative cycles. Consequently, there has been an outpouring of academic interest in Tolkien's posthumously published works and manuscripts. Most of the resulting studies have focused on the philological background

of Tolkien's world, with key examples from this school including Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth* and Verlyn Flieger's *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*. While these linguistic studies illuminate an essential aspect of Tolkien's writings, they also largely ignore the literary functions of the legendarium's incompleteness, and, specifically, how competing, often mutually exclusive, variants of his stories generate an uncertain epistemological framework replete with artistic and philosophical implications.

This epistemological uncertainty, in which the boundaries of knowability collapse as the reader hesitates on the precipice of choice, unable to distinguish between variations of reality, has been largely overlooked by scholars such as Dimitra Fimi, who argues that Tolkien's legendarium fails as a mythological project because it lacks a basis in existing folk-narratives.[1] Admittedly, Tolkien's mythology is fundamentally imaginative rather than historical, but I contend that his sustained production of inescapable epistemological uncertainty, generated through the tangled publication history of the legendarium manuscripts as well the metafictional framing devices present in the published works, compensates for the inherent deficiencies in Tolkien's mythological project by locating meaning in the "Volk," or collective identity, of his readership. I begin by first situating Fimi and Tolkien in their respective contexts, followed by a more in-depth presentation of Fimi's argument and my responses to her assertions.

## Tolkien, Fimi, and Myth

In *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*, Fimi asserts that Tolkien's mythological project fails as mythology due to a lack of authentic folklore.[2] According to Fimi, imaginative sub-creation outside of a real, historically situated culture cannot achieve the status of true myth (55). To understand Fimi's assertion, however, one must first acknowledge how her definition of myth differs from that of other theorists. Consider, for example, Northrop Frye, who conceptualizes myth as "an art of implicit metaphorical identity," a "pure ideogram" that seeks to rep-

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[1] My conception of epistemological uncertainty is indebted to Todorov's definition of the fantastic in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (24–40).

[2] This claim occupies a largely tangential position beside Fimi's larger focus on Tolkien's intellectual and artistic development, evolving view of fairies, invented languages, and interlacements with race, as well as his shift from mythological to historical writing. I focus primarily on just a small section from Chapter Four of Tolkien, Race and Cultural History to highlight it as an illustrative example of a wider tendency in Tolkien studies.

resent the thing it symbolizes in a more substantially true manner than mere analogy or simile (*Anatomy of Criticism* 136). Frye associates these sorts of myths, pure myths, with conventional archetypes or stock figures such as the Sun God or Heroic Quest. Fimi, by contrast, is primarily interested in national myths, which she defines as narratives that emerge among groups of people over long periods to explain phenomena and create a cohesive cultural identity (51). Although the stories she examines often conform to archetypal standards, Fimi generally examines myth in a historically oriented manner. Considered in this respect, Fimi's critique of Tolkien's ahistoricity makes sense. While Fimi might consent to the characterization of the legendarium as archetypal myth, she objects to its characterization as national myth, which, at least in his early career, is how Tolkien conceived of his work ("A Mythology for Finland" 277; Carpenter 89; "Setting" 291-93).

In a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien laid out his ambitious mythological project as follows:

> I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story—the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths—which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired… possessing … the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic …, it should be 'high', purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long now steeped in poetry. (*Letters* 144-45)

In his attempt to create this mythology dedicated to England, Tolkien built on the legacy of several nineteenth-century writers and folklorists, such as the Brothers Grimm and Elias Lönnrot, who had endeavoured to "re-discover" heroic national mythologies (Fimi 53). While Tolkien undoubtedly draws on the archetypes and "metaphorical identification" Frye describes, the roots of the legendarium ultimately derive from a nationalistic rather than archetypal impulse, which explains why Fimi's article discusses myth primarily in the context of national mythologies.

