

An Eulogy of Finitude

Anthropology, Eschatology and Philosophy of History in Tolkien

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An undeclared love and a latent polemic

“I'm not a philosopher, but an experimenter”

Tolkien, *Notion Club Papers*

In his works Tolkien never refers to philosophers by name^[1], neither classical figures such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer or Marx, nor his contemporaries such as Freud, Bergson, Croce, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Husserl, Popper or Ryle. However, although he does not cite Kant, he does make use of the Kantian neologism “noumenon”^[2]; the ideas of *perennis philosophia* (a syncretic compound of ancient and medieval traditions) are also frequently employed, but without reference to sources. Tom Shippey thinks that Tolkien did not mention philosophers like Plato, Boethius and others – in spite of his knowledge of them – because of his anticlassicistic bias, and, moreover because – since he wanted to bring the native English literature out – he could not find English philosophers before Chaucer's times^[3]. A clear example may be found in *Note 8* of the self-commentary Tolkien made on *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth* (*The Debate of Finrod and Andreth*); the note discusses “desire” and distinguishes three kinds: “natural” desire which is shared by all members of a species, “personal” desire (“the feeling of the lack of something, the force of which primarily concerns oneself, and which may have little or no reference to the general fitness of things”) and “illusionary” desire, which obstructs the understanding that things are not as they should be and leads to the delusion that they are as one would wish them to be^[4]. This distinction is the same made by Thomas Aquinas in an article^[5] in *Summa Theologiae*, a work which Carpenter says was present on Lewis's bookshelf during the Inklings' evening meetings^[6] and which Claudio Testi tells me that he knows Tolkien to have possessed^[7].

Another undeclared thomistic point: the difference between the two kinds

of “Hope”, “Admir” and “Estel”. In the *Athrabeth* Andreth reflects about the nature of Hope: «'What is hope?' she said. 'An expectation of good, which though uncertain has some foundation in what is known? Then we have none.' 'That is one thing that Men call "hope",' said Finrod. 'Amdir we call it, "looking up". But there is another which is founded deeper. Estel we call it, that is "trust". It is not defeated by the ways of the world, for it does not come from experience, but from our nature and first being. If we are indeed the Eruhin, the Children of the One, then He will not suffer Himself to be deprived of His own, not by any Enemy, not even by ourselves. This is the last foundation of Estel'./.../Among the Atani /.../ it is believed that healing may yet be found, or that there is some way of escape. But is this indeed Estel? Is it not Amdir rather but without reason: mere flight in a dream from what waking they know: that there is no escape from darkness and death?»[\[8\]](#). In the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas distinguishes “spes” as a pre-moral “passio” (feeling) - which belongs even to drunk people and brute animals and whose content is “bonum futurum arduum possibile adipisci”[\[9\]](#) - from “spes” as a theological virtue, of which he writes: “spes non innititur principaliter gratiae iam habitae, sed divinae omnipotentiae et misericordiae, per quam etiam qui gratiam non habet eam consequi potest, ut sic ad vitam aeternam perveniat. De omnipotentia autem Dei et eius misericordia certus est quicumque fidem habet./.../quod aliqui habentes spem deficiant a consecutione beatitudinis, contingit ex defectu liberi arbitrii ponentis obstaculum peccati, non autem ex defectu divinae omnipotentiae vel misericordiae, cui spes innititur. Unde hoc non praeiudicat certitudini spei.”[\[10\]](#)

Further references to ancient and medieval philosophers have been pointed out by Tolkien scholars: Plato[\[11\]](#), Plotinus and Augustine[\[12\]](#), Boethius[\[13\]](#).

But: Tolkien never uses the word “philosophy” in his fiction, and amongst other published works only thrice in the lecture *On Fairy Stories* and thrice in the lecture on *Beowulf*. Thereafter this lexical ostracism – consciously wished for, I think - continues into Tolkien's scholars: in the two massive, erudite and up-to-date “Tolkien encyclopedias” by Drout and by Scull & Hammond there is no place - in the midst of hundreds of others - for the entry *Philosophy*[\[14\]](#).

With regard to writings not intended for publication, this word appears a few times in his *Letters*, usually as a synonym for “religion”[\[15\]](#) or with the meaning of generalized “theory”[\[16\]](#), but also at times in more strict sense, such as when he writes that the word “Ent” has slightly philosophical overtones, or that he does not believe that there can be philosophers able to deny the possibility of reincarnation[\[17\]](#), or when he explains the significance of the Ring of Power or speaks of the moral corruption present in Eddison's novels[\[18\]](#). Sometimes though, philosophy as rational knowledge is explicitly

distinguished from religion, e.g. when he says that the Hobbits might have misunderstood Aragorn's miraculous healings because of their lack of philosophical and scientific knowledge, or when he makes it clear that although religion had a minor role among the Faithful of Númenor the same could not be said regarding philosophy and metaphysics, or when he observed that in *The Lord of the Rings (LotR)* evil and falsity are represented mythically whereas good and truth are represented in a fashion more "historical and philosophical" than "religious"[19]. The "home" of philosophy is, according to him, "in ancient Greece"[20] (and not in Germany, which he considered "home" of philology[21]), for the reason that "southern" mythology rests on deeper foundations than that from the north, and so must lead "either to philosophy or anarchy"[22]. In the aborted *The Notion Club Papers* the word appears twice: once in reference to the character Rupert Dolbear (who is also interested in psychoanalysis and often falls asleep during discussions) and once in reference to the character Michael Ramer (a philologist alter-ego of Tolkien), who says that he is *not* a philosopher, but rather an "experimenter"[23].

These occurrences (or, better, non-occurrences) of the names of philosophers[24] or the word "philosophy" bring to mind Carpenter's reconstruction of a typical Inklings' session[25]: when they are together, the friends talk of many things: the war under way, *LotR*, the philosophy of history, literary criticism, Shakespeare, religion, ethics. But when they refer to thinkers by name, they do so polemically, disparaging "contemporary thought"[26]. They also make me think of Tom Shippey – an intellectual often identified with his hero Tolkien – who says he knows nothing of philosophy, but also demonstrates a certain (latent) polemical attitude towards it, calling philologists "tough minded" and philosophers "tender minded"[27]. Perhaps both Tolkien and Shippey were thinking of, on one hand, the abstruse and often essentially empty philosophy of 19th-century German idealism and 20th-century French and German existentialism and, on the other, the differently abstruse and differently empty "Oxbridge Analytical Philosophy" which was already strong before the Second World War and afterwards dominant in the English-speaking academic world[28]. In Tolkien we find respect (though not *declared* love) for ancient and medieval philosophy, together with scepticism or at least lack of interest regarding modern and contemporary philosophy.

And maybe this happened – as we hinted to – because of rather extrinsic circumstances, I mean of social context e interpersonal relations, as Shippey thinks: "philosophy - why does Tolkien not mention it? I suppose I can only say that unlike Lewis he never took the philosophy part of the Oxford Classics course, so maybe he felt that he was professionally ill-equipped - Oxford is always full of philosophers. Maybe he felt that that was Lewis's business. Or he could just have decided to keep his thoughts to himself." [29] And also Ross Smith (*Inside Language. Linguistic and Aesthetic Theory in*

Tolkien, Walking Tree Publishers, 2007, pp. 140-141) writes that even if there are no mentions of Tolkien on analytical philosophy, Tolkien was nevertheless close friend of C. S. Lewis who opposed it and especially A. J. Ayer.

But – as we already saw and shall see below - we find in Tolkien an attraction towards themes which are central to the philosophical tradition: ethics, aesthetics, anthropology, history and religion.

Summing up: a strong concern for philosophical themes[30], combined with a latent polemical attitude towards the way in which these are treated by recent and contemporary philosophers!

Anthropology

Which themes, then? Verlyn Flieger agrees with Tolkien's assertion: the principal theme is death; Charles Nelson considers other subjects to be central[31]; W. A. Senior thinks that the central concern is the "sense of loss" of which death is but one form[32]; Tom Shippey observes that although to Tolkien it "*seemed* that the central theme was death"[33], he himself sees the "ideological" and "philosophical" nucleus of Tolkien's work as being about providence[34].

Tolkien is of course a great storyteller and – for example on the subject of death – presents us with expressive images such as that of Gildor Inglorion and the other High Elves, who in the woods of the Shire are aware they are meeting "mortals" (Hobbits), but he also loves to philosophize "behind the scenes", for example in the *Letters* and other writings not intended for publication, such as *Laws and Customs among the Eldar* and *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth* and in his various explanatory comments on these fictional writings[35]. And here he discusses traditional anthropological and theological themes of body and soul and God's plan for these; death for him is always the "severance" of the two "components", which should remain united. The Elf Finrod says to Wisewoman Andreth: do you not think that the separation of soul and body could be experienced as a liberation, as a returning home?; and Andreth replies: no, we do not think so because this would be to disparage the body and is a thought of Darkness, for in the incarnate it is unnatural.[36]

As Ralph C. Wood writes, this is a "radical non-Platonic turn"[37] And Claudio Testi, too, writes: philosophically "approximately one could say that it seems to be an Aristotelian element in a Platonic context"[38]. Damien Casey as well: theologically Tolkien is aware that the heart of Christianity is the incarnation, notwithstanding the atrophy of this heritage in the Platonic tradition[39].

This "non-Platonic turn", Wood acutely explains, is also an implicit - but

interesting and well-founded – explanation of the motivations behind Platonic dualism: it would seem that Men, or rather their “souls”, possess the memory of “another world” from which they have become estranged and to which they seek to return (the Platonic soul which tends towards its original Hyperuranic homeland), *but* Andreth denies this, for her soul and body are each essential to the other, and thus their “severance” is a calamity caused by Melkor. So the “nostalgia” that the Elves have noticed in Men is *not* the desire for a world different to this one, but rather an effort to return to the harmony and unity between body and spirit which were lost by Men in the rebellion at Ilúvatar, and remain lost in corrupt Arda. Plato, that is, confuses the moral and theological problem with the anthropological and metaphysical, indicating “another world” for the “soul” when he should have indicated moral conversion for Men[40]. Casey comments with similar perception that the Platonic “salvation” to “another world” is merely an escape from evil and pain, but which does not in fact save Man’s history, his identity, his own unique and unrepeatable human reality (which accords with God’s will); in order to save these things the salvation of *this* world must be included[41].

Although the original Jewish/Christian message is both non-Platonic and in some respects anti-Platonic, it has for many centuries been spread widely by means of Platonic categories. Tolkien is, however, a Christian of the 20th century, a century in which theology and Christian spirituality have strongly criticized the fundamental category of Platonism, so-called “dualism” (a category which had already been philosophically opposed, in different ways, by both Hegelianism and 19th-century Marxist and positivist materialism), and he follows the debate which for him was contemporary, observing explicitly, for example, that his friend Lewis was not philosophically a dualist, but had a “dualist” imagination[42]. And this was because, notes Christopher Garbowski, “a general philosophical movement” had influenced Tolkien: in this the value accorded to psychosomatic phenomena had made obsolete a material conception of the separate “soul”, thus permitting a return to biblical monism[43].

