

The authors of Middle Earth: Tolkien and the mystery of literary creation

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Who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*? And *The Hobbit*? And the *Silmarillion*? And in general, who is the author of the large corpus of texts, published or unpublished, which give life to Middle Earth's *imaginarium*? To answer 'J.R.R. Tolkien' would not only mean to miss a crucial feature of the literary fabric of these books, which associates them with a long-standing literary tradition, from James' *The Turn of the Screw* to Manzoni's *The Betrothed*. More importantly, such an answer would mean to overlook an important dimension of Tolkien's poetics, grounded on his literary convictions, and ultimately rooted in his deep Christian faith. The aim of this article is to try to give a more precise answer to the above questions, and thereby discuss some of the literary sophistication of Tolkien's works, unjustly obscured by their commercial success, as well as delve into the depths of his Christian poetics. Before that, however, I need to make an apology to Tolkien himself, as I suspect that he would not have approved the sort of exercise that I will be carrying out in this work, to disclose what should remain veiled, as an atmosphere to be felt, rather than as an 'evidence' to be scrutinised by critical analysis. As Gandalf warns Saruman, "he that breaks a thing in order to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom" (*LotR* 2.2 [Tolkien 2004: 259]).

1. THE HIDDEN META-TEXTUAL FRAME OF MIDDLE EARTH

It is clear that in the writing and editing process Tolkien took care to conceal the identity of the authors of Middle earth and in general to conceal the object of this research, which I will henceforth refer to as the 'meta-textual frame', i.e. the fictional history of composition, transmission and publication of his books². Scholars have recently begun to highlight the underlying and unifying meta-textual narrative of Middle Earth and its literary significance (see in particular Nagy 2003, Flieger 2005: 55–84, Flieger 2007, Nagy 2007, Brljak 2010, Thiessen 2014; cf. also Oberhelman 2008, Lee 2014b: 61, Nagy 2014: 112–6). This article will build on these recent works, aiming to expand on the literary complexity of the meta-textual frame, as well as to delve its possible meaning and symbolism. This study is indebted above all to Flieger's works, with which it has some points of affinity, especially in its first part. However, it fundamentally disagrees with her scepticism about the possibility of considering the meta-textual frame as a 'substantial structural factor', rather than a mere 'authorial conceit'. In this article I will construe narrative elements, such as multiple focalisations and interlaced narratives, cited by Flieger as counter-evidence to the meta-textual frame, as depending on or constructing that very frame, together with the number of explicit hints scattered throughout his published works³.

¹ I warmly thank Anthony Errington, George Corbett, Stefano Rebeggiani and Roger Sylvester for their helpful comments and criticism. This article was first given as a paper at the Seminar of the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts, University of St Andrews. I thank all participants for their questions and the engaging discussion, as well as the editors of this journal for their kind support and encouragement.

² Much evidence related to this is indeed found in external sources, such as in particular the earlier manuscript drafts of his works collected by Christopher Tolkien in the monumental *History of Middle Earth*. For instance, in its earlier versions, *The Lord of the Rings* ended with an epilogue featuring Sam Gamgee writing on and/or reading excerpts from the Red Book to his (numerous) children (cf. Tolkien 1983–1996: 9.9, Flieger 2005: 77–80). Similarly, the *Book of Lost Tales* includes several unpublished passages openly narrated in the first-person by Frodo (cf. below n. 17).

³ This article will only focus on the 'published' meta-textual frame, i.e. on the meta-textual frame that can be reconstructed on the basis of Tolkien's published works, including in particular *The Lord of the Rings* and *The*

1.1 The Paratext of LotR

In fact, the most explicit and comprehensive evidence about the writing of Tolkien's works (the 'meta-textual frame') is not found in external or unpublished sources, but in *The Lord of the Rings* itself (henceforth *LoTR*), both in the paratextual sections (Prologue and Appendixes) and in the main text⁴. Just before his final journey to the Grey Havens and beyond, the Hobbit Frodo hands over all his possessions to his friend Sam. These include:

LotR 6.9 [Tolkien 2004: 1026–7]

“a big book with plain red covers; its tall pages were now almost filled. At the beginning there were many leaves covered with Bilbo's thin wandering hand; but most of it was written in Frodo's firm flowing script. It was divided into chapters but Chapter 80 was unfinished, and after that were some blank leaves. The title page had many titles on it, crossed out one after another, so:

My Diary. My Unexpected Journey. There and Back Again. And What Happened After. Adventures of Five Hobbits. The Tale of the Great Ring, compiled by Bilbo Baggins from his own observations and the accounts of his friends. What we did in the War of the Ring. Here Bilbo's hand ended and Frodo had written:

THE DOWNFALL OF
THE LORD OF THE RINGS
AND THE
RETURN OF THE KING

*(as seen by the Little People; being the memoirs of Bilbo and Frodo of the Shire,
supplemented by the accounts of their friends and the learning of the Wise.)
Together with extracts from Books of Lore translated by Bilbo in Rivendell.*

This cryptic passage is a mine of information, a 'fortunate crack' giving a glimpse of an elaborate meta-textual frame, which underlies the novel and indeed the whole *imaginarium* of Middle Earth, pivoting on this ancestral 'big book with plain red covers', or more simply 'Red Book'⁵.

1.2 The first author of the Red Book: Bilbo Baggins

From this fictional paratext we learn that Bilbo Baggins is the first writer of the 'Red Book', authoring its opening text; although the heading 'the Hobbit' does not appear in the list of provisional titles "crossed out one after another" by Bilbo, there are few doubts that the '*many leaves covered with Bilbo's thin wandering hand*' form the textual archetype of what is now

Hobbit, but also *The Silmarillion* and *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*. Before its publication, the *Silmarillion* originally featured a number of different, elaborate frame narratives, which evolved in time but consistently involved an (old-)English traveller compiling oral stories, directly recorded from elves living in Tol Eressëa (cf. Noad 2000, Flieger 2007). Another variant of this archetypal textual frame is found in Tolkien's unfinished and unpublished time-fictions, the *Lost Road* and *Notion Club Papers* (on which see Flieger 2014).

⁴ This analysis will not consider any meta-textual reference (such as e.g. the famous meta-textual dialogue between Sam and Frodo on the Stairs of Cirith Ungol (*LotR* 4.8 [Tolkien 2004: 711–13]), but only those that depend on and evoke the underlying frame narrative.

⁵ The paratext also introduces the important epithet 'of Westmarch', which refers to the place where the book was preserved by Sam's descendants, as stated in the Appendixes and Prologue. Cf. *LoTR* Appendix B: [Sam] comes to the Tower Hills, and is last seen by Elanor, to whom he gives the Red Book afterwards kept by the Fairbairns. [Tolkien 2004: 1097]; *LotR* Prologue [Tolkien 2004: 14]: *That most important source for the history of the War of the Ring was so called because it was long preserved at Undertowers, the home of the Fairbairns.*

known as ‘*The Hobbit*’. Tolkien explicitly confirms that, at the very beginning of the Prologue to *LoTR*.

LotR Prologue [Tolkien 2004: 1]:

Further information [sc. ‘Concerning Hobbits’] *will also be found in the selection from the Red Book of Westmarch that has already been published, under the title of The Hobbit. That story was derived from earlier chapters of the Red Book, composed by Bilbo himself, the first Hobbit to become famous in the world at large, and called by him There and Back Again (...)*

More indirect hints to Bilbo’s authorship of ‘the Hobbit’ (or rather of his ‘diary’, ‘there and back again’), are also scattered across *LoTR* itself, normally in the form of references to Bilbo’s ‘secret’ book, only read by Frodo and (surreptitiously) by Merry.

LotR 1.5 [Tolkien 2004: 105]

“I must be the only one in the Shire, besides you Frodo, that has ever seen the old fellow’s secret book .” ‘You have read his book!’ cried Frodo. ‘Good heavens above! Is nothing safe?’ ‘Not too safe, I should say,’ said Merry. ‘But I have only had one rapid glance, and that was difficult to get. He never left the book about. I wonder what became of it. I should like another look.(...) Have you got it, Frodo?’ ‘No. It was not at Bag End. He must have taken it away.’

There is even a direct quote from the *Hobbit*, explicitly ascribed to Bilbo.

LotR 2.1 [Tolkien 2004: 225]

That house was, as Bilbo had long ago reported, ‘a perfect house, whether you like food or sleep or story-telling or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all’. [= *Hobbit* 3].

There is an event from the *Hobbit* (or rather from Bilbo’s diary) that receives particular meta-textual attention in the *LoTR*, which is Bilbo’s narrative of the finding of the ring and his escape from Gollum’s cave. In several points it is said that two variants of this narrative existed: a ‘fake’ one told by Bilbo to the dwarves at the time of the event and eventually written down in his book, according to which the ring was given by Gollum to him as a present⁶; a second, accurate one, revealed only to his closest friends and eventually to all members of the Council of Elrond, which is essentially the version one can now read in Chapter 5 of the *Hobbit* (‘Riddles in the Dark’)⁷. According to Tolkien’s meta-textual frame, this second version remained at oral stage for a long time, and was not included in the *Red Book*. And yet, it was eventually written down, as stated in the Prologue to the *LoTR*:

LotR Prologue [Tolkien 2004: 13]

This account Bilbo set down in his memoirs, and he seems never to have altered it himself, not even after the Council of Elrond. Evidently it still appeared in the original Red Book, as it did in several of the copies and abstracts. But many copies contain the true account (as an alternative), derived no doubt from notes by Frodo or Samwise, both of whom learned the truth, though they seem to have been unwilling to delete anything actually.

⁶ Cf. *LotR* 1.1 [Tolkien 2004: 40] ‘Which story, I wonder,’ said Gandalf. ‘Oh, not what he told the dwarves and put in his book,’ said Frodo. ‘He told me the true story soon after I came to live here. He said you had pestered him till he told you, so I had better know too. “No secrets between us, Frodo,” he said; “but they are not to go any further. It’s mine anyway.”’ ‘That’s interesting,’ said Gandalf. ‘Well, what did you think of it all?’ ‘If you mean, inventing all that about a “present”, well, I thought the true story much more likely, and I couldn’t see the point of altering it at all’.

⁷ Cf. *LotR* 2.2 [Tolkien 2004: 249] ‘[...] I will now tell the true story, and if some here have heard me tell it otherwise’ – he looked sidelong at Glóin – ‘I ask them to forget it and forgive me’.

