Chapter 6

ARCHAISM, NOSTALGIA, AND TENNYSONIAN WAR IN *THE LORD*

OF THE RINGS

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Despite Tolkien's personal experience of modern war, his fantasy epic is surprisingly different in image, diction, and ambience from literature associated with World War I. Its war rhetoric resembles more than anything else the moralized combat of Victorian medievalist literature, especially Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*.

Through his long-running *Idylls of the King*, whose composition stretched from the 1830s to the 1880s, Alfred Tennyson became a major influence on the Victorian shift toward the symbolic in medievalist representations of warfare. Seeing his own era as morally superior to Geoffrey of Monmouth's or Malory's, Tennyson committed himself to capturing the true "spirit" or "ideal" of Arthurian chivalry without much of its troubling military substance, omitting any but legendary history and far reducing the characteristic medieval interest in the detail of wars and tournaments. Partly through the huge success of Tennyson's "parabolic" Arthuriad, in the later Victorian period, war became the main selling-point of medievalism as symbolic heroism and chivalry, even though, viewed in the cold light of history, medieval war could also be seen as barbarous violence, an indictment of its age. An elderly character in one of Charlotte Yonge's late novels nicely sums up the conflict:

> [Y]ou will laugh, but my enthusiasm was for chivalry, Christian chivalry, half
> symbolic. History was delightful to me for the search for true knights. I had lists
> of them, drawings if possible, but I never could indoctrinate anybody with my

affection. Either history is only a lesson, or they know a great deal too much, and will prove to you that the Cid was a ruffian, and the Black Prince not much better.[i]

One outcome of such tension, between the Middle Ages as half-symbolic chivalry and medieval violence as barbaric "Other" to the modern, was the increased ideological vulnerability of the symbolism to adverse critiques of medieval history. Medievalist fictions had to find ways to cope with that difficulty, by giving war a more positive and widely applicable narrative treatment. I wish to suggest in this essay that the war discourse of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* can best be understood within this late-nineteenth-century context. As a war story, *The Lord of the Rings*, I argue, is more of a late utterance in a Victorian medievalist poetic, usually thought to have died out after 1916, than either a medieval or a mid-twentieth-century text.

Tolkien's relation to the war of his own century is problematical. Famously, he made others take all responsibility for any connection between *The Lord of the Rings* and World War II. The book was, he said, purely a "feigned" "history," "with . . . varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers."[ii] Yet he hinted that it might have been generally influenced by his dreadful experience in the Great War, more than fifty years before[iii]—"By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead"—and by an even earlier trauma: "The country in which I lived in childhood was being shabbily destroyed before I was ten" (*LR*, foreword, xv).

It is not surprising that Tolkien should rate his memories of the Great War as more important than any contemporary reference. The nobility of long memory and the obliviousness of the present time to past sacrifices are major themes in *The Lord of the Rings*, which Tolkien made as deeply nostalgic and past-oriented as he had

judged *Beowulf* to be.[iv] It abounds in laments for lost landscapes and departed glories, and dwells repeatedly on scenes of decay and desolation. Indeed, given Tolkien's association of the Great War with English rural destruction as his two founding traumas, one might well have expected that a horrific version of modern war would complete *The Lord of the Rings*' indictment of the twentieth century. This is not the case. Early attempts to read the novel as a political allegory probably arose because much of its discourse of war seemed so distant from most twentieth-century sensibilities. Hugh Brogan has written that for "Tolkien, a man whose life was language,. . .[to] have gone through the Great War, with all its rants and lies, and still come out committed to a 'feudal' literary style. . .looks like an act of deliberate defiance of modern history."[v] Tolkien's references to his own war memories are definitely not "feudal" in style—"the animal horror of the life of active service on the earth—such as trench life as I knew it" (*Letters*, 72).

And yet, despite the author's language here and in the 1968 foreword, *The Lord of the Rings* does not mainly represent war as an "oppression" or "hideous experience" that wastes young lives (*LR*, Foreword, xiii). Instead, Tolkien principally makes the War of the Ring into a theater of heroic action in which the military prowess of groups and individuals is recognized as necessary, ennobling, and deeply effective. His war may be "grim" and "terrible," but it is often valorous and lofty in style, and of the major friendly characters, only Boromir and Théoden actually die in its fighting. Certainly, the novel also shows evidence of more common modern attitudes. Tom Shippey has commented on the postheroic, "modernistic style of courage" exemplified by the Hobbits.[vi] Brian Rosebury,[vii] Brogan, and John Garth have all suggested ways in which Tolkien's Great War memories might have influenced horrific and menacing narrative details. Yet Garth's recent book, while

fully documenting the evils Tolkien experienced in the trenches and his distaste for war propaganda, still concludes that *The Lord of the Rings* "tackled the themes that Wilfred Owen ruled off-limits: deeds, lands, glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, power."[viii] My focus here is on what cultural factors might have helped to make up such an idealized discourse of war in Tolkien, especially the high style of war narrative he often employs within *The Lord of the Rings*.