In “this” world Happiness is arduous and - in practice – experimented only as “salvation”. Shippey recalls an old Scottish tale – that Tolkien knew – in which an Elf asks an aged human if salvation is possible for a being such as she, and he replies: no, salvation is only for the sinful sons of Adam[44]. Why only for the sinners? One might say: by definition, as Jesus said (“I have not come to save the righteous, but the sinners”, in other words everyone) and remember that for many centuries Christianity considered the “second death” central: the death of the soul, psychic death, and not the first (“Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it”).

In fact mankind can think of death only as *quia est*, not as *quod est*, for we know that it exists, but not what it is, because we cannot form an idea based on experience, neither a conscious idea nor an unconscious one.

Sigmund Freud – in all phases of his thought - was convinced of this. Summarizing and commenting upon Freud's notions about death, the Freudian psychoanalyst Franco De Masi writes that the "idea" we have of death we can construct only on the basis of experiences from life, for example on the basis of experiences of relationships which are all ultimately marked by separation or mourning[45]: this leads us to imagine death as a sort of life in which we perceive ourselves to be isolated from all other human beings, or in other words the idea we have of death is that of "psychic death", since our psychic life is formed, develops and is maintained through interpersonal relationships. Many psychoanalysts have observed in relation to their clinical cases that such an "idea" of death may assume a devastating concreteness in psychotic patients; in these people physical death becomes a terrible prospect, because for them it constitutes the limit which puts an end to the possibility of correcting their psychic death – the notion that they are inconsistent and without significance for others[46]. Vincent Ferré, in the section *L'Aliénation et la Folie* of his book rightly observes that in *LotR* the Ring either drives people mad or attempts to do so (Boromir, Gandalf, Galadriel, Aragorn, Bilbo, Frodo, Gollum)[47].

Amongst the psychotics to be found in Tolkien's stories are the kings of Numenor such as Ar-Pharazon and the Nazgûl (ex-Kings), who have in common the search for power and the search for immortality; in both groups the latter seems connected to the former. The evasion of death is sought for the personal and unconscious motive that the striving after power has led to an empty life, without meaning, and the character then tries to find more time because unable to accept his own "completion", unable to reach an end. Whereas, as Tolkien wrote in a letter, "Death is not an Enemy!.../the message was the hideous peril of confusing true 'immortality' with limitless serial longevity. Freedom from Time, and clinging to Time. The confusion is the work of the Enemy and one of the chief causes of human disaster. Compare the death of Aragorn with a Ringwraith." [48]. The paradoxical logical implication of this step is that "*true immortality*" *coincides with death*.

Immediately afterwards, Tolkien adds: "The Elves call 'death' the Gift of God (to Men). Their temptation is different: towards a fainéant melancholy, burdened with Memory, leading to an attempt to halt Time". For the Elves the temptation is not to seek to have more time, as Ar-Pharazon and the Nazgûl try to do, but to stop time. There are hence two different "escapes" from that "Death" which coincides with "true Immortality": "serial longevity" (that of power-thirsty human kings) and the "hoarding memory" of the Elves[49]. Despite the pompous title of "Immortals" which other less long-lived Middle-earth peoples accord to the Elves, this is not strictly true, for theirs is "strictly longevity co-extensive with the life of Arda"[50].

These two "escapes" from Death/Immortality – via either "serial" or "natural" longevity – have different aims: for the Slaves of Power, the wish to have "more future" (albeit a future which is not unknown, open to change, but

“serial”) in order to increase power (and thus unconsciously deceive oneself that in this way one’s life will acquire meaning). The Elves, on the contrary, desire to have “less future” due to their idealization of the past, since their memory of the past is not an instrument which serves for the future, but rather a “hoarding”, an avid treasuring. The Slaves of Power have no memory of the past; the Elves have a “burdened” memory. The common feature between the two groups is that neither believe in or hope for an unknown future, open and new. And both are attracted to power! The Elves too seek a form of power, that of being able to stop change, which specifically means ageing, because they would like to keep things “fresh and fair”. And this lesser power of theirs is tied to the greater power of Sauron and the Slaves, and in fact when the latter fall, the Elves’ power is finished [51]. It is as if when the power which tends always to dominate others’ wills (and needs longevity to succeed) collapses, the idealization of the past and refusal of change (ageing) also come to an end[52].

In summary, we can say that remembering the past is a good thing only if it serves to clarify future moral action (“*historia magistra vitae*”), as Nietzsche and Croce emphasized in their criticism of antiquarian historiography[53]. Since the Elves in Tolkien’s fiction represent an aspect of real anthropology[54], we might say that by means of the Elves’ natural and the Slaves’ serial longevity he wishes to portray (amongst other things!) a pathological aspect of human nature (the “psychotic limit”), the distortions that life which lasts “too long”, avoiding contact with Death (which is the only “true immortality”), may provoke[55]. This observation concerning the distortions caused by “too long” is also supported, I think, by features of Tolkien’s own life, as I will try to demonstrate below. Now, though, I will discuss the philosophical consequences of this anthropology, for example on the eschatology – the reflection on “final things”[56] – or, as is also said, on the “ultimate purpose”[57] of human life.

Eschatology

“Because of death we all live in a city without walls”

Epicurus, *Letters*

“To take life seriously means to accept resolutely, rigorously, as serenely as possible, its finiteness”

Norberto Bobbio, *De Senectute*

Franco De Masi rightly comments that it is not easy to discern to what extent the *thought* of death is an obstacle to life and how much, on the

contrary, it aids reflection on the value and meaning of life [58]. It seems clearer that the *negation* of death leads to blindness to the real experience of the passage of time. This negation does not coincide with religious belief in “immortality”; it is in fact necessary to understand exactly what is meant by this concept [59]. The great historical religions have at least two aspects: one profound and authentic, and one superficial and escapist. Garbowski observes, with good reason, that “a very simplistic vision of afterlife in the common religious imagination causes many to think of immortality in terms of what Tolkien called serial living: a continuation of life as we know it, even if at a higher plane. This might be why instead of dealing directly with the problem of an afterlife in his mythology, the author proposes *the artistic construction of the Elf Beings themselves who demonstrate the shortcomings of immortality as simple deathlessness/.../* This might partially be understood as death being a rest from a world full of suffering and a life that ultimately does not offer full answers” [60]. Shippey notes that whereas in *Paradise Lost* Milton considers death to be a just punishment for sin, “the *Silmarillion* seems to want to persuade us to see death as a potential gift or reward” [61].

Paradox! For Tolkien the “reward” is not a sort of “reawakening” followed by a sort of continuation of life, surrounded by lights, celestial music and in the embrace of loved ones, as in popular fantasies of immortality, but it *is* death (“true immortality”)!

Here we should remember that though the philosophical tradition – even in the Christian one, as in Aquinas [62] - the so-called “eternity” is quite different from “endless time”: Time concerns Change, while instead Eternity concerns Immutability, “*tota simul existens*”, and therefore, if immortality is meant as “eternal life”, it is *not* a life lasting for an endless time. Rightly Renée Vink observes: “Just like true immortality has often been confused with serial longevity, there is a related concept that has often been confused with neverending time. I am referring to eternity. Though Tolkien does not use the word, I would venture to say that ‘eternity’ is the state of existence where what he calls true immortality has its proper place. Death may not be the enemy, but Time surely is.” [63]

Tolkien writes that death is *not* punishment for sin, but inherent to human nature (biological *and* psychological), and attempting to avoid it is both *wicked* (because in conflict with nature) and *stupid* “because Death is a release from the weariness of Time” [64]. Indeed, these two causes of escapism seem more likely to come to mind to those who are “getting on in years”: a young person might well disapprove of both, and particularly the second. And yet the young also die. John Garth commented that the poem *Kortirion*, which Tolkien wrote in 1915 at the age of 23, possessed typically Tolkienian melancholy for a world that was drifting away; the summer he regards with nostalgia could be seen as his childhood or the pre-war past, and the winter as the only (lethal) future offered to young people like himself [65].

We know, though, that Tolkien's future was not to be war-time death, but marriage to Edith, children, philology at Oxford, writing novels and worldwide literary success. What we may imagine about the future is one thing; what it turns out to be is quite another. Two philosophers who were Tolkien's contemporaries, Croce (born in 1866) and Popper (born in 1902), have strongly emphasized that the future is completely unknowable, not a field to be studied, but for the application of our will, of our programme of action [66]. Shippey, commenting upon the development of *LotR* with respect to the Mirror of Galadriel and the Palantirs, notes that Tolkien wants to warn us of a great danger: "too much looking into the future can erode the will to action in the present"; one should not "speculate", but rather "get on with one's work" with decision and perseverance, and "this mental attitude may be rewarded beyond hope" [67].

The "final things" are Death (the end of life), Judgement (of the significance of one's life), Hell (if it had none), Heaven (if it had meaning) and all the four of them always (and only) look to the future. And this is true both for the old and for the young. In the song that Frodo (who was a young Hobbit, "just out of his tweens") sings in the Old Forest it is said – to *encourage* the wayfarer, not to deter him! - that "to east and west every forest ends"; Shippey comments that it is difficult not to see a reference to life and death (the "end" of the forest) in these words; the travellers will set off towards the light of the sun [68]. In fact every life has not always existed and does not exist forever, but is de-fined by its limits. And why, according to Tolkien, does this finiteness serve to create hope? If it was only because our present ills will cease with death, this would be merely the Epicurean idea of ataraxia and would not be applicable to a young person in good physical and mental condition. Bill Davis suggests a more interesting motivation: life's finiteness can be considered good because it holds out the prospect of escaping the repetition of things already known, whether far off (for the young) or nearby (for the old). [69]

More profoundly, it may contain the message that non-transience itself would be a bad thing, because it would involve a necessary fixation of pride: anything which we believe to keep "forever" is a source of pride or at least leads us to forget our limits [70], our defects, and blinds us to seeing *other* things and *new* things. Other and new things turn up every day, but it is difficult to see them or- once noticed – to take them in; various fears and aspects of pride block us. At the end of his book on philosophers and death (their thoughts on death and their actual deaths!), Simon Critchley observes that it is as though the life of each one was held in the grip of pre-existing structures: the evolution of the species, the historical situation, the personal Freudian "family story"; and the desires which such structures provoke in us threaten to suffocate us. We cannot refuse these unasked-for gifts of nature and culture, but we can transform the way in which we accept them and we can stand more fully in the light that throws the shadow of our

mortality: “it is my wager that if we can begin to accept our limitedness, then we might be able to give up certain of the fantasies of infantile omnipotence; to be a creature is to accept our limitedness in a way that does not result in disaffection and despair; it is rather the condition for courage and endurance”[71].