What is thus the point of this double version, which accordingly resulted in a textual variance? First, from a narrative point of view, the existence of a ‘fake’ version of the story helps to shroud the ring with a shadow of deception and evil, and to characterize his finder Bilbo as haunted by a morbid obsession to justify his ownership⁸. This is, however, only a post-event exploitation of something that is first of all a real fact. The two aforementioned narratives do exist, and firstly, in the real or ‘primary’ world (to use Tolkien’s terminology). In fact, the former narrative is the one found in the first edition of *The Hobbit* (1937) whereas the second is the one printed from its second edition onwards, which resulted from the revisions Tolkien made in 1951 in order to harmonise *The Hobbit* with the forthcoming *LoTR*.⁹ We can thus begin to introduce a key feature of Tolkien’s meta-textual frame: real, primary literary events or features (such as the revision of a chapter of *The Hobbit*’s first edition) are symbolically (and covertly) expressed in the secondary world, as narrative elements (a lie engendered by the ring’s corrupting power originated as a variance in the fictional transmission of the texts). I will come back to this point later on, since the whole meta-textual frame can be described in similar terms.

1.3 The second author of the *Red Book*: Frodo Baggins

With its reference to ‘notes by Frodo’, the above passage introduces the second important author of the Red Book, the hobbit Frodo. The paratext of *LoTR* indeed reveals that Frodo wrote the main text contained in the Red Book (“*most of it was written in Frodo’s firm flowing script*”), i.e. the account of the War of the Ring¹⁰. Moreover, according to Frodo’s intention, this secondary text would form a unity (“*the memoirs of Bilbo and Frodo*”) with the other, preceding text written by Bilbo. In contrast with Bilbo’s authorship, there are not many explicit references to Frodo’s authorial role in *LoTR*; nevertheless, his authorial role is often foreshadowed or alluded to. In his first visit to Bree, for instance, Frodo introduces himself as a writer:

LoTR 1.9 [Tolkien 2004: 155]

“he was thinking of writing a book (at which there was silent astonishment), and that he and his friends wanted to collect information about hobbits living outside the Shire, especially in the eastern lands.”

And this self-presentation is realized on his way back, at the end of the book, where it becomes an allusive reference to the actual writing of his account of the War during his final years in the Shire¹¹.

LoTR 6.7 [Tolkien 2004: 995]

Bree memories being retentive, Frodo was asked many times if he had written his book. ‘Not yet,’ he answered. ‘I am going home now to put my notes in order.’ He promised to deal with the amazing events at Bree, and so give a bit of interest to a book that appeared likely to treat mostly of the remote and less important affairs ‘away south’.

⁸ Cf. *LoTR* 1.1 [Tolkien 2004: 34] “*What is it all about? It is mine isn’t it? I found it, and Gollum would have killed me, if I hadn’t kept it. I’m not a thief, whatever he said.*”

⁹ For a comparison between the two versions cf. <http://www.ringgame.net/riddles.html> (accessed 20th September 2017).

¹⁰ Given its heading and content, this text seems to correspond to what is now known as The Lord of the Rings, although the two titles are not identical (a detail to which I will return)

¹¹ Frodo began and concluded this writing activity, both editorial and authorial, during his final couple of years in the Shire (1420–1). Cf. *LoTR* 6.9 [Tolkien 2004: 1027] *When the labours of repair had all been planned and set going he took to a quiet life, writing a great deal and going through all his notes. ‘Why, you have nearly finished it, Mr. Frodo!’ Sam exclaimed. ‘Well, you have kept at it, I must say.’ ‘I have quite finished, Sam,’ said Frodo.*

One might thus be tempted to conclude that the author of the *Hobbit* is Bilbo, and that the author of the *LoTR* is Frodo: Tolkien's meta-textual frame, however, is much more complex. It is not obvious at all that the two archetypal texts of the Red Book ('Bilbo and Frodo's memoirs') neatly coincide with their 'real' counterparts, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, nor that Bilbo and Frodo are their only two respective authors.

1.4 Bilbo's extended and incomplete authorial role

First, there are plenty of references in the novel to the incomplete status of the first text, Bilbo's diary, the supposed source of '*The Hobbit*'. At the beginning of *LoTR*, before his departure from Rivendell, Bilbo reveals that he has still to finish his book:

LotR 1.1 [Tolkien 2004: 32]

'[...] *I can finish my book. I have thought of a nice ending for it: and he lived happily ever after to the end of his days.*'

Despite Bilbo's ambitions, his diary is still incomplete at the time of the Council of Elrond, after several years spent by Bilbo in Rivendell.

LotR 2.1 [Tolkien 2004: 269]

'[...] *Don't adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry on the story. Well, it can't be helped. I wonder if it's any good trying to finish my book?*'

LotR 2.2 [Tolkien 2004: 269]

'[...] *I was very comfortable here, and getting on with my book. If you want to know, I am just writing an ending for it. I had thought of putting: and he lived happily ever afterwards to the end of his days. It is a good ending, and none the worse for having been used before. Now I shall have to alter that: it does not look like coming true; and anyway there will evidently have to be several more chapters, if I live to write them. It is a frightful nuisance. When ought I to start?*'

LotR 2.2 [Tolkien 2004: 277]

Then Bilbo would read passages from his book (which still seemed very incomplete), or scraps of his verses, or would take notes of Frodo's adventures.

An important reason for the book's 'incompleteness', as shown by the above passages, is Bilbo's realisation that 'the tale went on', i.e. that someone else (Frodo) was called to 'carry on the story': new chapters should have been added to his first tale, and initially Bilbo considers himself the one charged with that task. That the old hobbit started (or intended) to draft also the initial chapters of *LoTR* is indeed confirmed by the same paratext of *LoTR*, where Bilbo's own hand mentions the tale of 'What Happened after' the events of his 'unexpected journey', compiling 'from his own observations and the accounts of his friends'. There are many references in *LoTR* to Bilbo's wish to add 'new chapters' to the previous story, which yet remains 'our story'.

LotR 2.1 [Tolkien 2004: 238]

I began to wonder if I should live to see your chapters of our story.'

LotR 2.2 [Tolkien 2004: 249]

I tried to make a few notes, but we shall have to go over it all again together some time, if I am to write it up. There are whole chapters of stuff before you ever got here!'

Frodo's chapters, as Bilbo calls them, are thus part of the same Hobbit story initiated by Bilbo, and written down by him; at the same time, they belong to a new, second book, including, in Bilbo's initial intention, the events now recounted in Book 1 of the Fellowship of the Ring, up to Frodo's arrival in Rivendell.

LotR 2.3 [Tolkien 2004: 273]

*'We can have many a good talk. **What about helping me with my book, and making a start on the next? Have you thought of an ending?**'*

LotR 2.3 [Tolkien 2004: 278]

*'I should like to write the **second book**, if I am spared.'*

Thanks to Gandalf's explicit warning, Bilbo realises, however, that it is too soon to think of an ending for this second book, and that the new story is only at its beginning: this is not just a second book, but a real sequel, and Frodo's journey to Rivendell is only the first step of a long adventure:

LotR 2.2 [Tolkien 2004: 270]

*'I should say that your part is ended, unless as a recorder. **Finish your book**, and leave the ending unaltered! There is still hope for it. But **get ready to write a sequel**, when they come back.'*

Despite Gandalf's words, Bilbo's authorial role is often highlighted in the *LoTR*, also in connection with his role as a poet and/or adaptor of Elvish poems¹². Moreover, Bilbo continues to be described as the intended 'recorder' of the hobbits' new adventure¹³. And at the end of the novel, when the victorious Hobbits come back to Rivendell, with the ring destroyed, it is still Bilbo who is supposed to write down the full story of the War of the Ring, 'compiling' it from the reports of his friends.

LotR 6.6 [Tolkien 2004: 986]

Sitting round the fire they told him in turn all that they could remember of their journeys and adventures. At first he pretended to take some notes; but he often fell asleep; and when he woke he would say: 'How splendid! How wonderful! But where were we?' Then they went on with the story from the point where he had begun to nod.

In the end Bilbo did not fulfil his role as recorder: he did not edit his notes nor, apparently, finalize his first book. Both tasks were entrusted to Frodo:

LotR 6.6 [Tolkien 2004: 988]

'I don't think, Mr. Frodo, that he's done much writing while we've been away. He won't ever write our story now.' At that Bilbo opened an eye, almost as if he had heard. Then he roused himself. 'You see, I am getting so sleepy,' he said. 'And when I have time to write, I only really like writing poetry. I wonder, Frodo my dear fellow, if you would very much mind tidying things up a bit before you go? Collect all my notes and papers, and my diary too, and take them with you, if you will. Get Sam to help, and when you've knocked things into shape, come back, and I'll run over it. I won't be too critical.' 'Of course I'll do it!' said Frodo.

1.5 Frodo and the 'collective' narratives of *LotR*

¹² Cf. e.g. *LotR 2.3 [Tolkien 2004: 277]*, quoted above.

¹³ Cf. *LotR 6.4 [Tolkien 2004: 956]* 'You will get almost a chapter in old Bilbo's book, if ever I get a chance to report to him. And then Frodo will have to be locked up in a tower in Minas Tirith and write it all down. Otherwise he will forget half of it, and poor old Bilbo will be dreadfully disappointed.'

Frodo accepts Bilbo's investiture and will dedicate his last few years in the Shire to writing the account of the war and to 'tidying up' Bilbo's first book. We can thus note that Bilbo's authorial voice is not the only one in the *Hobbit*, which was polished up by Frodo, nor should it be completely discounted from *LoTR*, since this was partly compiled from Bilbo's notes, including above all those taken at the time of the Council of Elrond, and covering the events up to there¹⁴. Frodo's role in the writing of the Account of the War is firstly intended by Bilbo as an editorial one, aiming to 'knock things into shape', i.e. to compile different notes into a coherent narrative: these include Bilbo's notes, but not just those. As explicitly declared in the paratext, Bilbo and Frodo's memoirs are '*supplemented by the accounts of their friends and the learning of the Wise*' (see above). Just like Bilbo, Frodo is thus first of all a 'compiler', who puts together the reports and accounts of the characters involved in the story, and above all of the other three hobbits (Sam, Merry and Pipin).

The 'collective', 'compiled' nature of *LoTR* is another important feature of the meta-textual frame, which is evoked in the text by many narrative devices. A most common one is the 'remembering' formula, which presents parts of the narrative 'as memories'. Cf. e.g.

LoTR 1.3 [Tolkien 2004: 82]

*Pippin afterwards recalled little of either food or drink (...). Sam could never describe in words, nor picture clearly to himself, what he felt or thought that night, though it remained in his memory as one of the chief events of his life.*¹⁵

Most of the 'remembering formulas' belong to passages in which Frodo is not present, and indeed abound in particular in books three and five of the *LoTR*, which are narrated from the perspective of other characters, such as in particular Merry and Pippin¹⁶. All these 'memories' should thus be construed as being recalled at a later stage by one of characters, who is reporting to Frodo (and Sam). There are even some references to such narrative 'reporting moments' in the *LoTR*¹⁷.