It would be natural to suppose that Tolkien, as a learned medievalist, dealt with the memory of "hideous" modern war by transforming it into a superior version directly along medieval lines. In this connection, there have been important studies of his indebtedness to various medieval literatures,[ix] and, in obvious ways, Tolkien's war looks "medieval." The heroes in *The Lord of the Rings* fight with favored weapons of the Middle Ages—swords, spears, axes, and bows; they offer and fulfil military service as part of feudal or family obligation; there is a preponderance of medieval combat types, especially siege warfare, sword fights, cavalry charges, and battles in open field; there are numerous single combats within battles that broadly resemble those in medieval historiography and romance; battle description is dominated by features such as distinctive armor and livery, famous swords and horses with special names, banners, heralds, war cries, horns, and so on. There is continued reference to great "tales" of war, in various medieval forms: chronicle, elegy, and heroic lay. And yet, Tolkien's wars are not quite like those in the medieval stories he salutes, in either their overall narrative function or their specific rhetoric.

Of course, medieval literary sources and analogues can often be sighted in Tolkien's war narrative, but they become strangely transmuted in the process. For example, he commonly employs a paratactic sentence structure, which joins up its elements by a chain of "and's" and "then's." In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte*

Darthur this is the standard narrative method: matter-of-fact, highly physical, and centered on particular exploits. Malory's paratactic structure is congruent with a whole narrative procedure that takes the reader directly from one deed of arms to the next. Tolkien's major extended battle descriptions, such as the Pelennor Fields episode (*LR* 5.6, 821–22), are quite different in overall effect, although one could easily point to individual features that look "medieval." To begin with, there is a good deal of parataxis, but whereas in *Le Morte Darthur* parataxis is the staple of battle narrative, here it is a high style that embraces both simple actions ("and he spurred to the standard") (*LR* 5.6, 821) and sometimes elaborate figuration: "and the drawing of the scimitars of the Southrons was like a glitter of stars"; "and more skilled was their knighthood with long spears and bitter" (*LR* 5.6, 821). Tolkien's alliance of paratactic structure with highly charged imagery and lyrical cadences will recall the King James Bible or verse derived from it, like Lord Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" or Lord Macaulay's narrative poems, much more than it does Malory or any Old or Middle English prose. The symbolic coloring of the Pelennor scene (white and green, scarlet and black), the complex transferral of literal color to metaphorical use ("red wrath," "white fury . . . burned the hotter"), and the lofty similes ("like a glitter of stars," "like a firebolt in a forest") (*LR* 5.6, 821) indicate their origin in a postmedieval, romantic mindset. Tolkien makes the battle a panoramic, semisymbolic clash of good and evil, quite unlike the basic functionalism of most medieval English war writing with its principal interest in individual "deeds" of arms and the fortunes of the fight and with occasional evocations of the general battlefield atmosphere.

The style and certainly the individual word choices of Tolkien's description of the Pelennor Fields come closer in places to the effect of Old English and Middle English alliterative verse. "Long spears and bitter" recalls collocations like *Beowulf*

2703b–2704a, *wæll-seaxe gebræd, / biter ond beaduscearp* ("drew the deadly knife, keen and battle-sharp"),[x] or *The Battle of Maldon* 110b–111a, *bord ord onfeng, / biter wæs se beadu-ræs* ("Shield received spear-point; savage was the onslaught").[xi] In bare meter, at least, "and his spear was shivered as he threw down their chieftain. [/] Out swept his sword, and he spurred to the standard, [/] hewed staff and bearer, and the black serpent foundered" (*LR* 5.6, 821) could almost be lines from the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

But in overall effect, Tolkien's writing reads quite differently from any of these medieval poems. This is partly because he has such a mixture of different styles, and they have a fairly consistent style. Another difference occurs because in a twentieth-century prose fiction such abundant parataxis, sentence inversion, and metricality must strike the reader as elements of stylistic individuality, choices to heighten literary "tone," rather than as integral features of a narrative medium that the writer shares as normal with a contemporary audience. Tolkien's war narrative seems to try for elevation by sounding archaic, whereas if Malory or *Maldon* sound lofty to a modern reader (and Malory sometimes does not), they will seem to manage that effect just by being themselves, strikingly different from modern writing, but in modes we imagine to be familiar to the original audience while still sufficiently intelligible to us. They exemplify Virginia Woolf's dictum: "To believe that your impressions hold good for others is to be released from the cramp and confinement of personality."[xii]