Having considered both Tolkien's and Fimi's understanding of "myth," the question arises: Was Tolkien successful in his grand project? According to Fimi, no, and she is not alone in thinking so—Tolkien himself saw deficiencies in his project. In the same letter to Milton Waldman quoted previously, Tolkien goes on to disown his grand designs as "absurd" (*Letters* 145). Though his rationale for doing so is not entirely clear, Tolkien abandoned his Romantic, nationalistic ambitions during the 1930s. One might speculate that his reasons coincided with the problems Fimi identifies. Although Tolkien's world is impressively imagina-

tive, it can never be considered true myth by Fimi's standards because it does not have any real historical basis (55). Furthermore, Fimi claims that Tolkien's notion of "a body of more or less connected legend" is less an example of mythology than it is of folk-narrative, which she divides into three categories. First, there are myths, which are prose narratives set in the distant past and assumed to be true by their audiences. Second, there are legends, which are also prose narratives that are assumed to be true but are set in a less remote period. Finally, there is folklore, which is a type of prose narrative regarded as fiction by its audience (51). Fimi also identifies several common traits between these categories. Most significantly, she argues that folk-narrative must be created by a unified "Volk" or "folk," some group that develops the narratives over time in a shared habitat and language with the goal of creating a cultural identity (51–52).[3] Fimi asserts that because Tolkien's narratives do not adhere to these common characteristics or derive from concrete, real-world examples of the three types of folk-narratives, his mythological project was doomed to fail. Although Fimi's main observations are true and Tolkien's stories are, in fact, largely imaginative rather than historical, I argue that the meaning derived from the text really is produced by a sort of Volk, namely, the Volk of Tolkien's readership. Even though the legendarium was written by a single author, one's understanding of the texts depends on a communal experience. Specifically, Tolkien promotes this interdependent community experience through his intentional generation of various epistemological uncertainties that the collective Volk must resolve.

## Tolkienian Uncertainty: Allusion and the Reader

Tolkien generates this uncertainty through his use of allusion and restriction of vital details. Like many modern fantasy stories, *The Lord of the Rings* frequently alludes to a vast internal history and invented mythological backdrop, but what makes Tolkien largely unique is the way in which he withholds information. Tolkien was aware of this withholding effect and consciously sought to keep certain areas of his mythology murky, declaring his intention to "draw some of the

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[3] Cf. Benedict Anderson, who nuances the idea of a national Volk. Anderson posits that common cultural identity can be constituted retroactively, with national myths shaping the community as much as the community shapes the myths (7–8). According to this view of national origins, the story itself gives the Volk shape and identity, which members of that Volk then recognize their collective identity within.

great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (*Letters* 145). Many scholars have noted this allusive quality, which Tom Shippey calls the "Beowulfian impression of depth" (qtd. in *The Book of Lost Tales* ix). However, most have discussed Tolkien's allusions in strictly temporal terms. They see that *The Lord of the Rings* uses self-referential intertextual allusions to create a "counterfeiting effect" of ancientness and depth, a deft temporal trick but nothing more than that (Shippey 308). Myriad writers following in the Tolkienian tradition have made abundant use of this counterfeiting effect to generate strangeness and interest, with varying degrees of success (Lobdell 39).

Tolkien's characteristic use of allusion, however, operates on a subtler level than does that of his many imitators. In Tolkien's case, strategically withholding information creates not only an impression of depth but also an ineluctable sense of incompleteness—one that requires that readers imaginatively insert themselves into the text to create their own meaning. Evidence of this intentional incompleteness can be seen in Tolkien's foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*. Writing about his creative process, Tolkien describes how he began to write the novel in 1936 and ended in 1949, at which point "the tale was brought to its present end" (Foreword 10; emphasis added). Curiously, Tolkien wrote the foreword ten years after *The Lord of the Rings* was published. What further "end" could there be? Tolkien might have been referring to potential sequels, though by 1958 he had long since abandoned *The New Shadow*, his only attempt to write a follow-up to *The Lord of the Rings* (Scull and Hammond 518–519, 619, 699). More likely, he was referring to his habit of perpetually revising his works. Tolkien never envisioned his stories as fossilized things. As scholars such as Flieger have noted, he continually tweaked his stories—even in their published states (*Interrupted Music* 143).[4] For example, after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien continued, until his death, to work on reconciling the novel with his earlier Silmarillion,[5] and consequently he changed—or attempted to change—several elements of the novel (*The Peoples of Middle-earth* 388–389). By attempting to

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[4] Cf. Fimi, who emphasizes that after the publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937, Tolkien's legendarium focalized around a fixed pseudo-historical point (121).

[5] When referring to the Silmarillon in general, I have opted to leave the title un-italicized. When referring to the published 1977 version, I have italicized the title.

resolve apparent incongruities between *The Lord of the Rings* and the rest of the legendarium, especially in his constantly evolving character names and genealogies, Tolkien sought to clear the way for the eventual publication of the Silmarillion in book form, a goal he never achieved in his lifetime.