LoTR 6.4 [Tolkien 2004: 955]

'Bless me! But I can see there's more tales to tell than ours' 'There are indeed,' said Pippin turning towards him. 'And we'll begin telling them, as soon as this feast is ended. (...) and they talked deep into the night with Merry and Pippin and Gandalf, and after a while Legolas and Gimli joined them. There Frodo and Sam learned much of all that had happened to the Company after their fellowship was broken on the evil day at Parth Galen by Rauros Falls; and still there was always more to ask and more to tell.

¹⁴ I.e. the events now included in the First Book of the Fellowship of the Ring

¹⁵ Cf. also *LoTR* 1.7 [Tolkien 2004: 128] (...) *As far as he could remember, Sam slept through the night in deep content, if logs are contented; LoTR* 3.3 [Tolkien 2004: 450] *Neither Pippin nor Merry remembered much of the later part of the journey; LoTR* 3.4 [Tolkien 2004: 463] *Often afterwards Pippin tried to describe his first impression of them. LoTR* 5.2 [Tolkien 2004: 787] *Gimli remembered little.*

¹⁶ There are a few cases in which the 'remembering-formula' is applied to Frodo himself. Cf. e.g. *LoTR* 2.3 [Tolkien 2004: 282] *Frodo remembered little of it, save the wind. LoTR* 2.7 [Tolkien 2004: 359] *It was Frodo who first put something of his sorrow into halting words though his memory was stored with many things that others had made before him. Yet when he tried to repeat it to Sam only snatches remained, faded as a handful of withered leaves. LoTR* 2.8 [Tolkien 2004: 377] *The way of Elvish words, they remained graven in his memory, and long afterwards he interpreted them, as well as he could.* These references, however, also point to the same meta-textual frame: in coherence with it, the non-omniscient narrator of *LoTR* has not only to rely on the accounts of the other characters to fill up gaps in the story in which he was not directly involved; he also must recall at a later stage the events that happened to him.

¹⁷

Although there are few allusions to it in the published text, the most important one of these reporting moments took place in Minas Tirith, after Aragorn's crowning. As Frodo recounts, in a passage not-included in the *LoTR*, and now printed in *Unfinished Tales*:

Unfinished Tales [Tolkien 1998: 329]

After the crowning we stayed in a fair house in Minas Tirith with Gandalf, and he was very merry, and though we asked him questions about all that came into our minds his patience seemed as endless as his knowledge. I cannot now recall most of the things that he told us; often we did not understand them. But I remember this conversation very clearly.

An interesting feature of this passage is also the first-person narrative. As Christopher Tolkien notes: *The 'He' of the opening sentence is Gandalf, 'we' are Frodo, Peregrin, Meriadoc, and Gimli, and 'I' is Frodo, the recorder of the conversation; the scene is a house in Minas Tirith, after the coronation of King Elessar.* The first-person narrative is never used in the *LoTR*, which always uses the third narrative person; this fact itself should be related to its intended 'choral' nature, meta-textually justified by presenting Frodo as first of all a recorder of accounts.

Together with the remembering formulas these reporting moments should be construed as depending on and underpinning the underlying meta-textual frame, as well as justifying one of the most distinctive features of the narrative fabric of the novel, i.e. the extensive use of multiple focalisations and interlaced narratives¹⁸.

1.6 Sam's authorial voice: narrative/style and the meta-textual frame

Bilbo and Frodo cannot be considered the only, independent authors of the two texts of the Red Book, also because of another important *tessera* of the meta-textual mosaic. In addition, the Hobbit Sam plays an important authorial part, both as an editor and reviser (as declared by Bilbo), but also as a writer of the final chapters of the book. The paratext of *LoTR* indeed reveals that the manuscript handed over by Frodo to Sam is unfinished, with the writing of the few remaining leaves entrusted to Sam to write¹⁹.

There is also a clue to the exact starting point of Sam's authorial hand, which is the number of his supposedly unfinished chapter (80). Since *the Hobbit* includes 19 chapters and *LoTR* 63 chapters, one can infer that the final chapter of the novel, i.e. the one including the paratext, is the 81st, of the *Red Book* and thus that the unfinished 80th chapter is the previous one, 'The Scouring of the Shire'. More than that cannot be said with certainty, although I am inclined to think that Frodo's hand is supposed to conclude with the Horn-cry of Buckland (*Awake! Awake! Fear, Fire, Foes! Awake! Fire, Foes! Awake!*), right after Sam's departure to Cotton's farm and before the battle properly begins. In fact, what follows is mostly told from Sam's perspective²⁰. Moreover, in contrast, with Frodo's leading part in the first part of the chapter²¹, Frodo's role in

¹⁸ On interlaced narratives, their nature, ancestry and parallels see in particular Rosebury 2003: 27–8, Shippey 2003: chapter 5.

¹⁹ Cf. *LoTR* 6.9 [Tolkien 2004: 1026–7] *It was divided into chapters but Chapter 80 was unfinished, and after that were some blank leaves. (...) 'I have quite finished, Sam,' said Frodo. 'The last pages are for you.'*

²⁰ Cf. *LoTR* 6.8 [Tolkien 2004: 1007] *'Behind him Sam heard a hubbub of voices and a great din and slamming of doors.'* [ibidem 1008] *'Sam hurried to the house.'* [ibidem 1014] *'Into the middle of this talk came Sam, bursting in with his gaffer.'* [ibidem 1016] *'Even Sam's vision in the Mirror had not prepared him for what they saw.'* [ibidem 1020] *'I shan't call it the end, till we've cleared up the mess,' said Sam gloomily. 'And that'll take a lot of time and work.'*

²¹ Cf. *LoTR* 6.8 ([Tolkien 2004: 1001] *'I am going where I please, and in my own time.'* [ibidem 1003] *'He won't be so eager when Mr. Frodo has finished with him'* [ibidem 1005] *'Indeed. I am glad to hear of your plans,' said Frodo. 'I am on my way to call on Mr. Lotho, and he may be interested to hear of them too.'*

the action explicitly decreases after this point ([*ibidem* 1016] ‘*Frodo had been in the battle, but he had not drawn sword*’); Frodo is not interested at all in the battle of Hobbiton (and thus, one should assume, in its narrative). A formal feature of the text (the apparent change of the narrator’s perspective) is thus meta-textually justified by a supposed authorial change in the writing of the text. It is not the only one. Another formal feature related to the meta-textual change of narrator concerns style: in the second part of the chapter, after Merry’s battle cry, one can clearly notice a lowering of register, with plenty of contractions and analogous colloquial forms and words²², which are characteristically attributed to Sam throughout the book. To focus on one example: the low-register hypocoristic term ‘lad’, is never used in the *LotR* except in direct speeches by hobbits or orcs²³. The only three real exceptions are found in this chapter, and indeed only in its second half²⁴. These sort of stylistic changes are supposed to reflect the supposed identity of the author of the passage, i.e. the hobbit Sam, whose language is characterised throughout the novel as low-register.

There is thus a concealed correlation between narrative and stylistic features and the underlying meta-textual frame. This correlation is not only found in these final chapters, but is a widespread feature of the literary fabric of the *LoTR*, discernible above all in its stylistic diversity²⁵. For instance, the first book of the Fellowship of the Rings displays a considerably lower register than the later books, which is more similar to that of the *Hobbit*²⁶. Applying Tolkien’s meta-textual frame, we can link this stylistic feature with the intense presence of Bilbo’s authorial voice in this very book, through the notes taken by him in Rivendell. There would be much to say also on the abundance of ‘light talk’ in the chapters of the story concerning (and allegedly reported by) the hobbits Pippin and Merry, or on the use of authorial empathy and focalisation, but this would be in itself a topic for another work.

We can thus sum up the meta-textual narrative reconstructed above in the following way: what are now known as the *Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* originally formed a single volume of 81 chapters, written by three intermingling hobbit hands (‘as seen by the little people’): Bilbo Baggins, who drafted (but did not finalise) the first 19 chapters (The *Hobbit*’s archetype), and sketched notes for the following 12 ones (book 1 of *LoTR*); Frodo Baggins, who presumably polished up Bilbo’s early chapters, and wrote the main bulk of the text, compiling from Bilbo’s and his own notes, and incorporating the (oral) accounts of his friends, especially his fellow hobbits; Sam Gamgee, who completed chapter 80 of the book, left unfinished by Frodo, wrote the final one and perhaps incorporated some minor editorial changes to the whole volume.

1.7 The other volumes of the *Red Book* and its textual history

This account, already quite elaborate, is still only a small part of the meta-textual frame of Tolkien’s works. First of all, the *Red Book* did not only consist in the above text of 81 chapters,

²² Cf. e.g. *LotR* 6.8 [Tolkien 2004: 1009] *the ruffians can’t come at ’em*.

²³ Cf. e.g. *LotR* 3.3 [Tolkien 2004: 458] *Evidently Mauhúr and his ‘lads’ had been killed or driven off*. An Irrelevant exception: Bergil of Minas Tirith is referred to as ‘lad’, but the term here is not hypocoristic.

²⁴ *LotR* 6.8 [Tolkien 2004: 1010] *Pippin rode off with half a dozen lads on ponies*. [*ibidem* 1007] *Before he got to the lane’s end there was Farmer Cotton with three of his lads, Young Tom, Jolly, and Nick, hurrying towards him*. [*ibidem* 1008] *When Sam got back he found the whole village roused. Already, apart from many younger lads more than a hundred sturdy hobbits were assembled with axes*.

²⁵ On intertextual and intra-textual stylistic variation of Tolkien’s works see recently Turner 2014.

²⁶ Tolkien himself often noted that there is a great stylistic variety in the *LoTR*, with a general ascending trend of ‘heightening’ of the linguistic register while the story proceeds (cf. e.g. Letter 193 *I paid great attention to such linguistic differentiation as was possible*, *LotR* Appendix F [Tolkien 2004: 1133–4]; cf. also Letter 131 on the stylistic differentiation in the *Hobbit*, (...) *in fact (as a critic has perceived) the tone and style change with the Hobbit’s development, passing from fairy-tale to the noble and high and relapsing with the return*).

but also included ‘*extracts from Books of Lore translated by Bilbo in Rivendell*’²⁷. More information about these ‘books of lore’, abridged by Frodo in the ‘appendix’ to his memoirs, are scattered throughout the *LoTR*; from these one learns that Bilbo’s books were three in number and were ‘made at various times’, and they were given by Bilbo to Frodo on his last visit to Rivendell.

LotR 6.6 [Tolkien 2004: 986–7]

Then he gave Frodo his mithril-coat and Sting, forgetting that he had already done so; and he gave him also three books of lore that he had made at various times, written in his spidery hand, and labelled on their red back: Translations from the Elvish, by B.B.

There are also a couple of references to the original Elvish versions of these translated Books of Lore²⁸, and one of these reveals his very author, Elrond himself.