Tolkien, by contrast, well aware that his impressions did *not* hold good for most literary contemporaries, consciously wielded archaism as an antimodernist cultural weapon. The insistent archaism of battle scenes in *The Lord of the Rings* reveals his cultural campaign to restore a sense of heroic potential to English life, which is symbolically enacted through the novel's revival of earlier English usages. Tolkien

attempts to share his heroic mind-set with others by employing archaic language as if it were actually contemporary and colloquial. Even small features of Tolkien's high style, such as the elision of the indefinite article in a phrase like "with great press of men" (*LR* 5.6, 821), stand out as effortfully grand. A reader expects in modern English usage, at a deeper, less negotiable level than individual lexical choices, the form "with *a* great press of men," so what Tolkien offers as a casual, natural parlance cannot be accepted as such. "Great press" is colloquial thirteenth- to sixteenth-century English, but in a modern work its presence creates a complex secondary effect, revealing the writer's impossible desire for archaic forms to pass as both ordinary *and* lofty.

Naturalization of the archaic as a high style was Tolkien's deliberate program, which he once defended in an unfinished letter: "If mod. E. [modern English] has lost the trick of putting a word desired to emphasize (for pictorial, emotional, or logical reasons) into prominent first place, without addition of a lot of little 'empty' words (as the Chinese say), so much the worse for it. And so much for the better for it the sooner it learns the trick again. And *some* one must begin the teaching, by example" (*Letters*, 225–26). Although inversion of sentence order and other archaisms might seem appropriate in formal speeches between characters drawn from a past age, archaism has a different effect in a simple narrative utterance like "great press," which, if it *were* natural in form to a modern narrator, as it was to the Wife of Bath,[xiii] would be quite prosaic. It can only be "high" in Tolkien *because* it is archaic, and so the archaism, implicitly proposed as more impressive than what he called "our slack and frivolous modern idiom" (*Letters*, 225–26), is seen to be valued for its own sake.

The frequent archaism, much greater than Tolkien's normal practice, in the battle scenes of *The Lord of the Rings* indicates the special status he gave to military

prowess. Battle is consistently made a high subject.[xiv] Although the love of war for its own sake clearly worried Tolkien, as many critics have noticed, he still very often employs inversion and/or parataxis as a means of ennobling battles and military symbols—"Great was the clash"; "Fewer were they"; "Out swept his sword" (*LR* 5.6, 821); "Very bright was that sword when it was made whole again; the light of the sun shone redly in it, and the light of the moon shone cold, and its edge was hard and keen" (*LR* 2.3, 269).

What helped to form this high style of war? Perhaps one answer lies in the closeness in balance and cadence of the lines on the sword Andúril just quoted to some lines in Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur": "On one side lay the Ocean, and on one / Lay a great water, and the moon was full."[xv] Tennyson was clearly one model for Tolkien's poetry before and around the time he enlisted, as Rosebury notes, and as can be seen in numerous instances quoted by Garth.[xvi] We need not suppose that the trenches destroyed that influence. Research by historian Jay Winter has suggested that the Great War did not suddenly inaugurate mass modernity by breaking all links with the past, as used to be claimed. Rather, many people, perhaps most, coped with war trauma by performing the work of memory and mourning with their prewar cultural resources. In Winter's words, "The Great War, the most 'modern' of wars, triggered an avalanche of the unmodern."[xvii]

Tolkien's Middle-earth narratives, begun in wartime, might well be understood in this context. It was he who called the Shire "more or less a Warwickshire village of about the period of the Diamond Jubilee" (*Letters*, 230). When he found himself, as a war casualty, faced with the need to invent "a myth for England," it should not be surprising if he was influenced by the very popular "Return of the King" myth presented in Tennyson, Victoria's laureate, who died the year Tolkien was born.[xviii]

Generally speaking, Tolkien's narrative can be seen as a way of "getting over" the war through its assertion of strong continuities with the nineteenth century. Tolkien does not show nostalgia for the medieval past as a separate period in itself, a lost domain, but he mourns the sudden modern loss of a sense of continuity with that past. In seeking to reconnect the present to the Middle Ages, he therefore binds himself to intervening ages as well, when it was better remembered. So, in *The Lord of the Rings* a privileged discourse of "tree" and "root" connects Norse mythology, English folk-tale, genealogy, and linguistic derivation, and naturalizes their continuing connection with the English landscape. Language, landscape, and identity become intimately close. *Beowulf,* for Tolkien, was a timeless, and therefore a contemporary text for England: "It was made in this land, and moves in our northern world beneath our northern sky, and for those who are native to that tongue and land, it must ever call with a profound appeal—until the dragon comes" ("Beowulf," 33–34).