Tolkien's death thus left his texts in a curious position: Because of his continuous revisions, the stories existed in several different versions with no clear indication as to how they should be interpreted. His son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien, commenting on this very problem, notes in the foreword to *The War of the Jewels* that "freely as my father often wrote of his work, he never so much hinted at his intentions for the structure as a whole. I think it must be said we are left, finally, in the dark" (x). Elsewhere in his writings, the senior Tolkien mirrored this sentiment, citing a desire to preserve "mysteries" as the reason for leaving out explanatory details (*Letters* 174, 190). There can be little doubt that Tolkien not only left certain questions unanswerable but that he did so deliberately, presumably with the intention that others would take up his stories and make them their own. Yet even long after he rejected the idea that other authors might write tales set in Middle-earth, Tolkien never abandoned the core idea that his readers would play an essential role in assembling his jumbled text in a meaningful way.[6]

This model of reader participation can be represented in three-tiers. First, there are the published works—*The Lord of the Rings*, for example. These texts have a concrete plot that the audience more or less passively receives. Next, there are the unpublished or posthumously published texts, such as *The History of Middle-earth* and *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*. These texts possess some degree of malleability. The author wrote them but neglected to clearly indicate which were part of the "canonical" story and which were not. In such cases, he leaves the reader to choose. The last group is the most ephemeral of all. A vast amount of Tolkien's mythology remains either partially written, unwritten,[7] or indecipherably vague. This nebulous hodgepodge of names, phrases, half-written poems, and half-baked ideas forms the bedrock of Tolkien's universe, what Flieger calls Tolkien's "uncompleted music" (*Interrupted Music* 143). Thus, on the first level, the reader has little to do other than receive the story, but on the second and

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[6] See Abrahamson's "J.R.R. Tolkien, Fanfiction, and 'The Freedom of the Reader'" for a fuller account of Tolkien's complex relationship with his audience.

[7] By this I mean stories that are alluded to in the legendarium as well as Tolkien's personal writings but were never actually written.

third levels, the reader plays an irreplaceable role in the location of meaning. It is impossible to identify which of the several versions of a story Tolkien "intended" to be the "correct" one, which places an enormous epistemic responsibility on the shoulders of the readers.

Take for example the *Dagor Dagorath*, Tolkien's cryptic "Battle of Battles." In all of Tolkien's writings published during his lifetime, there is only one passing reference to this mysterious battle. Towards the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf vaguely alludes to "other evils … that may come, for Sauron himself is but a servant or emissary" (*The Lord of the Rings* 913). This apparent throwaway line refers to Morgoth, the primary antagonist of Tolkien's legendarium who in some versions of *The Silmarillion* is prophesied to return from his exile and bring about the End Times. There is only one other reference to this battle in the "primary" texts, which comes in *The Silmarillion* when the armies of Ar-Pharazôn, the last King of Númenor, are trapped in the Caves of the Forgotten "until the Last Battle and the Day of Doom" (287). Those two cryptic references are the only hints about the *Dagor Dagorath* Tolkien offers in the "canonical" stories. The *Dagor Dagorath* appears with much greater frequency in the nebulous, half or partially written category of Tolkien's works. In early versions of *The Silmarillion* composed throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Tolkien explicitly refers to a final cosmic battle between Morgoth and the forces of light. These references were contained in the Second Prophecy of Mandos, which Christopher Tolkien removed from the published version of *The Silmarillion* due to apparent contradictions between the Prophecy and Tolkien's 1958 version of the Valaquenta (*Morgoth's Ring* 3–4). Despite these contradictions, Tolkien continued to develop the idea of the *Dagor Dagorath* throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Eventually, he seems to have replaced the apocalyptic "Battle of Battles" described in the Second Prophecy of Mandos with a prophetical account of the War of Wrath, the calamitous battle that ends the First Age in *The Silmarillion* (*The Peoples of Middle-earth* 374–375).

By the end of his life, however, Tolkien was still wavering between interpretations. In the latest text, an extremely rough manuscript Christopher Tolkien entitles "The Problem of Ros" in *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, the elder Tolkien seems to have fully replaced the *Dagor Dagorath* with a modified account of the War of Wrath (374). However, in the "Annals of Aman," a much longer document written only a few years earlier than "The Problem of Ros," Tolkien retains the older conception of the *Dagor Dagorath* (*Morgoth's Ring* 71, 76). Adding to the confusion, Tolkien wrote a slightly different account of the *Dagor Dagorath* in his 1954 essay "On the Istari" that mostly conforms to the early versions described in

*The Silmarillion*, though with a few major differences (*Unfinished Tales* 395). This plethora of variations, some seemingly abandoned, others only partly sketched, and still others developed, discarded, restored, and apparently rejected once more, leaves the cohesive canonicity of Tolkien's work in tatters. With so many competing versions of Tolkien's mythological stories jostling for position even in his latest and most complete works, who can say which are official and which are not?