A sense of humility could therefore open us to “final things” (to see different and new things), and an awareness of death could encourage such humility, as Christian and Buddhist traditions of asceticism have emphasized for centuries. With respect to two episodes in *LotR*, Shippey writes: what does it mean that Frodo in the Dead Marshes sees the faces of Elves and Orcs similarly covered in algae and dirt? And what does it mean that Merry in the Barrow sees the face of the dead Nobleman overlying that of the Barrow-wight? Perhaps this: that all glory decomposes[72]? It would seem so, at least for Tolkien, who wrote in a letter that the victors cannot enjoy the victory as they had imagined, for the more they struggle to achieve it, the more victory will be a delusion[73].

Perhaps in death there is not only the humility (and relief) of finiteness. Bearing in mind Tolkien’s Christian ideology, Shippey sees a connection between the theme of the Resurrection and a moment in the *LotR*: when Gandalf is about to be struck by the Lord of the Ringwraiths (who calls himself “Death”), at that precise moment a cock crows and, as though in reply, the sound of war horns is heard. It is a reference to the New Testament account of the cock’s crow which Peter heard and wept bitterly, immediately recalling Jesus’ words: this sound means that the Resurrection has occurred and from that moment Peter’s desperation and his fear of death have been overcome, that day follows night, that life conquers death, that a larger cycle exists above the smaller, that he who fears for his life will lose it and that dying fearlessly is not a defeat[74].

Here Shippey suggests that the Resurrection coincides – in personal reality, not mythical fantasy – with the choice of death (the future martyr Peter) for love (of Jesus). Bill Davis notes that Arwen prefers finiteness with love to infinity without, almost as though Tolkien were saying that it is impossible to have love without having death, and that even if death is not chosen for its own sake, then love is, and death accepted as the necessary price[75]. Sam, says Shippey, returns to his home in the Shire not out of necessity, but having another option which he refuses – that of going with Frodo to the Undying Lands. He, just like Arwen, chooses mortality for love (love for Rosie, Elanor and the Hobbits of the Shire); this choice – according to Shippey – makes the ending of *LotR* sad, “but while on the one hand Sam has come to Death, for love, he has also come back to life, for he has his long and successful life ahead of him”[76]. Arwen could have gone to the Undying Lands taking with her the *memory* of her love for Aragorn, but – writes Richard C. West – chooses to live this love and accept death that will take her beyond the “boundaries of the world”[77]. These Undying Lands seem, then,

to offer rest and escape from pain, but lacking in “finiteness” because they are within, not outside, the “boundaries of the world”; Death, on the other hand, seems tied to both “finiteness” (beyond the “boundaries of the world”) and love.

The word “love” has many meanings, generally not incompatible but various. In philosophical and religious traditions it is often emphasized that love is not only a sentiment, but also a concrete action for good, that it has both a content and a purpose: love for one’s family, for one’s country or for science are linked by the idea of having a task to perform, a mission. If “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...” (John 3:16), then the Platonic idea of life as “exile” is mistaken; life is rather a “mission”. Damien Casey observes: “The difficulty with the Platonic flight from the world that is the more traditional path of sanctity is that it leaves Morgoth’s Ring intact. The salvation of the world entails that the ring of the world must also be taken up into God. And it is we who are to be the agents of the world’s divinisation.”[78]

And Shippey – commenting on the “walking songs” which appear throughout *LotR* up until when Frodo sings one before leaving Middle-earth – notes that they express a pain that is ancient, although soothed by the earth’s beauty[79]. But why this suffering? For a world which does not die? And what world would that be? For Plato, it is something “other” from that in which we live. But, if we take our distance from Plato, perhaps we can manage to see that the “world which does not die” – for which we experience this nostalgic pain – is none other than this one, but rather something in this one: the moral values which should be followed in this world, values for which we feel nostalgia since we live far from them as a result of our various defects. Our mission is to pursue them for love of themselves and of the world which needs them[80].

When Robert Gilson, a friend during adolescence of his and Tolkien’s, was killed in the war, Geoffrey Smith wrote to Tolkien that he did not care whether their friendly and intellectual fellowship had social success or received explicit recognition, because it was spiritual in nature and as such transcended mortality and was “as permanently inseparable as Thor and his hammer”; the influence to be exerted on the world was “a tradition which forty years from now will still be as strong to us (if we are alive, and if we are not) as it is today”[81]. On the other hand, the truth is that we all have a mission, even those considered “bad”: Tolkien wrote in a letter that there are people who *appear* “damnable”, but their “damnability” is not measurable on a macrocosmic scale (and in fact could be a force for good)[82]. If even those who appear wicked to us have a mission, how can we visualize or understand *our* mission in life? Tolkien wrote, in a letter to his niece, “Why did God include us in his plan? We can only say that he has done, and therefore we cannot reply to the question of what is the meaning of life”[83].

This sentence of Tolkien's is full of humility, limpidly Socratic and open to "last things" and "ultimate purpose". Anna Mathie observes that "the closing chapters of *LotR* are a portrait of mortality"; the Fellowship of the Ring has achieved its mission, Gandalf and the High Elves have won the war, Frodo has saved the world, and now they are leaving Middle-earth and many good things will be forgotten[84]. Thus the "missionary" leaves, but the effects of the mission remain in the world. Shippey writes about the brooklet which runs in Mordor, seemingly for no purpose, but which is actually as useful as any water could be (to Frodo, Sam and Middle-earth): apparent failure, but success in practice[85]. That which seems to be the death of the streamlet becomes instead a cause of life; the death of each of us - Tolkien perhaps implies here - might seem to render useless the life of each of us, whereas a grain of wheat that does not die does not bear fruit. Our personal, individual life is finished, bounded by many things, especially death; but it is - perhaps! - part of a plan which includes it but extends beyond.

Philosophy of History

"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.'

Sam e Frodo, *The Stairs of Cirith Ungol*

"I am historically minded. Middle-earth is not an imaginary world."

Tolkien, *Letter n. 183*

With reference to TCBS, their intellectual friendship club, Geoffrey Smith wrote to his friend Tolkien shortly before his death in the war: "the death of one of its members cannot, I am determined, dissolve the TCBS /.../ Death can make us loathsome and helpless as individuals, but it cannot put an end to the immortal four! /.../ May God bless you, my dear John Ronald, and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there, if such be my lot "[86]. Similarly, after the death of their friend Rob Gilson, Christopher

Weisman wrote to Smith: “I believe we are not now getting on without Rob; we are getting on with Rob. It is by no means nonsense, though we have no reason to suppose, that Rob is still of the TCBS”[87]. In the words of these young men it is as if their aspirations and experiences of friendship were an immortal “X” over and above the lives of human individuals.

This idea is transferred by Tolkien to *LotR*, with his sense of the profound, drawing on a continuing memory of people and episodes from the past, which structured and contributed to the events lived through as present happenings by the characters, as Shippey has observed[88]; his intention is to consign to future generations (the 'Red Book of Westmarch'!) the memory of present happenings which will become the past, as Ferré says[89]. And it is not merely remembering: the plot of the story and the characters' interpersonal relationships continually communicate and demonstrate to us how individual destinies are closely and necessarily interwoven, in life as in death; the relationship between Frodo and Sam (and Gollum!) is a good example of this[90]. This idea of the interpersonal quality of salvation, typical of twentieth-century Christian theology – it is not a coincidence that in the letter quoted above Weisman mentioned the “Communion of Saints” – which strongly emphasized throughout the 20th century the biblical and patristic message of “collective eschatology”[91]. Shippey notes that the entire story of Middle-earth is bound by a condition of interpersonality: it is like a Limbo in which the un-baptised dead await the Day of Judgement (for Tolkien, the events he narrated were set in pre-Christian times) when they will be reunited with their baptised and saved descendants.

But during the course of the 20th century, outside of the visible churches (perhaps earlier than inside them), the widespread sensitivity of the century for “interpersonality” was manifested in many fields: in political movements, pedagogy, clinical psychology, historiographical research and philosophy. Though he made no explicit references, Tolkien probably knew the philosopher Robin G. Collingwood[92]; they were in the same places at similar times (both Fellows at Pembroke College), and the latter was well known in academia and outside for his writings on the philosophy of history and his specific historical research regarding Roman Britain. Collingwood's most important work [93] is *The Idea of History* (1946); its central idea is that of “re-enactment”: historical thought (not only on the part of professional historians, but everyone) consists of *re-living* the thoughts of people from the past[94]. This idea of re-living inspired the two “time travel” novels which Tolkien left unfinished: *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers*[95]; Verlyn Flieger has discovered that in these Tolkien was directly inspired by a 1927 book, *An Experiment with Time*, by the non-academic philosopher J. W. Dunne[96]. The idea of “immortality” which it contains – which Tolkien abandoned in his novels – features people who, in dreamlike or excited mental states, cause the reincarnation of persons or repetition of events from the past, however remote. The probable influence of Collingwood on Tolkien

– if it should ever be proved – would have been different to that of Dunne, because he makes reference not to excited or dreamlike states, but to fully conscious and rational – critical – thought: Aragorn and Arwen “re-live” the stories of Beren and Luthien inasmuch as they remember them and think about them, but they also judge them, and thus add to them in an original and creative way.

At the root of the philosophy of history, several fundamental choices must be made: one must decide, for example, if history is cyclic and thus “nihil sub sole novum” as – more than Qohèlet – the ancient Gentiles thought (for example, with great clarity, the emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius); or, as the ancient Jews held and subsequently our Western Christian civilization maintained, that history proceeds in a direction – perhaps unknown – and does not return and return again, so that there *is* something new under the sun.

The second option positions makes the theme of immortality relevant not so much to reincarnation or “re-enactment”, but rather to the idea of the relay-race of generations: every person and each generation leaves a unique and unrepeatable mark which irreversibly changes what will follow, included within the new that – in any case – emerges.

Tolkien wrote that every event had at least two aspects: one regarded the history of the individual, the other the history of the world[97]. Tolkien was concerned, at least in his fiction, with the “history of the world”. In the aftermath of the powerful historical philosophies of the 19th century (Hegelian, Marxist, Positivist), Tolkien found himself living in a period – the first half of the 20th century – in which the 19th-century lesson was repeated and over-abundantly varied: several classical and highly influential philosophies of history[98] such as those of Oswald Spengler[99] and Arnold Toynbee[100], together with others, intellectualist and extravagant such as that of Edmund Husserl[101] or terrible and obscure such as that of Alfred Rosenberg[102]. All somewhat pessimistic, perhaps not surprisingly given what was happening and was about to happen in Europe and the rest of the world. After the Second World War, this surfeit of philosophies of history contracted and disappeared. The appalling drama proved to be a decisive factor in the selection from and development of the 19th-century inheritance, which (like many others) was no longer considered and events took a different turn.