So much in Tolkien's battle to restore cultural continuity is imaginatively projected in this way from a romantic reading of early heroic narratives that his work might seem to exemplify the nostalgia double bind described by Susan Stewart in *On Longing*:

Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very

generating mechanism of desire.[xix]

In Stewart's terms, one might see a fear of experiential inauthenticity behind Tolkien's grand narrative, fear driving the continuing consolidation of his linguistic and narrative environment against his experience of an environment doubly destroyed. Certainly, within *The Lord of the Rings*, critiques of the heroic view based on empirical history and material culture are branded as loss of faith and associated with demoralized minds like Saruman: "Dotard! What is the House of Eorl but a thatched barn where brigands drink in the reek, and their brats roll on the floor among the dogs?" (*LR* 3.10, 567).

Yet if, for Tolkien, the gap Stewart postulates between history or lived experience, on the one hand, and ideology, on the other, threatens a horror—the debasement of an idealized environment by sordid materialism—it also provides an endless opportunity for fiction. Within the never-sated narrative space, archaism, nostalgia, and the elegiac mode are deployed as active forms of cultural continuity. Tolkien virtually situates himself *within* the tradition of Old English writing, with *The Wanderer* and much of *Beowulf*. In "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," he delights in pointing out that the most famous lines from *The Battle of Maldon* (312–13), spoken in the face of certain defeat—

Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,

mod sceal þe mare þe ure mægen lytlað.

[Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our

strength lessens.]

—are "not 'original' [to the man who speaks them], but an ancient and honored expression of heroic will."[xx] For Tolkien, to assert these lofty battle sentiments yet

again is no mere literary quotation but the conscious renewal of a heroic tradition in the face of imminent loss.

Repetition, which for Stewart is a sign of the otherness of experience mediated through narrative and of the inauthenticity of lived experience, for Tolkien acknowledges the loss of the heroic past in a form that consoles it by asserting a community of interest with the vanished heroes and all those who have since believed in them. Consciousness of loss and absence provides prestigious roles for figures who connect present and past: the mage who can interpret ancient vestiges; the survivor who keeps faith with his dead comrades; the exile in whom memory preserves a lost noble world. With these prestigious adversarial roles comes a sense of cultural work as the battle to reimpose on the world an ideal order that is intuited to be lacking. The conception of heroism in *The Lord of the Rings* feeds directly on the difficulties in realizing such an order:

> "Few now remember them," Tom murmured, "yet still some go wandering, sons of forgotten kings, walking in loneliness, guarding from evil folk that are heedless."
>
> The hobbits did not understand his words, but as he spoke they had a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, like a vast shadowy plain over which there strode shapes of Men, tall and grim with bright swords, and last came one with a star on his brow. Then the vision faded and they were back in the sunlit world. (*LR* 1.8, 142–43)

That "few" are aware of these guardians, that they walk "in loneliness," completes an impression of their necessity and rightness, their supreme importance within an imperialist system of meaning. The past is "shadowy" only because the present is

"heedless," ignorant, and ungrateful. The import of the vision may seem remote from the material "sunlit world," but it portends a steep learning curve for the Hobbits toward a potential re-ennoblement of the modern life they represent. In that process, the "bright swords" of war become paramount.

Tolkien's conscious reassertion of archaism in the face of modernity is itself a reprise of the young Alfred Tennyson's original framing of "Morte d'Arthur," in "The Epic":

Why take the style of those heroic times?

For nature brings not back the mastodon,

Nor we those times; and why should any man

Remodel models?[xxi]

Tennyson's anxiety about reviving a past style was partly disingenuous. Despite the frame of authorial self-doubt, the imagined audience of "The Epic" act like proto-Inklings: after discussing "the general decay of faith / Right thro' the world," they listen in deep silence to "Morte d'Arthur," and one, at least, dreams that night of a modern Arthur returned, "With all good things, and war shall be no more." Implicitly, as in Tolkien, the problematical archaism of Tennyson's medievalist venture is shown to be its main point, a sign of the struggle to keep faith with a heroic potential against the apparently ineluctable course of the world.