There are essentially two possible explanations for these numerous contradictory accounts. On the one hand, Tolkien might simply have been trying to streamline his legendarium into a publishable form and along the way he inadvertently introduced a few inconsistencies into the mythology. According to this view, these inconsistencies might make for interesting diversions, but ultimately they are superfluous to our appreciation of Tolkien's work. Tolkien had in his mind a version of the "canonical" Silmarillion, and the astute critic's role is to determine what that version was. Anne C. Petty's 1979 book *One Ring to Bind Them All* serves as an illustrative example of this linear approach to Tolkien's mythology. In her zealousness to prove that *The Lord of the Rings* constitutes an authentic myth, Petty traces the novel's plot, as well as its mythic parallels, along a strictly linear, three-part structure of departure, initiation, and return (2–3). Petty's interest lies in Tolkien's overarching narrative structures, and consequently she overlooks minor inconsistencies. This sort of approach to Tolkien's mythology dominated for most of the late-twentieth century until the publication of *The History of Middle-earth* shed new light on Tolkien's creative process.

On the other hand, as Tolkien's manuscripts became widely available, several high-profile Tolkien scholars advocated for a much more chaotic, disjointed conception of Tolkien's mythology. Elizabeth A. Whittingham, for instance, argues in her 2007 book *The Evolution of Tolkien's Mythology* that Tolkien's mythological project developed in six stages, which she attempts to conveniently place on a chronologically arranged chart (10). Tellingly, however, she admits that "an organized chart cannot truly reflect the chaotic, creative nature of Tolkien's writing" (9). As seen previously in the evolution of the *Dagor Dagorath*, Tolkien's imagination progressed sporadically, often branching outwards in conflicting directions and occasionally even returning to old legends he had previously discarded. This understanding of Tolkien's chaotic writing process constitutes the second major explanation of the contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in Tolkien's mythology. Between the two explanations, I find the latter to be the more compelling, though its implications have yet to be fully processed with respect to Tolkien's mythological ambitions. While Whittingham is correct in her assertion that Tolk-

ien's creative process developed in progressive, often non-linear stages, she does not satisfactorily address the consequences of such a theory, namely, the emergence of sustained epistemological uncertainty.

Of the modern Tolkien scholars, Tom Shippey was among the first to consider this uncertainty with a great degree of sophistication. Writing in his revised and expanded edition of *The Road to Middle-earth*, he notes that inconsistencies are an essential part of the experience of reading Tolkien's work (314). Shippey's main example of this inconsistency is "The Legend of Beren and Lúthien." According to Shippey, there are "at least" nine different versions of the legend, each with its own nuances and peculiarities (313–314).[8] By contrast, Shippey claims there are approximately eight extant versions of the Germanic 'Legend of Brynhild' (313). In both cases, the "widely variant texts … create once more an imaginative space in which later authors can work, a space moreover enriched by discrepancies" (314). Rather than marginalize Tolkien's inconsistencies, Shippey ascribes to them a literary function.[9] Furthermore, Shippey argues that Tolkien was aware of this effect. In Tolkien's abortive 'time-travel' story, "The Notion Club Papers," Michael George Ramer comments on "the daimonic force that the great myths and legends have," noting that this power originates "from the profundity of the emotions and perceptions that beget them, and from the multiplication of them in many minds" (*Sauron Defeated* 228). Here, Tolkien hints at a twofold generation of meaning. Initially, the author's own "emotions and perceptions" lay the foundations for the story to take root. To achieve true greatness, however, a story requires the "multiplication" of many minds.[10]

## Tolkien's Volk

According to scholars like Fimi, such "daimonic force" is presumably achievable only on an authentic folk-narrative basis, which the legendarium lacks. However, this narrow characterization of Tolkien's mythology is unjust. While

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[8] More recently, in "Real-World Myth in a Secondary World," Richard C. West traces the mythological "echoes" in various versions of the Beren and Lúthien story (264). Gergely Nagy, meanwhile, examines the mythic quality in Tolkien's other major Silmarillion narrative, the tale of Túrin Turambar.