But Tolkien was a fully pre-war man and his *Silmarillion* and *LotR* are – amongst other things – stories about the philosophy of history. And in his letters he made explicit several of the links between this and actual world history[103]. Shippey writes that one might have thought that Tolkien, with parents and friends dead and in the midst of the Great War, might have wanted to construct a myth to justify a dream of escaping death, but he had “motives that were much more than personal” for doing this: to elaborate a myth of England (*for* England)[104]. Meaning, I think, that this myth would

have given nobility to the England of his time (as the *Aeneid* did to Rome at the critical moment of the end of the Republic), that of Churchill's "finest hour", in which the problem of personal life and death are grafted onto, and seek meaning from, the function of peoples in history[105]. Tolkien's "philosophy of history" is not pessimistic as were those in fashion at the time[106] that I referred to above: in the Age of Men Tolkien does express melancholy for the disappearance of Elvish Beauty, but not moral or other kinds of decadence! When he speaks of the fading of Elvish Beauty (or the Ents) and the coming of the Age of Men, Tolkien – unlike Spengler, Rosenberg or Husserl – does not give us message of "decadence", but instead one of "finiteness": his refusal to add to the already numerous "twilights of the West" then in vogue is made explicit, for example, in the dialogue between Gimli and Legolas at Minas Tirith.

As has been noted, the death of an individual for the preservation of his people is felt by many to be tolerable and just, and as a young soldier Tolkien saw the European nations' uncertain fate in the war through the lens of the Early Medieval period, when the destiny of small barbarian populations – like the Geats in *Beowulf* – hung from a thread, and he began to think that the extinction of peoples in history was the rule rather than the exception, and in Middle-earth, as in the European Great War, the principal theme is not individuals' mortality (and desire for immortality) – as in Goethe's *Faust* – but that of peoples; in the first half of the 20th century the nations of Europe, forgetting the idea of a universal empire of Christendom, sought "immortality in the mortal realm" with Wagnerian nationalism, just like Feanor, Galadriel and the rebel Eldars in the First Age[107].

My comment on this opinion is as follows: all nations behaved thus during the First World War, but during the second only some. England, for example, did not: it defended itself and in doing so defended the world, and afterwards accepted with good grace to lose, in this now changed world, its worldwide Empire. W. A. Senior shares this view: in Tolkien's "history of the world" we witness the destruction of Beleriand, Gondolin, Nargothrond and Doriath; Morgoth's slaughter of the Noldor, survived only by Galadriel, recalls the decimation of two generations of British men in two world wars, a loss which bled dry the British Empire and led to its gradual disintegration[108]. A disintegration of which of Tolkien (like many other Britons) did not disapprove! [109] The finite nature of the histories of peoples, like that of the lives of individuals, is viewed with sadness, but not with disapproval: "true immortality" (it must be remembered!) coincides with finiteness, with death.

This meaning of "immortality", as a unique – and finite! – contribution that peoples and persons make to the history of the world, is applied in Tolkien's fiction to both Elves and Men. But there is another meaning of "immortality", which regards only the Elves. As I have tried to show in detail elsewhere[110], in Tolkien's world many events (wars, the fall of kings, cases of treachery etc.) occur without producing changes: a "generalized Medieval

period” lasts for thousands of years, devoid of the profound dynamics (Christianization, Renaissance, scientific revolution, birth of nation states, Enlightenment, political and industrial revolutions etc.) which make our actual history a true process of development. But Tolkien’s world is that of the three Ages dominated by “immortal” (or rather, long-lived) Elves: in fact, Tolkien’s fiction tells us nothing about the Age of Men.

Why? I wonder. The historical immobility makes sense, I believe, because it refers to the Time of the Elves. A history of Men without cultural and social change would be meaningless and would lead to theological scepticism and desperation: why would innumerable generations of individuals be born and die if it served no purpose for future generations, if it was part of no development, if it fulfilled no “mission”? Real antiquity certainly did experience historical changes, but ancient historiography (that of the Gentiles, not the Jews) was not aware of it, for it held human nature to be unchangeable and time cyclical; hence the profound scepticism of the traditional gods and the sense of desperation which – like a karstic river – re-emerges, despite their best intentions, in Polybius and Tacitus.

Tolkien’s Elves, on the other hand, live for thousands of years, so they can easily get a sense of the passage of time from their *individual* experiences: experiences of persons who, *during the course of their lives*, learn slowly and with effort, leave behind past errors, and mature morally. Through the Elves’ “immortality” Tolkien wants to talk about an aspect of human experience[111]. Not human *collective* experience, that which we call history, but the *single* experience of the individual, that which we call life. In fact, just as cultural and social change does not occur with the Elves collectively during the Three Ages, thus it is in the lifetime of each single man: his character does not alter, because the cultural and social characteristics of the world that formed it cannot be changed: a 13th-century man, be he Dante Alighieri or the most humble servant of the manor, could never think, feel or act like one of the 18th or 20th centuries, as the historians of “mentality” are well aware[112].

Although character does not change, the life of a man has meaning because he can modify his own response to it. “Free will” does not involve trying to be another person and to live an external and internal reality different from that decreed by destiny, but instead consists of trying to understand it (“know thyself”) and hence regard it *critically* – which are the good points and which the bad? – and adapt appropriately. The clearest example is Galadriel: in the First Age she is a proud Noldor princess who goes to Middle-earth against the wishes of the Valar, not to recover the Silmarils like Fëanor, but neither to moderate their leadership over the people like Fingolfin. In Middle-earth she sought “a realm at her own will”[113]. Galadriel at the end of the Third Age is a woman who no longer leaves the side of husband Celeborn[114], who secretly conserves the ring Nenyà, surveys the

movements of the enemy, gives hospitality and encouragement to the Fellowship of the Ring, refuses – in a memorable scene with Frodo – every prospect of dominion, goes with Elrond and Gandalf to the Grey Havens and leaves Middle-earth forever.

And this is moral maturation, which for Tolkien is the only change recorded during the history of the Elves, for this story – it seems to me – does not recount history (at least not most importantly), but life. And since the life of Men is much briefer than that of Elves, the former are much more “restless”, because they are more urgently called by the conscious and unconscious demand for the achievement of moral maturity prior to death. Christopher Garbowski emphasizes that in *Athrabeth*, Andreth interprets human restlessness negatively: unlike the *Ainulindalë*, for this woman death, which is not a gift of Iluvatar, is the cause of this agitation; all human resources including reason cannot penetrate death and only obscurity remains[115]. But – says Tolkien - Andreth is wrong! As Matthew Dickerson observes,[116] Men have a freedom which in some ways is more significant than that of the Elves, for whom the music of the Ainur is Fate; Men have the power to “give form to their lives” beyond music. In fact, for Tolkien free will is associated with mortality: “It is one with the gift of freedom that the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive”. [117]

Here as well then, we find the theme of “finitude”: the lifetime of individuals is finite, the life of peoples is also finite, and finite too (though not equal to nought) is the capacity of a person to deal with his own destiny (or character).

A moment in the life of Tolkien

“The days seem blank, and I cannot concentrate on anything.

I find life such a bore in this imprisonment”

Tolkien (*in retirement*)

“When is the moment to exit from the world? To be a philosopher is to learn to die”

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

A writer’s sources and inspirational themes may – justifiably – be studied for their intrinsic value, although Tolkien – who in fact foresaw to what length academics would have gone with regard to his own works – thought that “it is

the particular use in a particular situation of any motive, whether invented, deliberately borrowed, or unconsciously remembered that is the most interesting thing to consider”[118]. Let us try, then, to examine more closely the “particular situation” from which Tolkien drew most of his motives for death and immortality.

Claudio Testi calls the years 1956-1960 “the apex of Tolkien’s reflection”[119]; and in fact both in the works of fiction unpublished at the time (now published in the volume *The Morgoth’s Ring*) and in his letters - especially those of 1957-58 - we see a Tolkien who is more than ever a “philosopher”. The “fictional” writings of this period are in reality largely discussions and philosophical analyses of themes such as the nature of evil, love and hope, sexuality and faithfulness, death and immortality. On the last of these subjects, the apex is reached in *Athrabeth* in 1959, the year Tolkien retired. Humphrey Carpenter writes in his biography that from the Mid-Fifties he ceased to meet his friends regularly: the Inklings’ last years had revolved above all around reading *LotR*, by then finished, published and enjoying increasing international success. Now he passed his time mainly at home and wanted to dedicate himself to his beloved *Silmarillion*. But he was depressed and found his life tedious, almost a prison[120].

When his young friend Rob Gilson died in the war, Tolkien wrote to his other friend Smith that the “destiny” of their TCBS was “greatness”, to be an instrument in the hands of God, to be “a mover, a doer, even an achiever of great things”; now that Rob was dead, his “greatness” was revealed to have been that of a friend towards his companions; Tolkien still had those hopes and ambitions, but now felt himself to be an individual, not a member of that group, which was finished[121]. In this letter written by Tolkien at age 24 we see a person sensitive and capable of affection, but not nostalgic, looking towards the future rather than the past of his adolescence[122]. At the end of the Fifties the almost seventy-year-old Tolkien had been a “mover, a doer, even an achiever of great things”: his *LotR* had been received with enthusiasm by many people and would be by many more. He had wedded Edith, his “Luthien”, had the family to which he had ardently aspired, met new and congenial friends, in first place C. S. Lewis, and had been able to express his philologist’s vocation as professor at the University of Oxford. Why then the boredom, the prison?

Let’s try looking at things from another perspective: now his *magnum opus*, *LotR*, was finished and Tolkien had taken his leave of it; he was now retired and no longer a teacher, his children had grown up and left home, he but rarely saw Lewis and his other friends, he and Edith now began to experience directly the problems of old age. In his philosophical writings from those years he takes up again his thoughts on immortality; there are three sorts: 1) the “true” variety which coincides with the death of those, like Men, who have a “short span of life”; 2) the “mad” sort of those who are long-lived but become Slaves of Power, such as the Nazgûl; 3) the “melancholic” type of

the long-lived who become progressively less interested in the future and more in the past, such as the Elves.

Tolkien was thinking of three kinds of lives, one brief and two long. What had he in mind? Did the brief life remind him of his own parents and his TCBS friends who died young, with respect to whom he felt some guilt at having survived for so long? Did the long and mad life face him with the temptation to congratulate himself for the success of *LotR* and to try and increase his popularity (although this temptation seems to have been weak)? Did the long and melancholic life remind him of the important things in his life that were now in the past, now that he faced old age and increasing solitude?

Tolkien was not a narcissist like Heidegger (who made precise provisions in his will for the posthumous issue at regular intervals of his unpublished writings, so that he would continue to be talked about, a culture-infesting “Serial Spectre”![\[123\]](#)) and in fact referred to the popularity he gained through *LotR* as a “deplorable cultus”. He probably felt himself most at risk from the third sort of life – melancholic Elvish longevity – that life of which he wrote in a letter of this period: Elvish immortality too has a weakness, because the Elves yearn for the past and have no wish face change, so they also seek a (limited) power, that to preserve things from change[\[124\]](#).