LotR 2.2 [Tolkien 2004: 242]

*Then through all the years that followed he traced the Ring; but **since that history is elsewhere recounted, even as Elrond himself set it down in his books of lore**, it is not here recalled. For it is a long tale, full of deeds great and terrible, and briefly though Elrond spoke, the sun rode up the sky, and the morning was passing ere he ceased.*

These ‘three books of lore’ dealt with the tales from the forging of the ring to the last alliance²⁹, and also with the events of the ‘First Age of the World’, that is, one must conclude, with what is now the content of the *Silmarillion*³⁰. The Red Book thus also included *Silmarillion* material, originally authored by Elrond, but abridged, translated, and edited by Bilbo³¹. Given its ‘translated’ and ‘abridged’ nature, one must infer that this material was only an approximate rendering of the original version, and contained simplifications and misunderstandings, as Tolkien himself points out³². I will come back to this point in the second part of my analysis.

We have thus added another important author of the Red Book, the elf Elrond himself, as well as another important facet of Bilbo’s role, that of translator. But the meta-textual frame is not complete yet, since, in Tolkien’s vision, this frame did not only encompass the redaction of the Red Book, but its subsequent textual history. In this case there is no need for reconstructions, as this textual history is sketched out by Tolkien in a detailed note appended to the Prologue of the *LoTR* (the ‘Note on the Shire Records’)³³. Tolkien’s account is intricate but clear, and can here

²⁷ Bilbo’s role as a ‘translator’ of Elvish poetry is also often alluded to in the work and some of his translated poems are even recited by characters in parts of the story: cf. e.g. *LotR* 1.11 [Tolkien 2004: 186] *It is part of the lay that is called The Fall of Gil-galad, which is in an ancient tongue. Bilbo must have translated it. I never knew that.* It is plausible that these oral texts were imagined to be eventually included in Bilbo’s ‘Translations from Elves’.

²⁸ *LotR* 2.3 [Tolkien 2004: 277] *Aragorn and Gandalf (...) pondered the storied and figured maps **and books of lore that were in the house of Elrond.***

²⁹ I.e. the content of the very last chapter of the *Silmarillion* (‘Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age’)

³⁰ Cf. *LotR* Prologue [Tolkien 2004: 15] *These three volumes were found to be a work of great skill and learning in which, **between 1403 and 1418**, he had used all the sources available to him in Rivendell, both living and written. But since they were little used by Frodo, being **almost entirely concerned with the Elder Days**, no more is said of them here.* One can thus reasonably link Bilbo’s Books of Lore with the *Silmarillion*, even if it would be too far-fetched to make them coincide, also given the fact that the *Silmarillion* was published posthumously.

³¹ As noted by Nagy (2014: 112), in his published works Tolkien therefore modified the original frame-narratives of the *Silmarillion* (cf. n.1) and made this ‘the work of Bilbo Baggins, collecting and translating Elvish Texts in Elrond’s house in Rivendell’.

³² On this cf. Agøy 2007, 144–5, Nagy 2014: 112–3.

³³ Cf. *LotR* Prologue [Tolkien 2004: 14–15] *This account of the end of the Third age is drawn **mainly from the Red Book of Westmarch.** That most important source for the history of the War of the Ring was so called because it was long preserved at Undertowers, the home of the Fairbairns, Wardens of the Westmarch. **It was in origin Bilbo’s private diary, which he took with him to Rivendell. Frodo brought it back to the Shire, together with many loose***

be paraphrased as such: Frodo's original book was later appended by four supplemental volumes, the full three books of Bilbo's translations from Elves, and a final volume featuring miscellaneous material, written or compiled at different times by a number of authors, which includes Merry Brandibuck and Gimli the Dwarf. The original Red Book was lost, but many copies were made of it, partial or complete, including in particular a full 5-volume edition ('Thain's Book'), which was emended, annotated and supplemented in Minas Tirith. The *LoTR* is derived from a copy of this edition, incorporating Frodo and Sam's chapters from the first volume and 'selections' from the fifth volume³⁴, including the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen, redacted in Gondor by Faramir's grandson.

Just as the early part of the meta-textual frame is evoked by narrative and stylistic changes, also this latter part is duly harmonised in the text through the use of formal features; the appendixes are indeed full of scribal glosses, later notes, and editorial references that are meant to match the elaborate textual history detailed in the Note on the Shire Records³⁵.

leaves of notes, and during S.R. 1420–1 he nearly filled its pages with his account of the War. But annexed to it and preserved with it, probably in a single red case, were the three large volumes, bound in red leather, that Bilbo gave to him as a parting gift. To these four volumes there was added in Westmarch a fifth containing commentaries, genealogies, and various other matter concerning the hobbit members of the Fellowship. The original Red Book has not been preserved, but many copies were made, especially of the first volume, for the use of the descendants of the children of Master Samwise. The most important copy, however, has a different history. It was kept at Great Smials, but it was written in Gondor, probably at the request of the great-grandson of Peregrin, and completed in S.R. 1592 (F.A. 172). Its southern scribe appended this note: Findegil, King's Writer, finished this work in IV 172. It is an exact copy in all details of the Thain's Book in Minas Tirith. That book, was a copy, made at the request of King Elessar, of the Red Book of the Periannath, and was brought to him by the Thain Peregrin when he retired to Gondor in IV 64. The Thain's Book was thus the first copy made of the Red Book and contained much that was later omitted or lost. In Minas Tirith it received much annotation, and many corrections, especially of names, words and quotations in the Elvish languages; and there was added to it an abbreviated version of those parts of The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen which lie outside the account of the War. The full tale is stated to have been written by Barahir, grandson of the Steward Faramir, some time after the passing of the King. But the chief importance of Findegil's copy is that it alone contains the whole of Bilbo's 'Translations from the Elvish'. These three volumes were found to be a work of great skill and learning in which, between 1403 and 1418, he had used all the sources available to him in Rivendell, both living and written. But since they were little used by Frodo, being almost entirely concerned with the Elder Days, no more is said of them here. Since Meriadoc and Peregrin became the heads of their great families, and at the same time kept up their connexion with Rohan and Gondor, the libraries at Bucklebury and Tuckborough contained much that did not appear in the Red Book. In Brandy Hall there were many works dealing with Eriador and the history of Rohan. Some of these were composed or begun by Meriadoc himself, though in the Shire he was chiefly remembered for his Herblore of the Shire, and for his Reckoning of Years, in which he discussed the relation of the calendars of the Shire and Bree to those of Rivendell, Gondor, and Rohan. He also wrote a short treatise on Old Words and Names in the Shire, showing special interest in discovering the kinship with the language of the Rohirrim of such 'shire-words' as mathom and old elements in place names. At Great Smials the books were of less interest to Shire-folk, though more important for larger history. None of them was written by Peregrin, but he and his successors collected many manuscripts written by scribes of Gondor: mainly copies or summaries of histories or legends relating to Elendil and his heirs. Only here in the Shire were to be found extensive materials for the history of Númenor and the arising of Sauron. It was probably at Great Smials that The Tale of Years was put together, with the assistance of material collected by Meriadoc. Though the dates given are often conjectural, especially for the Second Age, they deserve attention. It is probable that Meriadoc obtained assistance and information from Rivendell, which he visited more than once.

³⁴*LotR* Appendix A [Tolkien 2004: 1033] 'only selections from them [the sources], in most places much abridged, are here presented'.

³⁵ Narrative formulas, for instance, imply that parts of the Appendixes are authored by Hobbits (presumably living in Brandibuck Hall or the Great Smials). Cf. e.g. *LotR* Appendix A [Tolkien 2004: 1039] 'as they had done for long years before we came to the Shire'. Other references instead point to Gondor and to Findegil, the scribe of the king (cf. e.g. *ibidem* 1043 n. 1 *The sceptre was the chief mark of royalty in Númenor, the King tells us; ibidem* 1050 n. 1 *as we have learned from the King*). In general, a complex system of diacritics, explained by Tolkien in the opening section, is used to evoke the variety of 'sources' available to the 'compiler' of *LoTR*. Cf. *LotR* Appendix A [Tolkien 2004: 1033] *Actual extracts from longer annals and tales are placed within quotation marks. Insertions of later date are enclosed in brackets. Notes within quotation marks are found in the sources. Others are editorial.*

1.8 The hidden presence: Tolkien's own authorial/editorial voice

The most important feature of the Note, however, is precisely the presence of Tolkien's authorial voice, which connects the meta-textual frame outlined above with Tolkien's actual writing of the *LoTR* (or rather, according to the narrative, compiling and translating). In the above passage, just as in the prologue in general, Tolkien is indeed speaking in his own authorial (hobbit) persona; this is shown by the statement that '*[t]his account of the end of the Third age is drawn mainly from the Red Book of Westmarch*' and also by the reference to the publication of *the Hobbit*, which is said to have been 'derived from the earlier chapter of the Book' and above all to have been 'already published'. What the Note does not say explicitly, but is clearly implied, and indeed underlies the whole meta-textual frame reconstructed above, is that Tolkien is in possession of a manuscript descending from the *Red Book*, and more specifically of one of the descendants of the 'Thain's book', allegedly revised in Gondor. This is the point where the meta-textual frame of the *LoTR* is developed, through Tolkien's authorial persona, into a full frame narrative, featuring Tolkien himself, where the primary and secondary planes meet. This narrative is never articulated explicitly by Tolkien, but is hinted at in several places. First, in Appendix F of the book Tolkien claims to have transcribed the 'ancient scripts' and translated their content into English³⁶. Moreover, there are a few remarks in the *LoTR* itself where the narrator cannot be Frodo, and presumably not even Sam, but the very compiler of *LoTR*, i.e. Tolkien himself:

LotR 6.8 [Tolkien 2004: 1016]

In consequence, though it happily cost very few lives, it has a chapter to itself in the Red Book, and the names of all those who took part were made into a Roll, and learned by heart by Shire-historians.

However, the most explicit reference is hidden in the dust jacket of *The Hobbit* and the title pages of *LotR*, in the friezes of runic letters, which respectively transliterate as:

The hobbit or there and back again being the record of a year's journey made by Bilbo Baggins of Hobbiton, compiled from his memoirs by J.R.R. Tolkien and published by George Allen and Unwin Ltd. (The Hobbit 1937, Dust Jacket)

The Lord of the Rings translated from the Red Book of Westmarch by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. Herein is set forth the history of the War of the Ring and the Return of the King as seen by the Hobbits (LotR 1954–5, Title Pages)

Besides confirming the 'Hobbito-centrism' of the book (see below), this hidden paratextual material reveals that Tolkien considered himself as a 'compiler', not an author. This is another important element of the frame narrative of Tolkien's works, which introduces a further layer of complexity to the (fictional) transmission of the text, and above all associates Tolkien, the author in the primary world, with the authors of his secondary world, also described as 'compilers' or 'recorders'. This is not the only quality that Tolkien shares with his fictional authors: the second frieze reveals that just like Bilbo, Tolkien is also, and most importantly, a 'translator'. Tolkien's

³⁶ Cf. *LotR* Appendix E [Tolkien 2004: 1113] *The Westron or Common Speech has been entirely translated into English equivalents. (...) In transcribing the ancient scripts I have tried to represent the original sounds (so far as they can be determined) with fair accuracy, and at the same time to produce words and names that do not look uncouth in modern letters.*

translating role is in fact obsessively emphasised in both *the Hobbit* and the *LoTR*³⁷, as well as in his other writings³⁸. This is another key feature of the meta-textual frame of *LoTR*: not only does it add a further stage to its already complex meta-textual history but above all it presents Tolkien's works (already described as 'abridgements') as 'mediated', 'approximate' texts, in a word as 'translations'.