Tolkien resembles Tennyson in numerous more specific ways. First is his lexicon loaded with Tennysonian favorites— "bright," "dark," "fair," "foul," "dim," "pale," "fade(d)," "faint," "clean," "sweet," "weary," "gleam," "flame," "gray," "thin," "shadow," "waste." Second is his habit of displacing psychological and moral analysis onto descriptions of landscape, weather, architecture, and ornament. It could be argued that this is a tendency Tolkien shares with several other writers—the

Beowulf-poet, *Gawain*-poet and Spenser come to mind—yet, taken in combination with the close similarities in vocabulary, it often creates in his work a distinctly Tennysonian ambience. Direct borrowings are absent, but Tolkien's landscapes generally aspire to what J.S. Mill early identified in Tennyson: "the power of *creating* scenery, in keeping with some state of feeling; so fitted as to be the embodied symbol of it."[xxii] Examples abound: "to their right a grey river gleamed pale in the thin sunshine" (*LR* 1.12, 195); "The sun grew misty as the day grew old, until it gleamed in a pale sky like a high white pearl. Then it faded into the West, and dusk came early, followed by a grey and starless night" (*LR* 2.8, 370); "Only far away north-west there was a deeper darkness against the dying light: the Mountains of Mist and the forest at their feet" (*LR* 3.2, 419); "Over the last shelf of rotting stone the stream gurgled and fell down into a brown bog and was lost. Dry reeds hissed and rattled though they could feel no wind" (*LR* 4.2, 611). Tolkien's natural world is glossed with psychic and moral suggestions—"thin", "dying", "rotting", and "lost"—to the extent that what John D. Rosenberg writes of *Idylls of the King* applies equally well to *The Lord of the Rings*: it "uses landscape...not as a decorative adjunct to character but as the mythopoeic soil in which character is rooted and takes its being."[xxiii] Further resemblances to Tennyson are seen in Tolkien's striving for aural imitation—"hissed and rattled"—, and in his creation of unease or apprehension by repeatedly giving colorless or imprecise features of description a precise location: a "grey" river viewed "to the right," a "misty" sun fading "into the West," "darkness" to the "north-west." Tolkien's habitual glances to the sun and the horizon simultaneously orient his heroes on a realist map and surround them with an illimitable vista of psychic possibilities.

Tolkien also strongly resembles Tennyson in the broad political reliance he places on the central role of a true king, and particularly in his vision of good rule as

environmental and moral cleansing, based on a prior inner cultivation of the self.

Arthur praises the reformed Edyrn for "weeding all his heart / As I will weed this land

before I go."[xxiv] Arthur's role in "Gereint and Enid" is a political extension of the

same theme:

> [A]nd [he] sent a thousand men
>
> To till the wastes, and moving everywhere
>
> Cleared the dark places and let in the law,
>
> And broke the bandit holds and cleansed the land. [xxv]

Tolkien's version of good kingship is a directly similar scouring and recultivation

of the earth. In Aragorn's reign, Gandalf says, "The evil things will be driven out

of the waste-lands. Indeed the waste in time will be waste no longer, and there

will be people and fields where once there was wilderness" (*LR* 6.7, 971).

If the key to Tolkien's stylistic archaism is his nostalgic desire to reconnect

with a heroic past, then the nostalgia is empowered by such links with a recent era

of medievalist idealism. In particular, the comparison helps explain how Tolkien,

who had, like Tennyson, a well-attested distaste for actual war, could nevertheless

make it a "high" subject in the manner I have outlined. Within both writers'

works, the description of war often tends more toward ideological symbol than

toward direct description of military action: their war is a school of moral order, a

preparation for future rule: "That is what you have been trained for," Gandalf tells

Merry and Pippin before they "scour" the Shire, removing the "squint-eyed and

sallow-faced" Orc-like enemy (*LR* 6.7, 974; 6.8, 981, 992) and restoring ethnic

boundaries. As in Tennyson's *Idylls*, the enemy not only causes pollution but *is*

moral pollution, "the beast," to be dispelled by force. War is relied on to restore

the natural world: "Kill orc-folk!" says Ghân-buri-Ghân. "Drive away bad air and

darkness with bright iron!" (*LR* 5.5, 816).