Shippey underlines that Tolkien had always tried to prevent an important change in his own field of interest and activity: the academic extinction of the Venerable Comparative Philology[\[125\]](#). But in the letter cited previously Tolkien wrote that with the fall of Sauron’s Power the Elves’ efforts to preserve the past also fell to pieces! What does this idea mean? It occurs to me that with the fall of Hitlerian nationalism the efforts of philologists to preserve the academic and effective status of philology – which had been born and cultivated in its golden years for nationalistic purposes[\[126\]](#) – also disintegrated, or at least started to[\[127\]](#).

It also comes to mind that Tolkien, in that he was an Elf (i.e. an artist and scholar[\[128\]](#)), would have considered his own longevity to be “natural”: and Carpenter tells us that during these years and after, right up to the end, Tolkien continued to work indefatigably at fiction and philology. But as a Man, did he also see it as “natural” (or, rather, as “serial”?) that he survived his long-lost TCBS friends, together with the multitude who died in the Second World War (including the greatest medieval scholar of the 20th century, Marc Bloch, murdered by the Gestapo because he belonged to the French Resistance)? It is difficult to reply to these questions, but it seems to me necessary at least to ask them in the context of a serious consideration of Tolkien’s “artistic experiments” and “philosophical reflections” on Death and Immortality (that is, Not-Yet-Mortality)!

In a 1958 letter, Tolkien makes clear that the Elvish so-called immortality is not “true immortality”, but “strictly longevity coextensive with the life of Arda”[\[129\]](#). Arda: in other words, *thisWorld*! And – we know - the World

continued to exist throughout the Sixties and early Seventies of the 20th Century: Tolkien was of course “coextensive” at least to those decades, but did he perhaps feel himself “disappearing” or “fading” as he speculated about the Elves during the Age of Men?

A feeling, a temptation, probably. But – I believe – this was not dominant in his life: Carpenter narrates that the later years of Tolkien’s life were full, if not of interpersonal relations, at least the *desire* for contacts with his wife, children, fans, ex-colleagues, even with passing guests at the Miramar Hotel.... I am sure that he, as a Man, was able until the end to come out of himself and his “hoarding memories” and – through others’ love for him and his for them – to live in the present!

Before concluding, I must briefly turn also to Tolkien’s “Elvish” side, as a scholar of the human sciences and – especially – a great artist. Although he yearned to compose a “mythology for England”, as John Rateliff points out, the result was a “mythology for our times”, because *LotR* has been translated into 38 languages. The majority of his readers have never been to England, and those in Germany – England’s mortal enemy of sixty-five years ago – prefer this book to the Bible and the books of their fellow-German writer Thomas Mann[130]. Tolkien was able to witness this great public appreciation and he was amazed: after all, he had written *LotR* primarily for his own pleasure and as an “experiment” in the induction of “secondary beliefs”[131].

What did Tolkien mean by “experiment”? Carpenter has Tolkien say, on a typical Inklings’ Thursday evening: certain books reawaken desires that should not be reawakened, such as pornographic books, but the desires reawakened by books about fairies are of a different kind; he who reads pornography would like to live in reality situations similar to those described in print (and is disappointed when he does), whereas he who reads the chapter on Moria in *LotR* does not want to really “experiment” the dangers of that mine. Lewis replies: the pornographic imagination empties reality and renders it less appetizing, whilst the story of an enchanted forest has the effect that a child can then appreciate real forests more.[132]

Tom Shippey writes a most interesting thing about philology in his historical itinerary: the flourishing of this discipline in the 19th century led to the discovery of the Goths, Huns and other Northern cultures, and to the philologists of the time (and to Tolkien) it seemed possible to at least get close to reconstructing the “Lost Worlds” of these peoples. The philological technique of “reconstructing” inspired in them a romantic desire of this sort, whereas the philologists of today, including Shippey, consider it to be impossible to achieve: too few documents survive. If a reconstruction may be made of these Dark Ages, it is only by means of a novelist’s imagination, as William Morris and then Tolkien himself tried[133]. I personally suspect that when philology’s limits became apparent to Tolkien, not only in connection with its declining academic and social role which was mentioned above, but

also for the structural and intrinsic reasons recounted in this paragraph, he increasingly sought another path for the “re-enactment” which he wanted in his fiction, the writing that at times he called “my real work”.

But things are not quite that simple: on the one hand, in 1961 he still worked as a philologist for the critical edition of *Ancrene Wisse*, and on the other, the continual additions and changes made to the endless *Silmarillion* no longer had for Tolkien the same meaning that the composition of the *LotR* and the *Silmarillion* itself had had when, years previously, he had wanted to publish it together with *LotR*. Youth is not like old age! All things change (and pass): Tolkien was continually more aware – and he expressed this – that things had also changed in himself as a novelist, and his resources were not infinite. Tom Shippey, in his analysis of the 1965 allegorical fable *The Smith of Wootton Major*, emphasizes that Tolkien identifies with the blacksmith protagonist and adds that at that time Tolkien perceived that both philology and the World of Faerie (fiction, artistic creation) had by now finished to make their contribution to Tolkien the individual, although not to the others who would cultivate and develop them in their own ways[134]. In other words – with respect to the Nineteen-Thirties when Tolkien, in his lectures and writings on *Beowulf* and *On Fairy-stories*, self-confidently proclaimed the power of philology and creative fiction (respectively) – now, in 1965, although continuing to praise their benefits, he also pointed out limits, both intrinsic and as redeeming resources for individuals.

This too is, I believe, a Tolkienian “Eulogy of Finitude”: either Philology and Fiction are good things, but finite, certainly to be appreciated, but not idealized.

I conclude with the consideration that this conviction, at which Tolkien arrived only after due philosophical reflection, in old age, he nevertheless “acted out” or lived without explicit awareness throughout his entire life. In Tolkien fantastic invention was *never* a substitute for real life (a form of “pornography for intellectuals”): not with respect to interpersonal relationships, nor responsibilities in work, nor the seriousness of his academic research. Luthien did not substitute Edith, Middle-earth was not a substitute for that Europe which he lived through and the *Annals of the Silmarillion* did not take the place of considered hypotheses based on medieval texts. But the creations (“subcreations”!) of fantasy helped him to achieve a greater involvement in these experiences of his life. This process continued during the last stage of his life – that of old age and solitude - when Tolkien however continued to philosophize and write about the Elves’ longevity and the mortality of Men. De te fabula docet!

[1] Not in those published during his lifetime; among posthumous works, Plato appears once in *The Notion Club Papers* in the context of the myth of Atlantis, which is connected with that of Nùmenor (*Sauron Defeated*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 1993, p. 249), and there is also a passing reference to the little-known German philosopher Theodore Haecker (*Letters*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1981, p. 419), but the context of the quotation - where Haecker is associated to the philologist Bazell and the “normativeness” of Latin language is recalled - makes me think that Tolkien was referring to Haecker's book on Virgil, a literary essay, not a philosophical one (*Virgil, Father of the West*, translated by Arthur Wesley Wheen, Sheed & Ward, London, 1934)..

[2] *Letters*, cit, n. 131, p. 151.

[3] Email to me, 21.08.09.

[4] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Morgoth's Ring*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 1994, p. 343.

[5] *Summa Theologiae*, pars prima secundae partis, quaestio 34, art. 2. Aquinas distinguishes three kinds of “pleasure” (“pleasure” is the feeling which follows a fulfilled desire of a “good thing”[bonum]!) based on three kinds of “bonum”: a) “bonum per se”, id est “per suam naturam”; b) “bonum conveniens secundum dispositionem” (not universally, always) but in relation with some “not natural” circumstances, for example for a ill man some plants are medicines for him while are poisonous for healthy men; c) “apparens bonum”, when a man is wrong in his thought and thinks good what is evil instead. For me is evident the parallelism between Tolkien's “natural desire” and Aquinas's “bonum per se”, between Tolkien's “personal desire” and Aquinas's “bonum secundum dispositionem”, between Tolkien's “illusionary desire” and Aquinas's “apparens (false) bonum”.

[6] See Chapter 3 in Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1978.

[7] Claudio Testi has purchased Tolkien's copy on the collectors' market and received a positive *expertise* by Carl Hostetter.

[8] *The Morgoth's Ring*, cit, p. 320.

[9] *Summa Theologiae*, pars prima secundae partis, quaestio 40, artt. 1,3,6.

[10] *Summa Theologiae*, pars secunda secundae partis, quaestio 18, art. 4, ad secundum et ad tertium. On Aquinas as a Tolkien's source see by Bradley J. Birzer, *Aquinas*, in Michael Drout (editor), *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia. Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, Routledge, New York and London, 2007, p. 21.

[11] See Gergely Nagy, *Plato*, in *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, cit, p. 513. And Gregory Bassham: “Tolkien's repeated use of the term “demi-urgic” (e.g., *Morgoth's Ring* 332) to describe the creative/shaping activity of the Valar

(borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus*); Numenor as based on Plato's story of Atlantis in *Critias*; the Ring as based on Gyges's ring in *Republic*, Book 2; reincarnation of the elves (likely borrowed from Plato, esp. the *Phaedo*).” (from an email to me, 15th June 2009)

[12] John Willim Houghton, *Augustine in the Cottage of the Lost Play. The Ainulindalë as Asterisk Cosmogony*, in Jane Chance (editor), *Tolkien the Medievalist*, Routledge, New York London, 2003, pp.171-182. And also by the same: *Augustine of Hippo*, in *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, cit, p. 43.

[13] Tom Shippey, *Tolkien, Author of the Century*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 2000, pp. 128-142. And Gregory Bassham: “The question of how much philosophy Tolkien read is probably unanswerable. However, two philosophical works he almost certainly would have had in his library are (1) Alfred's translation of Boethius's *Consolatio* and (2) Chaucer's translation of the same. In fact, Boethius seems to have influenced Tolkien fairly heavily. His solution to the freewill/divine foreknowledge problem in *Osanwe-kenta* and elsewhere is identical to Boethius's (God is outside time, so strictly there is no foreknowledge). Also, Tolkien's use of the term "consolation" for one of the three benefits of fantasy-reading (escape, recovery, consolation) likely derives from Boethius. Also, Tolkien's insistence that evil is a *privatio* is likely due mainly to Boethius (though Boethius himself borrowed the idea from Plotinus and Augustine). Some of Tolkien's ideas on "chance" and "luck" may also be indebted to Boethius's *Consolatio*. Tolkien certainly had Chaucer's translation of Boethius' *Consolatio* in his personal library. For many years Tolkien served as co-editor of the Clarendon Chaucer, but eventually had to bow out prior to publication. (See Scull and Hammond, *Chronology*, p. 121f.) He wanted to produce a new text of Chaucer but was obliged by the Press to use Skeat's Chaucer's *Poetical Works*. That edition includes the whole of Chaucer's translation. As for Alfred's translation: as one of the world's leading Anglo-Saxon scholars, Tolkien surely would have had essentially every surviving Anglo-Saxon text in his personal library” (from an his email to me , June 15th 2009).