1.9 Summing up

We can now try to summarise the complex meta-textual frame narrative underlying Tolkien's works: Tolkien has come into possession of a manuscript copy of an old book in an ancient language ('the Westron'), consisting of miscellaneous accounts about the first 'Three Ages of this World' in five volumes. The book originally focused on the end of the Third Age and was written by three contemporary authors of Hobbit race (Bilbo, Frodo, Sam), but was soon supplemented by a large bulk of miscellaneous material, of different origin, authorship, and content. Tolkien is now translating extracts of this book into English and compiling them into separate volumes (the *Hobbit* and *LoTR*, as well as, at least according to this version of the frame, the incomplete *Silmarillion*). Going back to my opening questions: the *Hobbit* was originally authored by Bilbo, but was partly emended by Frodo; the *LoTR* was authored by Frodo and Sam, but incorporated accounts of Bilbo and several other characters; the *Silmarillion* (or more precisely its archetype) was written by Elrond, and later translated by Bilbo. All three original works were later heavily edited, through a process which included emendation, supplementing, and abridgement, and whose last stage consists in Tolkien's own compilation and translation.

Now that this journey of exploration is over, we still have to deal with several other important questions, no less complex than the ones with which we started. And the first question is: why? Why did Tolkien develop such an elaborate meta-textual frame? And in addition, why did he eventually conceal it, while leaving a large number of hints and traces? This will be the focus of the second part of this article.

2. THE SYMBOLISM OF THE META-TEXTUAL FRAME

³⁷ *LotR* Appendix E [Tolkien 2004: 1113] *The Westron or Common Speech has been entirely translated into English equivalents. (...) In transcribing the ancient scripts I have tried to represent the original sounds (so far as they can be determined) with fair accuracy, and at the same time to produce words and names that do not look uncouth in modern letters. LotR* Appendix F [Tolkien 2004: 1133] *In presenting the matter of the Red Book, as a history for people of today to read, the whole of the linguistic setting has been translated as far as possible into terms of our own times. (...) The Common Speech, as the language of the Hobbits and their narratives, has inevitably been turned into modern English. In the process the difference between the varieties observable in the use of the Westron has been lessened. [ibidem 1134] Translation of this kind is, of course, usual because inevitable in any narrative dealing with the past. It seldom proceeds any further. But I have gone beyond it. I have also translated all Westron names according to their senses. When English names or titles appear in this book it is an indication that names in the Common Speech were current at the time, beside, or instead of, those in alien (usually Elvish) languages. Moreover, as stated at the very beginning of the short 'Author's note' of the *Hobbit*: This is a story of long ago. At that time the languages and letters were quite different from ours of today. English is used to represent the languages.*

³⁸ Cf. *LotR* Appendix F.2 ('on Translation) and e.g. Letter 144 [to Naomi Mitchison, April 1954] *For the story has to be told, and the dialogue conducted in a language; but English cannot have been the language of any people at that time. What I have in fact done is to equate the Westron or wide-spread Common Speech of the Third Age with English; and translate everything, including names such as The Shire, that was in the Westron into English terms, with some differentiation of style to represent dialectal differences. (...) The name [Gamgee] is a 'translation' of the real Hobbit name, derived from a village (devoted to rope-making) [...].*

In order to address these questions, we need first of all to distinguish between two different levels of possible answers. Indeed, Tolkien's meta-textual frame can and must be explained from two different perspectives, one internal and the other external to the stories. By this I mean that the meta-textual frame is meaningful on two different planes at the same time, the fictional world of the story (the 'secondary world', according to Tolkien's terminology) and Tolkien's real world ('the primary world'). Using a key notion of Tolkien's poetics, we can affirm that this meta-textual frame is 'symbolic', and should be explained as such, i.e. both from a perspective internal to the secondary fictional world, and from one external to it, that is from the 'real world' perspective. A symbol, in Tolkien's terms, may be defined as a piece of truth which is experienced (or experienceable) in the real world and expressed in a transformed form in the fictional world³⁹. A couple of quotations from Tolkien's letters to his son will help to clarify this notion.

(Letter 66, to Christopher Tolkien, May 1944)

*I sense amongst all your pains (some merely physical) the **desire to express your feeling** about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering. In my case it generated Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes.*

(Letter 73, to Christopher Tolkien, June 1944)

*So I took to 'escapism': or really **transforming experience into another form and symbol**, with Morgoth and Orcs and the Eldalie (representing beauty and grace of life and artefact) and so on; and it has stood me in good stead in many hard years since and I still draw on the conceptions then hammered out⁴⁰.*

The words 'experience' and 'feeling', 'rationalise' and 'express' are critical: Tolkien does not conceive his work as an intellectual act, consisting in the assertion of pre-existing convictions under the veil of literary fiction, but rather as the artistic (or 'sub-creative', 'mythological', 'literary') expression of non-rationalised experiences. The expression is 'artistic' in the sense that it involves the transformation or codification of experiences within a specific expressive code, i.e., in Tolkien's case, the literary code of his novels, which includes the aesthetical, narrative, and even linguistic features of Middle-Earth universe.

This literary conviction explains Tolkien's notorious aversion for allegory⁴¹, his passionate apology for his secondary world 'in its own right', and his persistent prioritising of the 'coherence' and 'beauty' of the Story over its possible 'allegorical' meanings.

(Letter 165, To the Houghton Mifflin Co., June 1955)

*There is a great deal of linguistic matter (...) included or **mythologically expressed** in the book. It is to me, anyway, largely an essay in 'linguistic aesthetic' as I sometimes say to people who ask me 'what is it all about?'. It is not 'about' anything but itself. Certainly it has no allegorical intentions, general, particular, or topical, moral, religious, or political.*

(Letter 181, To Michael Straight, January/February 1956)

*[A story] must succeed just as a tale, excite, please, and even on occasion move, and within its own imagined **world be accorded (literary) belief**. (...) something of the teller's own reflections and 'values' will inevitably get worked in. This is not the same as allegory.*

³⁹ That is, in Tolkien's case, the narrative universe of Middle Earth (without the latter being necessarily subsequent to the former).

⁴⁰ All quotations of Tolkien's letters are from Tolkien 1995b.

⁴¹ And we might add for 'metaphors' and 'similes' etc.

A full exegesis of these beautiful passages, and a discussion of Tolkien's underlying concept of sub-creation are not the scope of this work. However, in the light of these passages one can simply point out that within Tolkien's framework, a symbol is a narrative element that is perfectly coherent within the economy of the secondary world, but which has also a hidden meaning in the primary world, deriving from its being an artistic expression of a 'real' experience. To give an example, and at the same time to return to the focus of my talk, let me again refer to the already-mentioned case of the two versions of the finding of the Ring: within the *LotR*'s 'secondary' world it is perfectly credible (and, indeed, it is 'necessary') that Bilbo should have given a false version of the story to the dwarves, under the corruptive effects of the Ring, and that this should have been the version that first entered the textual tradition of his diary⁴². But at the same time, the alternative version of the story actually exists in the 'real world', being in fact the one printed in the first edition of the *Hobbit*⁴³. This element of the meta-textual frame is thus 'true' and 'meaningful' in both the secondary and the primary reality, that is, in Tolkien's understanding, it is a symbol. What makes a symbol different from an allegory, in Tolkien's sense, is that its origin is literary-aesthetic rather than intellectual. Thus the symbol's significance in the secondary world takes priority over its significance in the primary world: in the example quoted, Tolkien does not *intentionally* and *deliberately* introduce the concept of a narrative (and textual) variant in order to reveal a piece of the editorial history of the *Hobbit*, but simply and primarily to justify the existence of a 'false' version of the narrative in the original *Red Book* (on which the first edition of *The Hobbit* was fictionally based). This meta-textual variance does reflect (and can reveal) in fact a 'real' editorial history, but this is not its foremost purpose or starting point, which is rather to add coherence and verisimilitude within the secondary reality.⁴⁴ The difference between a symbol and allegory are thus, paradoxically, at the level of realism: a symbol is an allegory that aspires to be 'accorded literary belief', that is, which is fully 'realistic' according to the reality of the fictional world. This is also the reason why a symbol, such as indeed the meta-textual frame itself, must be explained first of all from a perspective internal to the secondary reality, as a 'realistic' *tessera* of Middle Earth's world.

2.1 The internal function of the meta-textual frame

2.1.1 Realism and the mythopoetic ambition

The double-narrative of the finding of the ring can thus be explained first of all an instance of a necessary, 'realistic' element within Tolkien's universe, and the same can be said, analogically, for all the other features of Tolkien's meta-textual frame, and indeed for its very existence. The first explanation for the meta-textual frame is thus its necessity within the secondary plane. A coherent story, in order to be 'real' and accorded belief, needs a 'textual history', and especially a story which claims to be set in the same world as ours, in an imagined past. The meta-textual frame thus provides first of all internal realism. In this sense it plays a similar role to that of the (aesthetically) 'invented' languages of Middle Earth, which, as Tolkien often remarked, aimed

⁴² Since the effects of the ring did not disappear with its destruction.

⁴³ Later revised by Tolkien before the publication of the *LoTR*, and incorporated into it almost by chance.

⁴⁴ On the distinction between Allegory and (symbolic) Story cf. Letter 109 [to Sir Stanley Unwin, July 1947] *Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory. And one finds, even in imperfect human 'literature', that the better and more consistent an allegory is the more easily can it be read 'just as a story'; and the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it. But the two start out from opposite ends.* Letter 131 p. 144 [to Milton Waldman, late 1951] *I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory – yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language. (And of course, the more 'life' a story has the more readily will it be susceptible of allegorical interpretations: while the better a deliberate allegory is made the more nearly will it be acceptable just as a story).*

to give ‘an air of reality’⁴⁵. The ‘realistic’ function of the meta-textual frame and its ‘necessity’ become even clearer if one takes into account Tolkien’s mythopoetic ambition, i.e. his desire to create a national epic for England, on the model of Homer’s poems, and more recently for him, of Elias Lönnrot’s Kalevala, the Finnish national poem⁴⁶.