[9] See Verlyn Flieger's *Interrupted Music*, especially chapters one, three, and seven, as well as Vladimir Brljak's "The Book of Lost Tales: Tolkien as Metafictionist," for additional commentary on the literary function of Tolkien's inconsistencies.

[10] Tolkien also hints at this two-fold generation of meaning in his 'Pot of Soup' analogy in "On Fairy-Stories," though his concern lies less with the relationship between author and reader than with the communal quality of story.

Tolkien's sub-created mythology does not stem from a historical Volk base, his legendarium effectively approximates what Fimi identifies as folk-narrative. Tolkien offers a body of legends that evolved over time and whose meaning is largely determined by the collective group that engages with it. Admittedly, this Volk of Tolkien's readership is far younger than the collective consciousness that gave rise to, for example, the *Kalevala*, a collection of Finnish folk-narratives compiled into a national epic by Elias Lönnrot in the nineteenth century. The earliest Silmarillion manuscripts date to approximately 1914, whereas the *Kalevala* was first published in 1835 and recounts tales that some scholars have argued are certainly several centuries old (Lee and Solopova 74). Although Fimi notes that the legitimacy of the *Kalevala*'s historical basis has recently been questioned, she is willing to overlook possible flaws in Lönnrot's collection process because, in the end, he still based his epic on some form of pre-existing folk-narrative (55). Fimi suggests that even though it may not qualify as a fully authentic national myth, the *Kalevala* possesses something of the mythic quality that Tolkien's fiction does not. Tellingly, Fimi notes that within one hundred years of its publication, the *Kalevala* was heralded as a national icon and was required reading in Finnish schools (52). This elevation occurred rapidly, but for the vast majority of the Finnish population, that rapidity did not matter. What mattered was the cultural purchase the "myth" had established in its relatively brief history. I argue that the same is true of Tolkien.[11]

        To our increasingly urbanized, technocentric culture, Tolkien's late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century context seems nearly as distant as the Finnish folk-tales or the medieval sagas. The quaint agrarian English countryside of Tolkien's youth and the proud Imperial British identity he fought to uphold are now considered antiquated. In his own time, Tolkien sought to invest his work with an unearned depth by using intentionally archaic diction and grounding his invented tongues primarily in medieval languages (Shippey 211–212; Chance 2–3; Carpenter 37, 59, 93–95).[12] Now, Tolkien's everyday speech, to say nothing of his fiction, is genuinely archaic and will only grow more so as time progresses. Moreover,

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[11] Gergely Nagy makes a similar argument regarding the impression of mythological depth generated by Tolkien's intertextual allusions to the Túrin story: "Interpreting the corpus as a system of interconnected texts with specific textual relations…, we can say that Tolkien's works are essentially similar to primary-world mythological corpora" (252). Nagy does not draw the specific comparison between readership and Volk, though the relation is implicit.

[12] Cf. Flieger on the influence of Owen Barfield's notion of semantic unity on Tolkien's invented languages (*Splintered Light* 34-44, 67-68).

since *The Hobbit* was first published in 1937, Tolkien's tales have been told and re-told over multiple generations (indeed, across several artistic mediums too), establishing a sense of mythic grandeur. In fact, it would not be at all surprising to find that Tolkien's stories have more cultural purchase today than many classical myths.

Still, development over time is only one of Fimi's qualifications for "myth," which begs the question: How does Tolkien's legendarium fare according to Fimi's other three qualifications: a shared habitat, a shared language, and the pursuit of a shared cultural identity? At first glance, quite poorly. Tolkien's readers share neither a habitat nor a language in the conventional sense. *The Lord of the Rings* has been published in at least thirty-eight different languages and read on every inhabited continent.[13] This lack of linguistic and geographical cohesion would pose a serious problem for a traditional Volk, but Tolkien's readership needs to be considered in the context of his transnational aims. Tolkien's fiction endeavours to provide an open imaginative space for intellectual and ethical experimentation beyond borders, a project that has often been dismissively called "escapism." In fact, Tolkien frequently described his works as escapist, though without the pejorative connotation ("On Fairy-Stories" 381). To him, escape was simply one of three basic functions of fantasy that, when taken together, I argue, offer a transnational cultural ideal in which his Volk could actively participate through the act of reading.