[14] Michael Drout (editor), *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia. Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, Routledge, New York and London, 2007. Wayne Hammond & Christina Scull, *J. R. R. Tolkien Companion and Guide. Reader's Guide*, HarperCollins, London, 2006.

[15] *Letters*, cit., , n. 26, n. 49, n. 153, n. 156, n. 183.

[16] *Ibidem*, n. 15, n. 49, n. 52,

[17] *Ibidem*, n. 153, p. 189 (implicitly showing, it seems to me, that he knew some of them!).

[18] *ibidem*, n. 157, n. 211, n. 199

[19] *ibidem*, n.155, n. 84, n. 156: in the latter, it is interesting to note that “religion” is equivalent to “myth” (“story”, in Greek) and to tangible “representativeness”, as he also says more than once in his work *On Fairy-stories* (but without ever giving explanations).

- [20] *ibidem*, n. 84.
- [21] Cf. Tom Shippey *Goths and Huns in Roots and Branches. Selected Papers in Tolkien*, Walking Tree Publisher, Zollikofen (Switzerland), 2007, pp.114-136.
- [22] *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*, in *The Monsters and the Critics and other Essays*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1983
- [23] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, cit., pp. 159, 178.
- [24] Wholly deliberate, I think: for example, in the preparatory versions of the lecture *On the Fairy Stories* Tolkien writes the name of Carl Gustav Jung, while in the definitive one he only quotes the word 'archetype' but omits the name of the psychiatrist (see *Tolkien on Fairy Stories*, edited by Verlyn Flieger e Douglas A. Anderson, HarperCollinsPublishers, London, 2008, pp. 129, 170, 307.
- [25] Set in Magdalene College in the evening at a date between autumn 1940 and December 1941; see Chapter 3 in Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings*, George Allen & Unwin Publishers, London, 1978
- [26] They are against Karl Marx and the theologian Karl Barth., *ibidem*.
- [27] Several personal communications with Shippey .
- [28] See Shippey's (I think rightly) critical comment concerning the father of Anglo-American analytical philosophy G. E. Moore in his *Tolkien, Author of the Century*, cit, p. 158, and also this personal experience: "I intervened in an interview among philosophers at Oxford once, querying a point about language - the thesis was about the distinction in Augustine between 'God' and 'a god', and I said 'but Augustine wrote in Latin, where there is no such distinction. How can you tell?' - and this caused a most violent inter-college and inter-disciplinary dispute. WH Auden, Tolkien's friend, wrote a sarcastic verse about Oxford philosophers", (from an email to me, 14th july 2009).
- [29] *ibidem*.
- [30] Patrick Curry's opinion is similar (though not identical) to mine: "I have never heard from anyone that Tolkien ever read any philosophy, I'm afraid; and that is my subjective impression too. If you are looking for a direct connection, I think you will be disappointed. (Of course, his work has deeply philosophical implications, but that's another matter!)" : from an email to me dated 21st March 2009. John Garth said: "I've seen none of these names in Tolkien's writings, published or unpublished; I've never seen a philosophical title among lists of his books; and I can't think of any of his papers at the Bodleian which have a philosophical bent. The closest, I suppose, is *On Fairy-stories*". (from an email to me dated 26th March 2009). Either John Garth: "I've seen none of these names in Tolkien's writings, published or unpublished; I've never seen a philosophical title among lists of his books; and I can't think of any of his papers at the Bodleian which have a philosophical bent. The closest, I suppose, is *On Fairy-stories*" (from an email to me, 26th March 2009). Either Dimitra Fimi: "I am afraid I do not know enough to help you. I have looked at Tolkien's books in the Bodleian and in the English Faculty at Oxford, but I cannot remember any philosophy books within them (although I was looking for different things so I might have overlooked them)", (from an email to me, 5th April 2009). And the same I could see by myself, since last August I went to consult manuscripts and books in both those libraries.
- [31] As noted by W. A. Senior, *Loss Eternal in Tolkien's Middle-earth*, in George Clark and Daniel Timmons (editors), *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary*

Resonances, Greenwood Press, Westport – Connecticut, 2000, p. 173.

[32] *Ibidem*.

[33] Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 2005, p. 301.

[34] Tom Shippey, *Roots and Branches. Selected Papers in Tolkien*, Walking Tree Publisher, Zollikofen (Switzerland), 2007, pp. 317, 383.

[35] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Morgoth's Ring*, cit.

[36] *Ibidem*, p. 317.

[37] Ralph C. Wood. *The Gospel According to Tolkien. Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, p. 159. Anne Mathie (*Tolkien and the Gift of Mortality* in www.firstthings.com, November 2003) comments: “The body and the world of matter are not something to be escaped or transcended as such. To separate the body from the spirit, the dweller from the house, is considered to be a terrible thing.”

[38] See Claudio Testi, *Il Legendarium tolkieniano come meditatio mortis*, unpublished.

[39] *The Gift of Ilúvatar*, in “The Australian Journal of Theology”, Feb. 2004, issue 2, online: “Here we touch upon what I believe one of the most important challenges for Christian theology; our Platonic heritage has meant that the radically incarnational insight that is at the heart of Christianity has remained underdeveloped or atrophied. The incarnation's radical affirmation of the material world, however, lies at the very heart of Tolkien's theological anthropology.” And Shippey observes: “the theology of “body and soul” took some time to develop, but it was a favourite theme for Anglo-Saxon poets and homilists, and there is one mystery there. One of the most popular sermon collections of the Middle Ages is known as the “sermones ad fratres in eremo”, there are hundreds of manuscripts of it, but it is very poor both theologically and linguistically (the Latin is not distinguished). No-one knows where it came from, and the *Patrologia* editors suggest it must be Belgian, because it often mentions beer! But it is older than they think (because Anglo-Saxon homilists used it) and beer does not have to be Belgian (except to a French editor, perhaps). The point is, though, that by Aquinas's time the theology is clear: one should NOT say that the body is evil and the soul is good. But this terrible simplifying view is what sermons, and poems, creep back to. Good poets, like Andrew Marvell, are careful to keep the balance. Poor ones, or thoughtless ones, are likely to make it a fight between good and evil. I'm sure Tolkien knew the theology of this and was careful to give full value to the Incarnation, perhaps the more so because he had read works like the two Anglo-Saxon “Soul and Body” poems.” (from an email to me, 27th June 2009). I verified that among the books formerly owned by Tolkien (and now readable at the English Faculty Library in Oxford) there is an *Old English Homilies* (edited by R. Morris), London, N. Trübner & Co, 1868, and among those homilies there is one entitled *Hic Dicendum est de Quadragesima* where the author underlines the idea “the body loves what the soul hates”, pp. 11-25.

[40] Wood, *The Gospel*, cit, pp. 158-160

[41] Casey, *The Gift*, cit. : “Salvation makes no sense unless it includes the world. Salvation from the world is no salvation as much as an attempted flight from the disease. But the healing of the world will not simply restore the world to what it was in some imagined prelapsarian dawn, but will be something genuinely new. As Saint Paul explained in his epistle to the Romans: 'It is not for its own purposes that creation had frustration imposed on it, but for the purposes of him who imposed it – with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God.' The difficulty with the Platonic flight from the world that is the more traditional path of sanctity is that it leaves Morgoth's ring intact. The salvation of the world entails that the ring of the world must also be taken up into God. And it is we who are to be the agents of the world's divinisation.”

[42] *Letters*, cit., n. 291, p.371.

[43] Christopher Garbowski, *Recovery and Transcendence for the Contemporary Mythmaker*, Maria Curie – Skłodowska University Press, Lublin, 2000, p. 168.

[44] *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., p.238

[45] Cf. Franco De Masi, *Making Death Thinkable. A Psychoanalytic Contribution to the Problem of the Transience of Life*, Free Association Books, 2004, p. 21. And W. A. Senior writes (*Loss Eternal*, cit., p. 173):“I would like to propose one concept that subsumes many of the others and that concomitantly provides Tolkien with his most pervasive and unifying component of atmosphere and mood; the sustained and grieved sense of loss, of which death is but one form, that floods through the history of Middle-earth”

[46] Franco De Masi, op. cit., pp. 116-118, 137, 105

[47] Vincent Ferré, *La Mort dans Le Seigneur des Anneaux*, « seconde partie » in *Tolkien: sur les rivages de la terre du milieu*, Christian Bourgois Éditeur, Paris, 2001, pp. 253-255.

[48] *Letters*, cit., n. 208, p. 267.

[49] *Ibidem*, n. 211, p. 284. With regard to this point, see also Peter Kreeft (although, in my opinion, there is some confusion here): in Tolkien there are two Immortalities: the false “serial longevity” and the true, a natural desire to escape death and this is the eucatastrophe described in *Leaf by Niggle*; true immortality is a self-purification, self-sacrifice. There are also two Deaths; the good is the death of selfishness and is associated with true immortality. Tolkien writes that the greatest acts of the human spirit are acts of self-denial (*The Philosophy of Tolkien*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2005, p. 96-100).

[50] *Letters*, n. 212, p. 285.

[51] *Ibidem*, n. 181, p.236

[52] John D. Rateliff (“*And All the Days of her Life are Forgotten*”, in Wayne Hammond & Christina Scull [editors], *The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, 2006, pp. 87-88) summarizes this point: the common

property shared by all the Rings of Power is their ability to slow down the decay of that which is loved and Tolkien judges this to be a fundamental error of the Elves: the Numenoreans want to live forever in an infinite present and the Elves want the past to last forever. Both errors seek to frustrate the capacity of the future to make its own contributions...but Iluvatar gives time and death to Men which allow them to create; the present is not a blank slate, but a freshly cleaned slate (because the past must give way to the present). The Elves, who cling to the past, are forced to fade away with it.

[53] See: Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* [English translation: *Untimely Meditations*] (1873-1876) and Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione* [English translation: *History as the Story of Liberty*] (1938).

[54] Tolkien, *Letters*, cit., n. 153, p.189: “Elves are certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires, incarnated in my little world”.

[55] In the *Panel Discussion on Mortality and Immortality* held in Birmingham in 2005, to the question of why the righteous Men (such as Aragorn and the first kings of Númenor) are long-lived, Harm Scelhaas replied that the more a person “can sustain the life, the more he appreciates the gift of Mortality at the end” (*Tolkien 2005. The Ring Goes Ever On. Proceedings*, The Tolkien Society, Coventry, 2008, p. 46). I do not agree, and offer the following reply: the idea of longevity as a “reward” is an Old-Testament residue in Tolkien (the patriarchs) that is perhaps also present in the idea of the longevity of the Elves, a race which never forms an alliance with Melkor or Sauron; but it is an anodyne and aborted idea. In fact in many of Tolkien’s stories righteous Men (and Elves) die prematurely, and Tolkien could not have forgotten the lives of many Christian believers and New Testament protagonists, first and foremost that of Jesus: it is clearly not necessary to be long-lived in order to appreciate the gift of immortality!

[56] In the Christian tradition the “final things” are: Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven.