In dealing with war in his novel, Tolkien encountered a problem similar to Tennyson's in the *Idylls*. Like Tennyson he longs for a state beyond war—"the very last end of the War, I hope" (*LR* 6.8, 997)—yet is committed to a story and an ethos in which martial heroism is a major currency. Both writers cope with the issue in a similar way, by moral allegory. Arthur's good wars are made a semisymbolic expression of moral superiority—"a voice / As dreadful as the shout of one who sees / To one who sins"[xxvi]—and his early enemies are inhuman or alien: the "heathen," "beast," and "Roman." Evil war, when his knights have degenerated, in Mordred's civil rebellion, is physically gross:

> Oaths, insult, filth and monstrous blasphemies,
>
> Sweat, writhings, anguish, labouring of the lungs
>
> In that close mist, and cryings for the light,
>
> Moans of the dying, and voices of the dead.[xxvii]

In *The Lord of the Rings*, battle alignments, as in Tennyson's self-styled "parabolic" wars, are also moral alignments. Tolkien mainly treats the nature of war according to the sides involved, which are identified by the rightness and wrongness of their overall causes. One side, led by Aragorn and advised by Gandalf, fights a "medieval" war of named volunteers and pledged faith, while the bad side is "modern," with its nameless conscripts, machines, slaves, and creatures of Sauron. The desolate Great War landscape of trenches, mud, shell holes, corpses, and total deforestation is associated with Isengard, the Paths of the Dead, or Frodo's and Sam's journey into Mordor, rather than with the book's actual battlefields: "Indeed the whole surface of the plains of Gorgoroth was pocked with great holes, as if, while it was still a waste of soft mud, it had been smitten with a shower of bolts and huge slingstones. The largest

of these holes were rimmed with ridges of broken rock, and broad fissures ran out from them in all directions. It was a land in which it would be possible to creep from hiding to hiding, unseen by all but the most watchful eyes" (*LR* 6.3, 913). This wretched Mordor country, unlike the Somme where Tolkien fought in 1916, does not owe its destruction equally to both sides in the war. Rather, while it functions as an expression of Sauron's sterile, dispiriting power, it gives Frodo and Sam the chance to display selfless endurance as they struggle to get rid of the Ring. Where the war landscape does impinge on actual combat in *The Lord of the Rings*, as at Helm's Deep, it is only the Orcs who are associated with the horror of flares, shell bursts, and night raids from the enemy trenches: "For a staring moment, the watchers on the walls saw all the space between them and the dike lit with white light; it was boiling and crawling with black shapes, some squat and broad, some tall and grim, with high helms and sable shields. Hundreds and hundreds more were pouring over the dike and through the breach." (*LR* 3.7, 520). The Orcs must "pour" over a dike, while Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli watch them from the walls of a medieval stronghold.

The mixture of realism and allegorical significance in such a war discourse is confusing. Tolkien argued that it was a "romance," and hence a nonrealist, quasi-allegorical narrative feature, derived from Christian psychomachia: "In real life they [the Orcs] are on both sides, of course. For 'romance' has grown out of allegory and its wars are still derived from the 'inner war' of allegory in which good is on one side and various modes of badness on the other. In real (exterior) life men are on both sides" (*Letters*, 82). Although the heroic-Germanic coloring may disguise it, in regard to war *The Lord of the Rings* is considerably more romance than epic or novel, because it gives an absolute aesthetic and moral privilege—aesthetics and morality becoming quite indistinguishable—to one side only. Tolkien re-creates, in effect, the

"parabolic" war of Tennyson, in which the king's enemies are not merely political or military opponents but thoroughly evil forces who can be understood to represent evil itself. One sign of this is that weapons occasionally become spontaneous agents in battle: "The bow of Legolas was singing" (*LR* 2.4, 291); "Yet my axe is restless in my hand. Give me a row of orc-necks and room to swing…!" (*LR* 3.7, 520); "It has been knife-work up here" (*LR* 3.7, 524). Tolkien's use of the motif recalls medieval heroic poetry like *The Battle of Maldon*, but with the thoroughly Tennysonian difference that only the good characters have weapons privileged to act willingly.[xxviii]