The comparison with the Kalevala is illuminating: despite most of Kalevala being his own work, Lönnrot always posed as a mere ‘compiler’ of collective tales, handed over from the distant past and embodying the spirit of Finnish tradition. As we have seen already, Tolkien also (along with Bilbo) described himself as a compiler of collective tales, and ‘collectiveness’ is a key feature of the ‘meta-textual’ frame of the *LoTR*⁴⁷. Moreover, as Flieger explains well, the meta-textual frame, featuring a single archetypical book translated by Tolkien at different stages, allows Tolkien to integrate its works into a unified mythological corpus⁴⁸. In fact, although most of the meta-textual references are found in the *LoTR* they often allude to other works, integrating them into the same frame narrative (as discussed below). Moreover, although in fewer numbers, meta-textual references are in fact found also in all its other Middle-Earth-related works: apart from the already-discussed cryptic para-text of the *Hobbit*, there are several meta-textual hints also in *The Silmarillion*⁴⁹ and *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*⁵⁰, all referring to the same unifying frame. All these contribute to the ‘internal’ realism of the works, since, on the model of real mythology⁵¹, they convey a sense of ‘wholeness’ and unity of their underlying ‘secondary’ reality.

2.1.2 Stylistic and narrative realism

The ‘realistic’ function of the meta-textual frame is not only valid at a large scale, but it affects the literary fabric of the text, down to the level of its stylistic and narrative features. For instance, the meta-textual frame reflects and justifies the stylistic variety of Tolkien’s works, both intra-textually (as already shown) and inter-textually: for instance, there is an evident contrast between

⁴⁵ Letter 15 [to Allen and Unwin, August 1937] *The magic and mythology and assumed ‘history’ and most of the names (e.g. the epic of the Fall of Gondolin) are, alas!, drawn from unpublished inventions, known only to my family, Miss Griffiths and Mr Lewis. I believe they give the narrative an air of ‘reality’ and have a northern atmosphere. But I wonder whether one should lead the unsuspecting to imagine it all comes out of the ‘old books’, or tempt the knowing to point out that it does not?; Letter 19 [to Stanley Unwin, December 1937] (...) personally I believe (...) [the names] are good, and a large part of the effect. They are coherent and consistent and made upon two related linguistic formulae, so that they achieve a reality not fully achieved to my feeling by other name-inventors (say Swift or Dunsany!).*

⁴⁶ On the link between the meta-textual frame and Tolkien’s mythopoetic ambition see recently Flieger 2005: 63, Thiessen 2014: 199–200.

⁴⁷ Both Lönnrot and Tolkien devised a meta-textual narrative frame to emphasise the ‘authentic’ quality of their works, but one might say that Tolkien is more honest, as he did not expect his readers to believe in that narrative, but simply to use it as a further means to convey an ‘air of reality’. On the literary (and linguistic) influence of Kalevala on Tolkien’s work see Kahlas-Tarkka 2014.

⁴⁸ Cf. Flieger 2005: 83–4, in particular (84) “[I]f we are to take Tolkien’s work as he wrote it and as he clearly wanted his audience to read it— as a true mythology, with all the layering and multiple narrators and overlapping texts and variant versions that characterize mythologies in the real world—then we must allow that, like those real-world mythologies, all the parts, even the apparently inconsequential ones, are in the greater service of the whole.

⁴⁹ Cf. e.g. *The Silmarillion* [Tolkien 1977: 312] *But those who saw the things that were done in that time, deeds of valour and wonder, have elsewhere told the tale of the War of the Ring, and how it ended both in victory unlooked for and in sorrow long foreseen.*

⁵⁰ Cf. in particular [Tolkien 2008b: 7] *The Red Book contains a large number of verses. A few are included in the narrative of the Downfall of The Lord of the Rings, or in the attached stories and chronicles; many more are found on loose leaves, while some are written carelessly in margins and blanks. Of the last sort most are nonsense, now often unintelligible even when legible, or half-remembered fragments.*

⁵¹ Lee (2014b: 61) also points out the similarity between the meta-textual frame, especially as regards the fictional history of transmission, and medieval antiquarianism, with which Tolkien was well acquainted thanks to his academic work.

the high-flown and archaising tone of the *Silmarillion*, the simple, fairy-story-like style of the *Hobbit*, and the stylistic medley which is used in *LoTR*. These stylistic variations find a ‘realistic’ justification in the meta-textual frame, and in particular in the identities of the author of the different works, an elf for the *Silmarillion*, the down-to-earth hobbit Bilbo for the *Hobbit*, and the ennobled, ‘elvenized’ Hobbit Frodo for *LoTR*. Similarly, on the narrative level, the multiple focalisations that can be identified in different parts of the *LoTR* match the ‘collectiveness’ of the meta-textual frame, with Frodo compiling from Bilbo’s notes and the memories of his friends, as we already pointed out.

2.1.3 Hobbito-centrism: narrative and themes

Despite this collectiveness, however, in one important sense the narrative perspective remains the same throughout the book, and this is that it is a hobbit perspective, a fact which is aptly justified by the hobbit identity of the book’s author(s). This is probably the most important ‘internal’ function of the meta-textual frame: i.e. to emphasise and justify the ‘hobbito-centrism’ of the book. This Hobbito-centrism is not just a narrative accident, but a fundamental feature of the novel, related to one of its key underlying themes, as Tolkien often repeats in his letters:

(Letter 131 p. 160, to Milton Waldman, late 1951)

*(...) But as the earliest Tales are seen through Elvish eyes, as it were, this last great Tale (...), coming down from myth and legend to the earth, is seen mainly through the eyes of Hobbits: it thus becomes in fact anthropocentric. But (...) through Hobbits, not Men so-called, because the last Tale is to exemplify most clearly a recurrent theme: **the place in ‘world politics’ of the unforeseen and unforeseeable acts of will, and deeds of virtue of the apparently small, ungreat forgotten in the places of the Wise and Great.***

(Letter 181, to Michael Straight, January/February 1956)

[The structure of the narrative] is planned to be ‘hobbito-centric’, that is primarily a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble.⁵²

The *LoTR* is written by a hobbit because the whole book is about hobbits, and more precisely about their ‘ennoblement’ and their contribution to the history of the world. Both these themes were most dear to Tolkien⁵³.

2.1.4 Merging myth into history: the symbolism of the hobbits (and their narrative)

The ‘hobbito-centrism’ of the book, however, is important not only from a narrative, stylistic and thematic point of view: it also has a crucial (meta-)literary function, that is, using Tolkien’s words, to ‘merge myth into history’.

(Letter 131 p. 144, to Milton Waldman, late 1951)

*The Hobbit, which has much **more essential life in it**, was quite independently conceived: I did not know as I began it that it belonged. But it proved to be the discovery of the completion of the whole, its mode of descent to earth, and merging into ‘history’. As the high Legends of the*

⁵² Cf. also Letter 186 [to Joanna de Bortadano, March 1956] *This story [Aragorn and Arwen] is placed in an appendix, because I have told the whole tale more or less through hobbits; and that is because another main point in the story for me is the remark of Elrond in Vol. 1 ‘Such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world’ (...).*

⁵³ Cf. e.g. Letter 165 [to the Houghton Mifflin Co., June 1955] *There are of course certain things and themes that move me specially. The interrelations between the ‘noble’ and the ‘simple’ (or common, vulgar) for instance. **The ennoblement of the ignoble I find especially moving.***

beginning are supposed to look at things through Elvish minds, so the middle tale of the Hobbit takes a virtually human point of view—and the last tale blends them.

What does Tolkien mean by ‘descend to earth’ and ‘merge into history’? A full answer to this question would require more than one article⁵⁴. Here I’ll simply say that the Hobbits introduce a point of view with which Tolkien and his readers can identify, that is first of all an ‘anthropocentric point of view’, and secondarily the point of view of ‘simple’ human beings living in a non-heroic age, like that of Tolkien’s twentieth century England. Tolkien himself often describes himself and (some of) his contemporaries as Hobbits, and even the meta-textual frame implies that the compiler was himself of Hobbit race. The Hobbits are therefore the most symbolic characters of the *LoTR* in the sense that they only have a full life (‘a more essential life’) in both the primary and secondary world; they help the merging of myth and history because they link the secondary with the primary world, that is the mythical universe of Middle Earth, with its elves, gods, and heroes, with Tolkien’s real contemporary world.

2.2 The ‘external’ meaning of the meta-textual frame

This leads me at last to the final part of this article, in which I will investigate the meaning of the meta-textual narratives on the ‘primary plane’. So far I have only discussed ‘internal’ justifications for the meta-textual frame, which are all somehow related to the need for internal realism and mythopoetic ambition. But this meta-textual frame is clearly symbolic, and it has a meaning also in the primary, real world, by being a codified expression of real experiences: to put it simply, what sort of ‘real’ experience is expressed by the meta-textual narrative?

2.2.1 The Hobbit’s intrusion: meta-textual frame and inspiration

The starting point for this de-codification is again the hobbits, or more precisely ‘the Hobbit’. We already read above (Letter 131) that Tolkien considered *The Hobbit* as ‘an unexpected discovery’, and this point is often repeated in his letters⁵⁵.

(Letter 164, to W.H. Auden, June 1955)

*The Hobbit was originally quite unconnected, though it inevitably got drawn in to the circumference of the greater construction; and in the event modified it. (...) **On a blank leaf I scrawled: ‘In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit’. I did not and do not know why. I did nothing about it, for a long time, and for some years I got no further than the production of Thor’s Map.***

(Letter 17, to Stanley Unwin, October 1937)

*I have only too much to say, and much already written, about the world into which the hobbit **intruded.***

(Letter 257, to Christopher Bretherton, July 1964)

The Hobbit was not intended to have anything to do with it.

The origin of the Hobbits and above all their ‘intrusion’ with the world of Middle Earth were unplanned. Tolkien did not consciously invent the hobbits, but the hobbits’ story, suddenly and unexpectedly, ‘happened to him’, like the discovery of a mysterious manuscript from a distant past (indeed written by and about Hobbits). The ‘hobbito-centrism’ of the meta-textual frame of *LoTR* does not simply have narrative, thematic, and literary connotations, but is connected to a

⁵⁴ On this see in particular Shippey 2003: chapter 3.

⁵⁵ On the ‘unexplained’ inspiration of the *Hobbit* cf. also Carpenter 1977: 230, Shippey 2003: 65–70.

fundamental experiential reality related to the writing of his stories: it is not Tolkien who decided to write about Hobbits, but it is, from this perspective, the Hobbits who decided to make him write about them. Tolkien's self-description as a 'compiler' and 'translator' is therefore an accurate, symbolic, expression of his experience as a writer of an 'unplanned' story, a story that he discovered rather than devised or invented.⁵⁶ This is the first, main 'external' (or primary) function of the meta-textual frame: it symbolically expresses the actual history of composition of the works. Just as the fictional 'variant narrative' of the finding of the ring reflects real 'editorial variants', so the meta-textual notion of Tolkien's 'discovery of a hobbit's manuscript' reflects the unplanned 'inspiration' of his hobbits' stories.