[57] The “ultimate purpose” is also (from a different standpoint) known as the “greatest good”: the subject is always Happiness, seen either as a principle (final cause) of human actions or as a criterion of preference for comparison between various “goods” when these are in conflict and a choice must be made.

[58] *I limiti dell'esistenza*, cit., p. 23

[59] *Ibidem*, p. 101.

[60] *Recovery and Transcendence*, cit., p. 168, italics added.

[61] *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., p. 237. But Gregory Bassham doesn't agree: “I must disagree with your claim that for Tolkien “death is not punishment for sin, but inherent to human nature.” Rather, Tolkien presents men as originally immortal (*Morgoth's Ring*, p. 332) who, like elves, could die at will, but unlike the elves, could leave the walls of Arda by means of a bodily assumption (*Morgoth's Ring*, p. 333). This power was lost (taken away by Eru) when the primeval humans

"fell" and worshipped Morgoth in the depths of time. Thus, Tolkien's view is essentially the same as Paul's: "the wages of sin is death." Contra Shippey, there is no contradiction in seeing death as both a "gift" (because a healing of world-weariness) and a punishment for sin (because a deprivation of the natural felicity that would have been the fate of unfallen man).", from an email to me 15th June 2009. In my reply I remembered him the Letter n. 156 and added: "But I agree with you that there is no contradiction in thinking that Death is *either* a gift *and* a punishment. It is a classic Augustinian and Thomistic doctrine the saying that "poena curat culpam". And moreover, leaving aside Augustine and Aquinas, I think that this is what really happens in human life: the right punishment is a necessary (even if not sufficient) factor of the healing of the human sin."

[62] *Summa Theologiae*, pars prima, quaestio 10, articulus 1.

[63] *Immortality and the Death of Love: Tolkien and Simone de Beauvoir*, in *Tolkien 2005. The Ring Goes Ever On. Proceedings*, cit., p. 127.

[64] *Letters*, cit., n. 156, p. 205.

[65] John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston-New York, 2003, p. 109. This must be compared with a poetic note written by Sigmund Freud, also in 1915, for which he won the prestigious German literary prize named after Goethe, which was entitled *On Transience*. Freud wrote of a walk in the mountains on the company of a young poet who, whilst he admired the natural beauty which surrounded them, expressed a deep sadness at the thought of its impermanence (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey et al., vol. 14, pp. 305-307).

[66] Benedetto Croce, *Zur Theorie und Geschichte der Historiographie*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1915; Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957); Popper writes that he arrived at this conviction in the impossibility of predicting the future in the winter of 1919-1920 "through disappointment with the mythic, urgent advent of the worldwide Communist revolution", p. 7.

[67] *Another Road to Middle-earth*, in *Roots and Branches*, cit., pp. 380-383.

[68] *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., p. 190

[69] Bill Davis, *Choosing to Die: the Gift of Mortality in Middle-earth*, in Gregory Bassham (editor), *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, 2003, p. 127: Davis uses the metaphor of a house with no exit (the Elves' lives) and another house with an exit (Men's lives), and asks where this door leads to – to a good place? To nothing? And he concludes: "Feeling trapped in a world with no escape, Elves envy even the possibility of annihilation. In uncertainty and despair most Men in Middle-earth fear that their fate is annihilation".

[70] Towards the end of his long life, Norberto Bobbio wrote: "Everything that had a beginning has an end. Why should my life not have one? Should the end of my life, unlike that of other events, both natural and historical, be a new beginning? Only that which did not have a beginning has no end. But that which has neither a beginning nor an end is eternal" (*De senectute e altri scritti autobiografici*, Einaudi, Torino, 1996, p. 41).

[71] Simon Critchley, *The Book of the Dead Philosophers*, Granta Books, London, 2008, pp. 280-281

[72] *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., p. 217.

[73] *Letters*, cit., n. 181, p. 235.

[74] Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., pp. 214-215.

[75] Davis, *Choosing to Die*, cit., p. 135

[76] Tom Shippey, email dated 5th October 2008 : “Turning to the other issue of sadness, why is 'Well, I'm back' so sad? I would say: 1) first, it is formally meaningless, in that it says nothing that needs to be said. Of course he's back. otherwise he would not be there to say "well, I'm back." So what he says demands another interpretation. This is what linguists call an "implicature". 2) What is meant to be implied is, perhaps, that he has come back when he had another option. And that option was to go with Frodo to the Undying Lands. 3) So he has come back to the land of mortality, and made, so to speak, *il gran rifiuto*, just like Arwen. This is in a way heroic of him, but taking that choice, as Elrond says, is a bitter one. 4) But while on the one hand he has come back to Death, for love, he has also come back to life, for he has his long and successful life ahead of him, Rose, children, grandchildren, Mayor of Michel Delving etc. 5) So it is also a very ambiguous moment. (And I think Tolkien perhaps should not have modified it by stating in the Appendices that Sam in the end takes the other choice and goes to the Grey Havens, once Rose has died. Better to leave it as he left the poem on St Brendan, with the person who has seen the Undying Lands nevertheless returning to and dying in Middle-earth. But Tolkien was always ambiguous about the voyage over the Sundering Sea. Some of his characters go, some refuse to go, some come back...) But I agree with Swanwick, or Swanwick's small son, that it is a very unexpected and non-Hollywood sort of ending, which Jackson did well to keep.”

[77] Richard C. West, “*Her Choice was Made and her Doom was Appointed*”, in Wayne Hammond & Christina Scull [editors], *The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004*, cit., pp. 326-327.

[78] Casey, *The Gift of Ilúvatar*, cit. Either Amaranth (*Death in Tolkien's Legendarium*, website of the Valar Guild, 2007) underlines how the reincarnated Elves normally remain in Aman, returning to Middle-earth only if they have a particular mission to carry out.

[79] *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., pp. 188-189.

[80] I should like to recall here the views of Benedetto Croce (from *Frammenti di etica* [1922] Laterza, Bari, 1981, pp. 23, 25) concerning the themes of death, immortality and the individual and his mission.

[81] In John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*, cit., p. 180

[82] *Letters*, cit., n. 181, p. 234.

[83] *Ibidem*, n. 310, pp. 399-400.

[84] “However happily a story ends, it must end, and that itself is our great sorrow. All that is beautiful and beloved dies. The Fellowship of the Ring accomplishes its quest, but with the end of its troubles comes the separation of its members. Gandalf and the High Elves win the war, but their own victory banishes them from Middle Earth. With them “many fair things will fade and be forgotten.” Frodo has saved the world but now longs to leave it. This has to be one of literature’s saddest happy endings”: (*Tolkien and the Gift of Mortality* by Anna Mathie, www.firstthings.com, November 2003).

[85] *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., p. 219.

[86] Letter of 3rd February 1916 quoted in Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*, cit., pp. 118-119, 177.

[87] Letter of 30th August 1916 that Smith later sent to Tolkien, *ibidem*, p. 185.

[88] *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., pp. 308-317.

[89] Vincent Ferré, *Tolkien, sur le rivages de la Terre du Milieu*, cit., p. 274: “Tombeau, monument, le texte de Tolkien perpétue la mémoire des victimes de la Guerre de l'Anneau, du passage à l'Histoire et du passage du temps, comme la chanson qui égrène le nom des disparus ».

[90] *Ibidem*, pp. 197-199: alliances and groups are necessities of life, couples survive and those alone die, because individuals are overcome by hubris, “la solitude conduit avec certitude à la mort”. Anna Mathie (*The Gift of Mortality*, cit.) observes: « This fertility, this willingness to pass life on to a new generation rather than grasping for 'endless life unchanging' is the Hobbits' great strength, as it should likewise be mankind's proper strength. It makes them at once humbler than immortals, since they place less confidence in their own individual abilities, and more hopeful, since their own individual defeats are not the end of everything .”

[91] For a synthesis of this development – which in Catholic teaching culminated with Chapter VII (*The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church*) of the *Lumen Gentium* Constitution of the Vatican Council II on “God's People” – see the excellent book on historical and systematic theology by Father Ruiz de la Peña, *La otra dimensión. Escatología cristiana*, EAPSA, Madrid, 1981, chapters 5- 8 and 11.

[92] See Alex Lewis, *The Ogre in the Dungeon*, “Mallorn” issue 47, Spring 2009, p. 15, where the author suggests that the 1939 Andrew Lang Lecture (Tolkien's *On Fairy Tales*) was provided to Tolkien by Collingwood himself. And also Tom Shippey: “I know little or nothing about philosophy, but one philosopher (of history) whom Tolkien must have known and *may* have taken an interest in was Robin G. Collingwood. I think they were both at Pembroke College, and Collingwood certainly took close interest in fairy-tales, while Tolkien probably knew and respected his father, the Icelandicist (and writer of historical novels) W. G. Collingwood”, (from an email of Tom Shippey to me, 7th February 2009). And also Dimitra Fimi: “Tolkien certainly knew R. G. Collingwood. In p. 264, note 1 of Collingwood's and Myres's *Roman Britain* [full citation: Collingwood, R. G. and Myres, J. N. L. (1936), *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)] the authors acknowledge Tolkien's help with the philology of the name Sulis, the Celto-Roman goddess of the hot springs at Bath. It also seems that Collingwood was the reason why Tolkien was consulted on the name "Nodens" found in inscriptions at the excavation of Lydney Park (Tolkien's piece has now been reprinted in “Tolkien Studies”, Volume 4, 2007, pp. 177-183).”, (from an email of Dimitra Fimi to me, 5th April 2009). And also Douglas Anderson, referring to his unpublished lecture of 2004: “Much of the work that I did do was on the similarity of interests between W.G. Collingwood, his son Robin, and JRRT, as well as what I could piece together of R.G. Collingwood's and JRR Tolkien's friendship. I barely touched on Collingwood's view of history, and there's a lot that could be said there.” (from an email of Anderson to me, 8th April 2009). And Claudio Testi read a Tolkien's manuscript (A 14/2, folios 28 and 29, at the Bodleian Library) where he, after quoting Bede about the name 'Britain', observe that Collingwood is

writing an introduction to the history of Roman Britain, but, being mainly a philosopher, he does not refer neither to literature (unless philosophical) and to language. (from an email to me, 7th august 2009). I note that in his book *Philosophy of Enchantment* (one section of which is entitled *On the Fairy Tales:*), written in the same times when Tolkien was preparing his lecture *On the Fairy Stories*, Collingwood deals with topics as the geographic and historical diffusion of the fairy tales, their relation to “archetypes”, their function towards the adult people rather than the children. All themes which in that lecture Tolkien also focused on. I think that the recent biography of Collingwood (Fred Inglis, *History Man. The life of R. G. Collingwood*, Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 105, 201, 223), notwithstanding three quotations of Tolkien's name, is pretty superficial on the relations between the two authors.