Gimli's Norse-like moments of battle-relish are fairly rare in Tolkien's narrative. Through the figure of Aragorn, especially, *The Lord of the Rings* more often displays what has been said about the medieval warriors of Victorian artists, that they are statuesque icons rather than action figures, with "a strong sense of arrested movement."[xxix] In *Idylls of the King*, Arthur's wars are "rendered mystically"[xxx] (allegorically) on the gates of Camelot, in a hierarchy rising from bestial savagery to angelic pureness, topped by the statue of Arthur himself.[xxxi] As, over the course of *Lord of the Rings*, Strider turns into Aragorn, he often seems like a new version of the Victorian allegoric statuesque: "The grey figure of the Man, Aragorn son of Arathorn, was tall and stern as stone, his hand upon the hilt of his sword; he looked as if some king out of the mists of the sea had stepped upon the shores of lesser men" (*LR* 3.5, 489). The iconic quality of Aragorn emblematizes the simultaneously desired presence and absence of the past in Tolkien's heroic nostalgia. Is it that a statue has come to life, the heroic past returned, or that Aragorn's new status removes him from the contingent world of time, of "lesser men," into what is already a perfected retrospective understanding? The core of Aragorn's greatness is that it is already archaic. In such moments Tolkien, one might say, equally desires the return of the

heroic age and the rememorializing of its loss—a renewal of the Tennysonian covenant with an idealized medievalist violence, but carefully removed from historical scrutiny, as the true idiom of national and personal heroic potential.

It could be argued that *The Lord of the Rings* maintains dialogue with Tennyson's *Idylls* to the very end. For Tolkien leaves us finally not with Frodo or Aragorn but with Sam Gamgee, just as the *Idylls* ends not with Arthur but with Bedivere, also staring westward, as his master's vessel passes beyond sight into a mysterious realm and a new age begins on earth. Both bereft companions grieve, but in comparison to Tennyson, Tolkien distances this world from the one to which his hero has departed. In Tennyson, Bedivere himself sees "the speck that bare the King, / . . .pass on and on . . . / . . .and vanish into light,"[xxxii] and hears, though faintly, Arthur's reception in heaven:

> As from beyond the limit of the world,
>
> Like the last echo born of a great cry,
>
> Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
>
> Around a king returning from his wars.[xxxiii]

In Tolkien, Frodo alone beholds the new day, "white shores and a beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise," and hears "the sound of singing that came over the water" as he nears his final home. With Frodo gone, a dejected Sam sees only "a shadow on the waters that was soon lost in the West," and hears "only the sigh and murmur of the waves on the shores of Middle-earth" (*LR* 6.9, 1007), much as Tennyson's Bedivere (following Malory) has done on his earlier, failed attempts to cast Excalibur away: "I heard the water lapping on the crag, / And the long ripple washing in the reeds."[xxxiv] Tennyson's triumphant "Return of the King" motif is absent in Tolkien at Frodo's parting, having been reserved appropriately for

Aragorn's elaborate reception in Gondor: "And the shadow departed, and the Sun was unveiled, and light leaped forth; and the waters of Anduin shone like silver, and in all the houses of the City men sang for the joy that welled up in their hearts" (*LR* 6.5, 941–42), followed by "[A]nd amid the music of harp and viol and singing and clear voices the King passed through the flower-laden streets and came to the Citadel" (*LR* 6.5, 947).

It is here, too, that Tolkien most strongly foregrounds another Tennysonian theme—"The old order changeth, yielding place to new"[xxxv]—when Gandalf stresses that the king's triumph means "The Third Age of the world is ended, and the new age is begun" (*LR* 6.5, 949). Aragorn's warfaring and hold on power are, like Tennyson's Arthur's, finally subsumed within the broadest view of historical necessity. Already by the time Frodo and Sam are reunited with him in Ithilien, his sword has become ritual and symbolic, a sign of the right to rule: "On the throne sat a mail-clad man, a great sword was laid across his knees, but he wore no helm" (*LR* 5.4, 932). There can be no suggestion that superior military force alone has won the day in Gondor. This is the image of a "true king."

Tennyson is by no means the only Victorian medievalist who invites relation to Tolkien. Others such as William Morris could perhaps be considered as more direct influences on him. After all, *The Lord of the Rings* is an eclectic text with many possible points of reference. Yet the example of Tennyson best helps us understand the "high" style of war discourse and its symbolic tendencies that puzzle some Tolkien readers so much. It helps us to see how, against his personal experience of war and his political understanding, for reasons of moral allegory, Tolkien displaces the evils of modern war on to the bad side and reserves for the good the "bright swords" of medievalist idealism. The sword—medievalized war's archaic weapon—

becomes for Tolkien both the real, which authenticates romantic nostalgia, and the sign of opposition to a debased modernity. As in Tennyson, the idea of war as an ennobling cultural and moral struggle is allowed precedence over the unpleasant history of war itself. Through Tolkien's continuing influence, so prevalent at the present time, we have not yet finished with the agenda of the nineteenth-century British Middle Ages.

Notes

1. Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Long Vacation* (London: Macmillan, 1895), chap. 13.

2. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,,* one-volume edn. (London: HarperCollins, 1994), foreword to the 2nd ed., 9 (hereafter cited in text and notes as *LR*).

3. See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien:A selection,* ed. Humphrey Carpenter with assistance from Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 303 (hereafter cited in text and notes as *Letters*): "Personally, I do not think that either war (and of course not the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding. Perhaps in landscape. The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme. They owe more to William Morris and his Huns and Romans, as in *The House of the Wolfings* or *The Roots of the Mountains*."

4. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in *"The Monsters and the Critics" and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), 5-34. See 31: "For *Beowulf* was not designed to tell the tale of Hygelac's fall, or for that matter to give the whole biography of Beowulf, still less to write the history of the Geatish kingdom and its downfall. But it used knowledge of these things for its own purpose—to give that sense of perspective, of antiquity with a greater and yet darker antiquity behind. These things are mainly on the outer edges or in the background because they belong there, if they are to function in this

way."

5. Hugh Brogan, "Tolkien's Great War," in *Children and Their Books: A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 356.

6. T[homas] A Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien, Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 151.

7. Brian Rosebury, *Tolkien. A Critical Assessment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 126.

8. John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 312.

9. T[homas] Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982); Jane Chance, ed., *Tolkien the Medievalist* (London: Routledge, 2003).

10. *Beowulf*, ed. and trans. Michael Swanton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978).

11. *The Battle of Maldon*, in *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, ed. and trans. Richard Hamer (London: Faber, 1970).

12. Virginia Woolf, "How It Strikes a Contemporary," in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 302.

13. Geoffrey Chaucer, "Wife of Bath's Prologue," line 522, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L. D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 112.

14. Rosebury, *Tolkien*, 65, points out that "the basic style of narrative and description. . .is. . .largely free from archaic, let alone obsolete, forms."

15. Alfred Tennyson, "The Passing of Arthur," lines 179–80, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1969), 1747.

16. Rosebury, *Tolkien*, 82. Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*, 35, 39–40, 59,

78–79.

17. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2–5, 54.

18. Tennyson's father had even held the living of Bag Enderby, in Lincolnshire, near the poet's birthplace. See Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 3.

19. Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 23.

20. J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 124. The translation is Tolkien's own.

21. Alfred Tennyson, "The Epic [Morte d'Arthur]," lines 35–38, in *Poems of Tennyson*, 584.

22. J. S. Mill, review of Tennyson, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* [1830] and *Poems* [1833], *London Review* July, 1835, in *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John D. Jump (London: Routledge, 1967), 86.

23. John D. Rosenberg, *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 67–68.

24. Alfred Tennyson, "Gereint and Enid," lines 905–06, in *Poems of Tennyson*, 1575.

25. Tennyson, "Gerent and Enid," lines 940–43.

26. Alfred Tennyson, "The Coming of Arthur," lines 115–17, in *Poems of Tennyson*, 1473.

27. Alfred Tennyson, "The Passing of Arthur," lines 114–17, in *Poems of*

Tennyson, 1745.

28. See *The Battle of Maldon*, line 110: "Bogan wæron bysige, bord ord onfeng" ("bows were busy too, / Shield received spear"). See also Alfred Tennyson, "'Fall battleaxe, and flash brand! Let the King reign," from "The Coming of Arthur," lines 485–86. See also "Coming of Arthur," lines 5–19, 94–120, 475–513.

29. Elizabeth Brewer and Beverly Taylor, *The Return of King Arthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983), 131.

30. Alfred Tennyson, "The Holy Grail," lines 359, 235–45, in *Poems of Tennyson*, 1672, 1669.

31. Ibid., lines 235–45: "And in the lowest beasts are slaying men, / And in the second men are slaying beasts, / And on the third are warriors, perfect men, / And on the fourth are men with growing wings, / And overall one statue in the mould / Of Arthur, made by Merlin with a crown, / And peaked wings pointed to the Northern Star / And eastward fronts the statue and the crown / And both the wings are made of gold, and flame / At sunrise till the people in far fields, / Wasted so often by the heathen hordes, / Behold it, crying, 'We have still a King.'"

32. Alfred Tennyson, "The Passing of Arthur," lines 465-68, in *Poems of Tennyson*, 1754.

33. Tennyson, "The Passing of Arthur," lines 458–61.

34. Tennyson, "The Passing of Arthur," lines 284–85, in *Poems of Tennyson*, 1748.

35. Tennyson, "The Passing of Arthur," line 408, in *Poems of Tennyson*, 1752.