2.2.2 Meta-textual frame and composition: the 'self-unfolding' of the story

There are other 'real' features of Tolkien's writing history and practice which are symbolically expressed in the book: the description of Bilbo's writing room in Rivendell, for instance, could equally describe the real Oxford study where Tolkien drafted his notes and books. Similarly, Bilbo's tendency to procrastinate his writing and his obsession about the unfinished status of his diary is easily mirrored in real elements of Tolkien's writing life⁵⁷. Also, the meta-textual frame, with Bilbo unable to go much beyond the drafting of the initial chapters of the 'new story', accurately reflects the actual chronology of the *LotR*'s composition, with Tolkien lingering over the first chapters of the Fellowship of the Ring⁵⁸. However, the most important 'real' feature of the meta-textual frame is related to the already-mentioned 'unexpectedness' of the stories, their 'happening' as unplanned, independent events.

That Tolkien considered his stories unplanned, is indeed true both at the level of the inspiration, and at each stage of the process of writing. Often Tolkien admitted, for instance, that 'the story unfolded itself', without sketches or synopses, as 'given things':

(Letter 131 p. 145, to Milton Waldman, late 1951)

*The mere stories were the thing. They arose in my mind as 'given' things, and as they came, separately, so too the links grew. (...): yet always I had the sense of **recording** what was already 'there', somewhere; not of 'inventing'.*

(Letter 199, to Caroline Everett, June 1957)

*From time to time I made rough sketches or synopses of what was to follow, immediately or far ahead; but these were seldom of much use: **the story unfolded itself**, as it were. The tying-up was achieved, so far as it is achieved, by constant re-writing backwards.*

Similarly, Tolkien declares that he did not have to anticipate knowledge of characters and scenes, before they were actually put in writing⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ Cf. also Letter 199 [to Caroline Everett, June 1957] *though praised for 'invention' I have not in fact any conscious memory of sitting down and deliberately thinking out any episode.*

⁵⁷ To confirm Tolkien's belief that symbols are not always necessarily subsequent to their primary referents, there are even cases in which meta-textual features anticipate reality: for instance, Bilbo's handing over his unfinished notes to Frodo closely foreshadow the posthumous editorial history of the *Silmarillion*, compiled by his heir Christopher Tolkien (on cf. Nagy 2014: 114 'Christopher Tolkien inserted himself in the functional place of Bilbo, thus reinforcing the mythopoetic effect with the keystone that locks the whole into place. The 1977 *Silmarillion* does everything Bilbo's work is supposed to do, and ultimately in conception conforms to Tolkien's governing intention').

⁵⁸ On the history of composition of Middle Earth see Whittingham 2007.

⁵⁹ Cf. also Letter 247 [to Colonel Worskett, September 1963] *There were no Ents in the older stories—because the Ents in fact only presented themselves to my sight, without premeditation or any previous conscious knowledge,*

Letter 91 [to Christopher Tolkien, November 1944] *What happens to the Ents I don't yet know. It will probably work out very differently from this plan when it gets written, as if the truth comes out then, only imperfectly glimpsed in the preliminary sketch.*

There is a metaphor in particular which Tolkien uses to express this experience of his work as something 'other'. This is the metaphor of the Tree:

(Letter 64, to Christopher Tolkien, April 1944) also *I hope to see him [CS Lewis] tomorrow and read some more of 'the Ring'. It is growing and sprouting again (I did a whole day at it yesterday to the neglect of many matters) and opening out in unexpected ways.*

(Letter 241, to Jane Neave, September 1962)
I was anxious about my own internal Tree, The Lord of the Rings. It was growing out of hand, and revealing endless new vistas.

This metaphor was later developed by Tolkien into the full narrative of 'Leaf by Niggle', in Tolkien's words a 'symbol of Tale-telling'⁶⁰, which can be considered as Tolkien's literary manifesto, and which would also deserve a full investigation (unfortunately outside the scope of this article). Tolkien thus considered their stories as something 'other' from him, something 'given', free from the control of his rational mind. This also explains why he refers to his books as a puzzle, as the work of 'a strange' hand, written by 'someone else', why he often declares a fundamental 'ignorance' about many details of the background story, and also why he indulges in an apparently absurd self-exegesis of or research on his own books:

(Letter 211, to Rhona Beare, October 1958)
I do not 'know' all the answers. Much of my own book puzzles me; and in any case much of it was written so long ago (...) that I read it now as if it were from a strange hand. (...) I have not named the colours because I do not know them.

(Letter 294, to Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, February 1967)
If it is of interest, the passages that now move me most – written so long ago that I read them now as if they had been written by someone else – are the end of the chapter Lothlórien and the horns of the Rohirrim at cockcrow.

(Letter 59, to Christopher Tolkien, April 1944)
I have seriously embarked on an effort to finish my book, and have been sitting up rather late: a lot of re-reading and research required.

2.2.3 Writing as a 'labour pain': discovering, recording and reporting (imperfectly)

There is a text in particular in which Tolkien delves into this experience of 'writing as discovery', which is a long letter dating to 1955 and written to the poet W.H. Auden, a great admirer of Tolkien's work. A couple of short extracts deserve to be quoted in full.

(Letter 163, to W. H. Auden, June 1955)
The last two books were written between 1944 and 48. That of course does not mean that the main idea of the story was a war-product. (...) It is really given, and present in germ, from the

when I came to Chapter IV of Book 3. Just like the narrative of LoTR, also its characters are according to Tolkien largely 'independent' from him.

⁶⁰ Cf. Letter 263.

beginning, though I had no conscious notion of what the Necromances stood for (...) nor of his connexion with the Ring. (...) So (...) the essential Quest started at once. But I met a lot of things on the way that astonished me. Tom Bombadil I knew already; but I had never been to Bree. Strider sitting in the corner at the inn was a shock, and I had no more idea who he was than had Frodo. (...) Fangorn Forest was an unforeseen adventure. I had never heard of the House of Eorl nor of the Stewards of Gondor. Most disquieting of all, Saruman had never been revealed to me, and I was as mystified as Frodo at Gandalf's failure to appear on September 22. I knew nothing of the Palantiri though the moment the Orthanc-stone was cast from the window I recognized it, and knew the meaning of the 'rhyme of lore' that had been running in my mind: seven starts and seven stones and one white tree. (...) I have yet to discover anything about the cats of Queen Beruthiel. (...)

(Letter 163 n., to W. H. Auden, June 1955)

*I had very little particular, conscious, intellectual, intention in mind at any point. Take the Ents, for instance. I did not consciously invent them at all. The chapter called 'Treebeard', from Treebeard's first remark on p. 66, was written off more or less as it stands, with an effect on my self **(except for labour pains) almost like reading some one else's work**. And I like Ents because they do not seem to have anything to do with me. I daresay something had been going on in the 'unconscious' for some time, **and that accounts for my feeling throughout, especially when stuck, that I was not inventing but reporting (imperfectly) and had at times to wait till 'what really happened' came through.** (...)*

It should be clear by now that Tolkien's meta-textual self-representation as a decipherer and translator of someone's else story has a meaningful correlation with the way Tolkien experienced his real writing experience. In particular, the adverb 'imperfectly' in the second passage quoted above is crucial, and helps to introduce another key element of Tolkien's writing experience, which is symbolically expressed through the meta-textual frame. This is the 'imperfection', 'approximateness' or 'incompleteness' of his writing. As shown by the above passages Tolkien conceives his writing as originating in an 'event', of which he only presents a 'report': Tolkien often points out in his letters that this report is 'imperfect' and incomplete, that he has a 'limited understanding of the things revealed' to him⁶¹. Cf. e.g.

(Letter 187, to H. Cotton Minchin, April 1956)

It [the Appendix] will be a big volume, even if I attend only to the things revealed to my limited understanding!

(Letter 109, to Sir Stanley Unwin, July 1947)

*Yet the chief thing is to complete one's work, **as far as completion has any real sense.***

Similarly, on the linguistic side, Tolkien often remarks that the 'English' language of his novels is 'approximate', a 'not very accurate' rendering of the original (fictional) languages of his texts⁶². Cf. e.g.

Letter 24 [to the editor of the 'Observer', January/February 1938] *In any case, elf, gnome, goblin, dwarf are only **approximate translations** of the Old Elvish names for beings of not quite the same kinds and functions.*

⁶¹ Cf. also Letter 115 [to Katherine Farrer, June 1948(?)] *The long tales out of which it is drawn (by 'Pengolod') are either **incomplete** or not up to date.*

⁶² Cf. also Letter 17 [to Stanley Unwin, October 1937] *Perhaps my dwarf –since he and the Gnome are only translations into **approximate** equivalents of creatures with different names and rather different functions in their own world (...). Letter 114 [to Hugh Brogan, April 1948] *A history of the Eldalië (or Elves, by a not very accurate translation).**

A complex philosophy of language and linguistic aesthetics underlies these beliefs, inspired by Owen Barfield's works, according to which modern languages of fallen men are no longer able to express the 'truth' of reality. For this reason, they are no longer 'beautiful', having lost the capacity to express with accuracy and precision the beauty of truth⁶³. This is not the place to delve into these theories, of Stoic ancestry: let me only emphasize here how the meta-textual frame, presenting Tolkien as a compiler and translator, is perfectly coherent with his experience of writing as an 'incomplete' and 'linguistically inaccurate' report of events that remain inherently 'ineffable', 'mysterious'.

But what kind of events are we talking about? If for Tolkien writing is just an 'imperfect report' of what 'really happened', what is the nature of this 'happening'? What has happened? There is no easy answer to these questions, but, with a degree of simplification, we might say that all these 'events' can be grouped together under a single word, Truth: writing, for Tolkien, is an imperfect report or 'reflection' of a True event, of Truth⁶⁴. Cf. e.g.

(Letter 181, to Michael Straight, January/February 1956)

I think that fairy story has its own mode of reflecting 'truth', different from allegory, or (sustained) satire, or 'realism', and in some ways more powerful.

And for Tolkien, a man of deep Christian faith, Truth ultimately has a divine origin. Truth transcends human understanding and is inherently something Other, which cannot be fully expressed in the imperfect language of fallen human beings. This explains both why (human) writing is inherently 'approximate'⁶⁵ and why Tolkien's stories felt to him as 'written by others', an 'unexpected adventure', 'a given thing'.

2.2.4 The Mystery of literary creation

In fact, Tolkien would never have claimed to be the origin of the Truth of his stories: as in the meta-textual frame, he was simply a 'reporter', 'a compiler' a 'translator' of a Story that was given to him. In the story 'Leaf by Niggle' it is not Niggle who gives life to his wonderful Tree: he is only able to paint lifeless and disconnected leaves, with a longing desire for a vision that he can only imperfectly picture in his mind. The Divine powers who govern his world decide to bless and transfigure this desire, and create a wonderful flourishing Tree out of it. The Tree has thus something divine in it, and yet it also has something of Niggle's 'artistic' ambition.