[93] Amongst contemporary philosophers, Collingwood's ideas correspond in particular to those of the Italian Benedetto Croce about whom he wrote several times and whose ideas (on aesthetics and especially philosophy of history) he spread, directly and indirectly, in the English-speaking world. William H. Dray, author of the most recent and complete study on Collingwood which documents his profound and lasting influence on Anglo-American philosophy of history (*History as Re-Enactment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 26), felt it necessary to underline that it was untrue that the English philosopher was “little more than a popularizer of Italian ideas”. In his intellectual biography of Croce, Fausto Nicolini writes : “the English philosopher with whom Croce had the closest and most frequent exchanges of letters and personal contacts was R. G. Collingwood, who died at little more than fifty years old in 1943. Benedetto Croce began correspondence with him, then a young Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford, in 1912-13, when Collingwood translated for the publisher Macmillan Croce's monograph on Vico. There followed the translations of *Contributo alla critica di me stesso*, *Iniziazione all'Estetica del Settecento*, *Frammenti di Etica* and also the article on Aesthetics for the 14th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. These contacts further intensified in 1923 when Croce went to Oxford where he was subsequently to return twice (*Croce*, UTET, Torino, 1962, p. 485).

[94] *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press , 1946: “The processes of nature can therefore be properly described as sequences of mere events, but those of history cannot. They are not processes of mere events but processes of actions, which have an inner side, consisting of processes of thought ; and what the historian is looking for is these processes of thought. All history is the history of thought. But how does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by rethinking them in his own mind. /.../ The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind. This re-enactment is only accomplished, in the case of Plato and Caesar respectively, so far as the historian brings to bear on the problem all the powers of his own mind and all his knowledge of philosophy and politics. It is not a passive surrender to the spell of another's mind ; it is a labour of active and therefore critical thinking. The historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the

context of his own knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, forms his own judgement of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it. /.../Thought can never be mere object. To know someone else's activity of thinking is possible only on the assumption that this same activity can be re-enacted in one's own mind. In that sense, to know 'what someone is thinking' (or 'has thought') involves thinking it for oneself./.../ And this does not appear a satisfactory account of historical thought only to persons who embrace the fundamental error of mistaking for history that form of pseudo-history which Croce has called 'philological history': persons who think that history is nothing more than scholarship or learning, and would assign to the historian the self-contradictory task of discovering (for example) 'what Plato thought' without inquiring 'whether it is true'. (pp. 215-216, 287, 300)

[95] *History of Middle-earth*, vols. 5 and 9.

[96] Verlyn Flieger, *Tolkien's Experiment with Time* in P. Reynolds and G. Goodnight (editors), *Proceedings of the JRR Tolkien Centenary Conference*, The Tolkien Society & The Mythopoeic Press, Milton Keynes and Altadena, 1995, pp. 39 - 44, translated into Italian by Roberto di Scala in "Terra di Mezzo" n. 7, Spring 1998, pp. 7-14.

[97] *Letters*, cit., n. 181, p. 233.

[98] Of which it unlikely, given their diffusion in many different areas, that Tolkien knew nothing, as Michael Drout has also said: "The relationship between Tolkien and philosophers has not been explored as much as it should be (the focus has been almost entirely on Theologians), so your research is important. Unfortunately, I cannot help very much. There have been rumours over the years that a catalogue of Tolkien's personal library would be published, but that has not yet happened. I don't know of any direct evidence, but I would be shocked if he didn't know something about Spengler and Toynbee, but proving it is another story." (from an email to me dated 22nd March 2009).

[99] *Der Untergang des Abendlandes (The Decline of West)*, 1918.

[100] *A Study of History*, 1934.

[101] *Die Philosophie in der Krisis der europäischen Menschheit (Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man)*, 1935.

[102] *Der Mythos des 20^o Jahrhunderts (The Myth of the Twentieth Century)*, 1934. See an interesting comparison between Rosenberg's philosophy of history and Tolkien's in: Christine Chism, *Myth and History in World War II*, in Jane Chance (editor), *Tolkien the Medievalist*, Routledge, New York – London, 2003, pp. 72-75.

[103] For example: n. 13 pp. 144, 157; n. 211 p. 283, n. 294 p. 376, n. 183 p. 244. Tolkien gave considerable detail: his own present and that of the readers of *LotR* (second half of the 20th century) corresponds to the end of the Sixth Age or the beginning of the 7th and, since each Age lasts about 2000 years, between the beginning of the third – and the events of *LotR* – and the novel's publication there were about 6000 years. The idea of living at the end of the Sixth Age of the world or

the beginning of the seventh is not original to Tolkien, but first to be found in *De temporum Ratione* of the Venerable Bede, an eighth-century English monk. Since Tolkien had marked the ends of the First, Second and Third Ages with grandiose events in Middle-earth in which the forces of good won over those of evil (the War of Wrath and the expulsion of Melkor; the War of the Elendil and Gil-Galad against Sauron with Isildur who takes possession of the One Ring; the War of the Ring and the destruction of Sauron), it is interesting to ask which events might have corresponded to the ends of succeeding Ages. In a spirit of pure speculation, I propose: the Fourth Age finishes in about 2000 BC at the beginning of the Bronze Age, when the Indo-European Elamite people defeated and put an end to the Semitic Sumerian civilization, when the period of anarchy in the Egyptian Empire ended and the unified Middle Kingdom began, with capital in Thebes, when the *Rigveda*, the oldest Hindu text, was written (Hinduism is the most ancient religion still in existence today). The Fifth Age finishes around the year zero, when Octavian defeated Anthony and Cleopatra at Actium (31 BC), impeding the rise of the East with respect to the West; when Jesus of Nazareth was born as the incarnation of the Christian God (3 BC); when Jesus Christ was crucified, initiating universal redemption (AD 30). The Sixth Age finishes with the defeat of Hitler's plan to conquer the planet and enforce Nazi methods and ideology (AD 1945), or when de-colonization freed the peoples of the Third World from European dominion (1945-1965); or when, with Stalin's death and the 20th congress of the PCUS the irreversible de-totalitarization of the USSR and disintegration of the Third Communist Internationale began (1953). We should remember that JRRT's letter is from 1958.

[104] *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., p. 303.

[105] For the links between England's "finest hour" and the composition of the *LotR*, see Franco Manni and Simone Bonechi *The Complexity of Tolkien's Attitude Towards the Second World War*, in *The Ring Goes Ever On. Proceedings of the Tolkien 2005 Conference, 50 Years of the Lord of the Rings*, The Tolkien Society, Coventry, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 33-51.

[106] Even less pessimistic than that one of Christopher Dawson. Tolkien quotes several times Dawson in his writing *On Fairy Tales*, and the relation between the two authors is underlined by Bradley J. Birzer (*J R R Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle Earth*, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2002) and by Gregory Bassham (email to me, 15th June 2009).

[107] "Spengler" (pseudonym), *Tolkien's Ring: When immortality is not enough*, in "Asia Times Online Ltd.", 2003.

[108] W. A. Senior, *Loss Eternal in Tolkien's Middle-earth*, cit., p. 176. On the collective death of peoples and institutions in Tolkien's fiction, see also the chapter entitled *Le Déclin* in Vincent Ferré, *Tolkien: sur les rivages de la terre du milieu*, cit., pp. 253-255.

[109] *Letters*, cit., n. 53 p. 65, n. 77 p. 89.

[110] Franco Manni, *Real and Imaginary History in The Lord of the Rings*, "Mallorn", issue 47, Spring 2009, pp. 28-37.

- [111] *Letters*, cit., n.153, p. 189: "Elves are certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires".
- [112] "Mentality" is defined as that group of convictions held by *all* people in a certain historical and geographical context, irrespective of education, personal ability, sex, profession, wealth and age. See e.g. Michel Vovelle, *Ideologies and Mentalities*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990.
- [113] *The Silmarillion*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2002, p. 90; *Unfinished Tales*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1988, p. 242, 263: "Nay," she said. "Angrod is gone, and Aegnor is gone, and Felagund is no more. Of Finarfin's children I am the last. But my heart is still proud. What wrong did the golden house of Finarfin do that I should ask the pardon of the Valar, or be content with an isle in the sea whose native land was Aman the Blessed? Here I am mightier."
- [114] Unlike her previous behaviour; cf. *Unfinished Tales*, cit., pp. 248-252, 256.
- [115] Garbowski, *Recovery and Transcendence*, cit., p. 167
- [116] *Following Gandalf*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids , 2003, p. 109.
- [117] *Silmarillion*, cit., p. 36
- [118] *Letters*, cit., n. 337 p. 418.
- [119] Cf. Claudio Testi, *Il Legendarium*, cit..
- [120] Humphrey Carpenter, *JRR Tolkien. A Biography*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 1977, pp. 239-243.
- [121] *Letters*, cit., n. 5 pp. 9-10.
- [122] On this crucial point in life Tolkien's orientation is substantially different to that of many of the Great War poets, idealist and nostalgic, who are well analysed by Paul Fussell in his interesting and perceptive book *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Oxford University Press, , 2000.
- [123] See comments by Enrico Berti in his *Una metafisica problematica e dialettica*, in Aa. Vv., *Metafisica. Il mondo nascosto*, Laterza, Bari, 1997, p. 45.
- [124] *Letters*, cit., n. 181 p. 236.
- [125] *Fighting the Long Defeat: Philology in Tolkien's Life and Fiction*, in *Roots and Branches*, cit., pp. 139-156.
- [126] Cf. Tom Shippey: *Grimm, Grundtvig, Tolkien: Nationalisms and the Invention of Mythologies*, in *Roots and Branches*, cit., pp. 80-96.
- [127] Tom Shippey tells me that in the English-speaking world Germanic philology is held in such poor repute that there are no longer young philologists able to edit critical editions of medieval texts in that family of languages. And my old friend from the Pisa Scuola Normale and disciple of Gianfranco Contini – Father Saverio Cannistrà – recounts that the situation is the same today in France and Italy for Romance philology!
- [128] *Letters*, cit., n. 181 p. 236: "The Elves represent, as it were, the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Humane nature".
- [129] *Ibidem*, n. 212, p. 285.
- [130] According to a 2004 poll of 250,000 German readers: John D.

Rateliff, “*And All the Days of her Life are Forgotten*”, cit., p. 89.

[131] *Letters*, cit., n. 328 p. 412.

[132] *The Inklings*, cit., chapter 3.

[133] *Goths and Huns: the Rediscovery of Northern Cultures in the 19th Century*, in *Roots and Branches*, cit., pp. 115-136. Now we have the freshly published most explicit Tolkien's attempt to do that, *The Legend of Sigurd & Gudrún* (HarperCollins, London, 2009), where he tries to solve – by his artistic means – the *Königsproblem* of Germanic Philology.

[134] *The Road to Middle-earth*, cit., pp. 271-280; “Defeat hangs heavy in *Smith of Wootton Major*. Smith is 'an old man's book', as Tolkien said in *Letters*, p. 389. But Alf is there to put Smith in a longer history. There were men who wore the star of inspiration before Smith; in a later age there will be others; in any case the star, that inspiration, is only a fragment of a greater world, a world outside the little clearing of Wootton.”, p. 277.