In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien names these three functions Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. Recovery he characterizes as something akin to the modern concept of defamiliarization, through which we can regain a fresh view of the ordinary by situating it alongside the fantastic (373). Escape and Consolation he links fairly closely. The former he describes as "the Escape of the Prisoner," through which we can imaginatively experience the desired as the real (376). The latter he associates with the happy ending, specifically the eucatastrophe, which involves a turn from despair to hope and "a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (384). Taken together, these three elements constitute Tolkien's ethic of fantasy. In this ethic, Tolkien posits an idealized way

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[13] The number of translations varies by source. HarperCollins listed thirty-eight official translations on the FAQ section of their website circa 2006. The publisher has since removed that information from its website, leaving the precise number a matter of some speculation among collectors.

of thinking achievable through fantasy. Whereas traditional Volks were unified in their common pursuit of a cultural identity, Tolkien's readership comes together in the common pursuit of a transcultural identity predicated on the presence, or at least the perceived presence, of a particularly early-twentieth-century romantic medievalist worldview in the legendarium. A detailed analysis of Tolkien's delicate balance between nostalgia and disillusion, romance and realism, lies beyond the scope of this paper.[14] However, the crucial point remains that Tolkien envisions a cultural identity exceeding national borders. In light of this transcultural focus, the international, multilingual composition of Tolkien's Volk naturally follows.[15]

      Finally, Tolkien promotes the understanding of his readership as a proper Volk by eliminating himself as the author figure. In Roland Barthes' terms, Tolkien's readers—his collective Volk—are born "at the cost of the death of the Author" (1326). Although Tolkien remains an essential explanatory figure in the physical production of the text, he has taken on the Barthian role of the "scriptor," the shade of the Author "born simultaneously with the text, [who] is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing" (1324). Tolkien manages this Bilbo-esque vanishing trick through layered metafictional apparatuses, most notably, the "found manuscript" conceit. This literary framing device allows Tolkien to claim in his original preface to *The Hobbit* and the note "On Translation" to Appendix F of *The Return of the King* that, in actuality, the 'author' of the novels simply translated a found manuscript of the *Red Book of Westmarch*, a document containing the original memoirs of Frodo and Bilbo Baggins (Letters 442; *The Lord of the Rings* 1167). In so doing, Tolkien essentially writes himself out of his own story. Not only has Tolkien the Author died, he also replaces himself with an impersonal translator who bears a striking resemblance to Barthes' passionless, humourless, emotionless scriptor (1325). Combined with the previously discussed epistemological uncertainty stemming from variant narratives, Tolkien's seemingly deliberate creation of a scriptor figure renders any reading of authorial intentions fallacious. We cannot know what the Author intended, aside from the

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[14] Tolkien's relationship to romance, realism, and nostalgia has been studied for as long as scholarly interest in his works has existed. For early examples, see Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth* (on romance 13-19; realism 135-36) or Frank Bergmann's "The Roots of Tolkien's Tree."

[15] The relationship between Tolkien's legendarium and his readership is analogous, not identical, to that between primary-world mythology and historical Volks, a distinction Nagy notes as well (240-41, 247, 250, 252). Since members of Tolkien's ahistorical, transnational Volk identify as fans or readers rather than literal descendants of a historical or mythological past, his readership may not be a Volk in the historical sense—but it is, in a sense, a Volk.

fact that he wanted to keep his intentions unknowable. Thus, the responsibility falls on the readers to find meaning collectively in the vast uncertainty of Tolkien's legendarium. In this respect, Tolkien's fiction succeeds as a modern transnational national myth.

When Tolkien began writing his legendarium in the early twentieth century, his project must have seemed absurd. Today, through the subtlety of his metafictional conceits and the unique circumstances stemming from his curious posthumous publication history, Tolkien's stories breathe in much the same manner as their traditional mythological counterparts. Because Tolkien's myths persist in a state that is perpetually uncertain and temporally distant, they achieve now what was impossible during his own lifetime: They become something like true myths. Though scholars such as Fimi have argued that Tolkien's fiction lacks the requisite folk-narrative basis to constitute a mythology, the transnational, transcultural quality of his Volk suggests that Tolkien may actually have underestimated the scope of his project. His was not a mythology for England, but rather a mythology for the modern world, and as we drift further away from Tolkien's early-twentieth-century cultural context, his stories become increasingly indecipherable from the very myths that inspired them:

> 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 feet,
> Until it joins some larger way
> Where many paths and errands meet.
> And whither then? I cannot say. (*The Lord of the Rings* 48)

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