⁶³ For an extensive discussion of Barfield's influence on Tolkien's thought and works see especially Medcalf 1999 and Flieger 2002.

⁶⁴ Elaborations of Tolkien's belief that myth and art (must) express 'truth' in 'symbolic' (i.e. non-explicit, not-allegorically) forms are found especially in the lecture 'On Fairy Stories' (Tolkien 2008a), originally delivered at the University of St Andrews, and his poem 'Mythopoeia' (in Tolkien 2001), which originated in a momentous conversation with C.S. Lewis (on which see recently Phelpstead 2014). Cf. also Letter 131 p. 144 [to Milton Waldman, late 1951] *Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real world' (...) [ibidem 147] I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode.* It would be interesting to investigate why for Tolkien a symbolic Story could be at the same time a non-intellectual event, originating in an aesthetic process of discovery, and at the same time an expression of Truth. I hope to try to give a full answer in another work; here I will only say that the answer lies in Tolkien's 'Sacramental' vision of reality (and art), grounded in his Catholic faith, and the related belief in the unity of beauty and truth.

⁶⁵ It also explains why the 'most moving' stories for Tolkien are the ones untold, that is the ones that are not 'mediated' by human imperfection; cf. also Letter 96 [to Christopher Tolkien, January 1945] *One that moves supremely and I find small difficulty in evoking: the heart-racking sense of the vanished past (best expressed by Gandalf's words about the Palantir); and the other the more 'ordinary' emotion, triumph, pathos tragedy of the characters. That I am learning to do, as I get to know my people, but it is not really so near my heart, and is forced on me by the fundamental literary dilemma. A story must be told or there'll be no story, yet it is the untold stories that are most moving.*

The birth of the Tree, and by analogy of Tolkien's literary work, originates thus in a mysterious interplay between human and divine forces. This is the reason why Tolkien always considered literary creation as a 'mystery'.

(Letter 180, to Mr Thompson, January 1956)

*I have long ceased to invent (...) though even patronizing or sneering critics on the side praise my 'invention': I wait till I seem to know what really happened. Or till it writes itself. (...) I am interested in mythological 'invention', and the 'mystery' of literary creation (or sub-creation as I have elsewhere called it). (...) I would build on the hobbits. And I saw that I was meant to do it (as Gandalf would say), since without thought, in a 'blurb', I wrote for *The Hobbit*, I spoke of the time between the Elder Days and the Dominion of Men.*

Literary creation is a 'mystery' because its occurrence and offspring cannot be fully explained, for Tolkien, in rational terms, as purely human activities, performed by individual human beings⁶⁶. In fact, Tolkien never thought himself 'alone' in his writing, never considered himself as the only author of his stories⁶⁷. A funny anecdote exemplifies this, in which Tolkien reports his fortuitous encounter with an eccentric old fellow:

(Letter 328 [to Carole Batten-Phelps, Autumn 1971])

*He was struck by the curious way in which many old pictures seemed to him to have been designed to illustrate LotR long before its time (...) Suddenly he said 'Of course you don't suppose, do you, that you wrote all that book yourself?' Pure Gandalf! I was too well acquainted with Gandalf to expose myself rashly, or to ask what he meant. I think I said: 'No, I don't suppose so any longer'. An alarming conclusion (...) but not one that should puff any one up who considers the imperfections of '**chosen instruments**' and indeed what sometimes seems their lamentable unfitness for the purpose.*

It is important to note that Gandalf is for Tolkien a divine entity, a symbol of divine grace⁶⁸: in this anecdote it is thus God himself, divine 'Truth', who claims 'co-authority' of Tolkien's stories and reminds him of his purely 'instrumental' role. Tolkien often described himself as an instrument of God, and indeed aspired to be such from his very early years:

(Letter 15 [to G.B. Smith, August 1916])

*The greatness I meant was that of **a great instrument in God's hands**—a mover, a doer, even an achiever of great things, a beginner at the very least of large things.*

And eventually Tolkien did consider himself (and was grateful for) having become an 'instrument in His hands', chosen to provide, through the beauty of his literature, 'a drop of water on a barren stony ground' and offer 'a tribute to the infinity of God's potential variety'.

(Letter 87, to Christopher Tolkien, October 1944)

⁶⁶ Letter 328 [to Carole Batten-Phelps, Autumn 1971] *The book was written to please me (...) it was written slowly and with great care for detail and finally **emerged as a Frameless picture**: a searchlight, as it were, on a brief episode of History (...) Very well: that may explain to some extent why it feels like 'history': it does not fully explain what has actually happened. (...) I feel as (...) if indeed the horns of Hope had been heard again, as Pippin heard them suddenly at the absolute nadir of the fortunes of the West. But How and Why?*

⁶⁷ In fact, within his fiction evil is defined as the attempt at creating 'on one's own', which is what, for instance, Morgoth, Sauron and Saruman do. Similarly, one of the main causes of the fall of the Noldor in the Silmarillion is the 'artificer' Fëanor's prideful refusal to recognize the divine origin of the beauty of his fateful Silmarils.

⁶⁸ Cf. e.g. Letter 109 [to Sir Stanley Unwin, July 1947] *I think that there is no horror conceivable that such creatures [the Hobbits] cannot surmount, by **grace (here appearing in mythological forms)** combined with a refusal of their nature and reason at the last pinch to compromise or submit.*

What thousands of grains of good human corn must fall on barren stony ground, if such a very small drop of water should be so intoxicating! But I suppose one should be grateful for the grace and fortune to have allowed me to provide even the drop.

(Letter 153, to Peter Hastings, September 1954)

I should have said that liberation 'from the channels the creator is known to have used already' is the fundamental function of 'sub-creation', a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety, one of the ways in which indeed it is exhibited.

For Tolkien literary creation is thus another form of God's creative power, channelled through the imperfect 'code' of a human instrument. Just like Niggle's Tree, Tolkien considers his own work as the offspring of his artistic, sub-creative aspiration and the vitalising power of God, an offspring which Tolkien 'delivered' with 'labour pains'. Tolkien's stories are thus not only his own stories, just as a translation belongs to the translator but primarily to its original author. In fact, the true Author of Tolkien's stories, returning to our starting question, is not Tolkien himself, but rather an Unnamed Person.

(Letter 192 [to Amy Ronald, July 1956])

The Other Power then took over: the Writer of the Story (by which I do not mean myself) 'that one ever-present Person who is never absent and never named'.

Why does this person remain Unnamed? The reason is the same as why Tolkien eventually concealed the meta-textual frame, whose ultimate (perhaps unintended) function, to put it in a nutshell, is to express in symbolic forms the 'Otherness' and 'multi-authoriality' of his stories. It was not Tolkien's ambition (or vocation) to articulate truth in the imperfect language of fallen human beings, but rather to express it in a more unfamiliar, and thus more powerful (and accurate) form⁶⁹, under the cloak of symbols and stories⁷⁰.

Following Tolkien's example, let me thus conclude this article with a story, which I think provides a good symbolic summary of the journey I have made, and that I will leave for the reader to interpret. This is from the *Silmarillion* and concerns the creation of the dwarves by Aulë, the semi-god of 'sub-creation':

The Silmarillion 2 [Tolkien 1977]

Aulë made the Dwarves (...) but fearing that the other Valar might blame his work, he wrought in secret: and he made first the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves in a hall under the mountains in Middle-earth. Now Ilúvatar [God] knew what was done, and in the very hour that Aulë's work

⁶⁹ On the beneficial 'unfamiliarity' of the symbolic code cf. e.g. Letter 153 [to Peter Hastings, September 1954] *I would claim (...) to have as one object the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to 'bring them home'.*

⁷⁰ On Tolkien's 'hiding' effort in his work cf. e.g. Letter 156 [to Robert Murray SJ, November 1954] *I have purposely kept all allusions to the highest matters down to mere hints, perceptible only by the most attentive, or kept them under unexplained symbolic forms. So God and the 'angelic' gods, the Lords or Powers of the West, only peep through in such places as Gandalf's conversation with Frodo: 'behind that there was something else at work' (...) or in Faramir's Numenorean grace at dinner. Letter 163 [to W.H. Auden, June 1955] (...) the author, the most modest (or at any rate retiring) of men, whose instinct is to cloak such self-knowledge as he has, and such criticisms of life as he knows it, under mythical and legendary dress (...) Letter 250 [to Michael Tolkien, November 1963] *At any rate as a key to dons' behaviour. Quite true, but not the whole truth. (The greater part of the truth is always hidden, in regions out of the reach of cynicism).* Letter 142 [to Robert Murray SJ, December 1953] *The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.* (Letter 142).*

was complete, and he was pleased, and began to instruct the Dwarves in the speech that he had devised for them, Ilúvatar spoke to him; and Aulë heard his voice and was silent. And the voice of Ilúvatar said to him: 'Why hast thou done this? Why dost thou attempt a thing which thou knowest is beyond thy power and thy authority? For thou hast from me as a gift thy own being only, and no more; and therefore the creatures of thy hand and mind can live only by that being, moving when thou thinkest to move them, and if thy thought be elsewhere, standing idle. Is that thy desire?' Then Aulë answered: 'I did not desire such lordship. I desired things other than I am, to love and to teach them, so that they too might perceive the beauty of Eä, which thou hast caused to be. For it seemed to me that there is great room in Arda for many things that might rejoice in it, yet it is for the most part empty still, and dumb. And in my impatience I have fallen into folly. Yet the making of things is in my heart from my own making by thee; and the child of little understanding that makes a play of the deeds of his father may do so without thought of mockery, but because he is the son of his father. But what shall I do now, so that thou be not angry with me for ever? As a child to his father, I offer to thee these things, the work of the hands which thou hast made. Do with them what thou wilt. But should I not rather destroy the work of my presumption?' Then Aulë took up a great hammer to smite the Dwarves; and he wept. But Ilúvatar had compassion upon Aulë and his desire, because of his humility; and the Dwarves shrank from the hammer and were afraid, and they bowed down their heads and begged for mercy. And the voice of Ilúvatar said to Aulë: 'Thy offer I accepted even as it was made. Dost thou not see that these things have now a life of their own, and speak with their own voices? Else they would not have flinched from thy blow, nor from any command of thy will.' Then Aulë cast down his hammer and was glad, and he gave thanks to Ilúvatar, saying: 'May Eru bless my work and amend it!' But Ilúvatar spoke again and said: 'Even as I gave being to the thoughts of the Ainur at the beginning of the World, so now I have taken up thy desire and given to it place therein; but in no other way will I amend thy handiwork, and as thou hast made it, so shall it be'.

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