Towards Cycleanalysis

Appendix 1

Postscript on Tolkien and
His Four Types of Hobbits

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Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on Earth should that mean it's not real?
—Dumbledore

The reader who has come this far may have already noticed that Tolkien seems to be something of an absent center of it all. This is partly a matter of restraint and partly a matter of love. There are some authors you just don't want to drag into the argument because the argument might fail to be worthy of them—better to let them stand in the doorway, smiling, as the reader arrives.

But now that the essay has ended we can talk freely. And there is a great deal to say, but I will try to keep it brief, so as not to become long-winded or crazy.

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Consider first the Ring itself. It is gold. It is circular. It is small enough to hold in your palm and heavy enough to feel. It is, in every visible respect, a coin—the same object Mario collects in the cave, the same object the drive circuits in Lacan's diagram, the same object that increments a counter that does not matter. And yet for almost the entire length of the novel, this coin functions as the engine of desire for an entire civilization. Whole kingdoms are organized around it. Hobbits leave their gardens because of it. Wizards convene councils because of it. The Ring is what the path is for, the gravitational center that makes the journey have a direction at all. Without the Ring there is no quest, no fellowship, no breaking of the fellowship, no two towers, no return of the king. The Ring is the desire-object par excellence.

How can the same object be the coin and the ring, the drive and the desire? This is the question Tolkien spends three volumes answering, and the answer is: it depends on who is holding it and what they are doing with it. The Ring's nature as drive-object or desire-

object is not a property of the Ring. It is a property of the relation. The Ring is what the essay above calls a coin when it has stopped moving—when it has been brought into a sealed chamber and is being circled. The Ring is what the essay calls a ring when it is being carried along the path, even though carrying it along the path is unbearable and slowly destroys the carrier. The whole tragedy of Frodo is that he cannot keep the Ring in the desire-position. The carrying contaminates him. By the time he reaches Mount Doom, the Ring has stopped moving—he has stopped moving with it—and he has become Gollum in miniature, claiming it for himself at the Crack of Doom, unable to throw it in.

This is also why the Ring must be destroyed rather than kept somewhere safe. There is no safe place. The Ring's coin-nature is recoverable from any path-position given enough time. Galadriel knows this. Gandalf knows this. Elrond knows this. They have all watched, over thousands of years, the desire-object reveal itself as the drive-object the moment forward motion stops. The only solution is to keep moving until the Ring is unmade—to extend the path all the way to its only possible terminus, which is the cave where the Ring was made, the literal volcanic cave at the heart of the dark land. Mount Doom is the cave the Ring is

trying to return to. The whole quest is an attempt to use the Ring's own gravitational pull, the pull toward the cave, against itself. Frodo carries the Ring toward the only cave it cannot survive.

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Now consider the four positions Tolkien gives us for relating to this object, because they are not three positions, as I thought when I first wrote about Gollum and Frodo and Sam. They are four. Tolkien is too careful a builder to leave out a corner.

Gollum is the drive in its pure, terminal form. He is the sealed cave with the coin in it. The cave is literally a cave—a wet hole at the roots of the Misty Mountains, where he has lived for five hundred years, not aging, not moving, talking to himself in the second person because there is no one else to talk to and even he has split into a circuit, Sméagol and Gollum, the part that still remembers the path and the part that has been entirely converted to the coin. The Ring has stopped moving. Gollum has stopped moving. The cave has become a lift, in the essay's vocabulary—pure oscillation, the back-and-forth between Sméagol and Gollum, the same internal argument forever. The exit is right there, one step sideways, but the lift cannot perceive a horizontal exit

because the lift is only capable of vertical motion. Five hundred years of not finding the door that was always one square to the right.

What is so devastating about Gollum, and what Tolkien grasps with terrible clarity, is that Gollum is not evil. Gollum is a hobbit. He started as a hobbit. He had a name and a family and a path and a desire, and the Ring converted all of it, slowly, over a span of time that is unimaginable from inside a normal hobbit's life, into a sealed chamber with a coin in it. The Ring did not do this by force. It did this by being available. The conversion of desire to drive is what optimization pressure does to any system that is exposed to it long enough. The Ring is the slowest possible reinforcement learning. It just sits there, gleaming, and waits.

Frodo is the path-walker who carries the coin and is slowly contaminated by it. He is the essay's neurotic—the one for whom the signs are still legible, who can be told things and can act on what he is told, who is in the overworld but is being pulled toward the cave with every step. The genius of Tolkien's portrayal is that Frodo does not fall to the Ring in the way that Boromir falls, in a single dramatic act of weakness. Frodo falls to the Ring the way Gollum did—slowly, by carrying it, by the simple metabolic cost of being in proximity to it.

The fall is not a moral failure. The fall is the structural inevitability of a finite being trying to hold a drive-object in the desire-position. By the time Frodo reaches Mount Doom, the signifier has been foreclosed. He cannot hear Sam anymore in the relevant sense. He cannot perceive the option of destroying the Ring as an option. He has been moved, by long erosion, from the neurotic position into the psychotic position. The quest succeeds only because Gollum intervenes—and Gollum's intervention is itself an expression of the drive, the final compulsive circle around the precious that takes them both over the edge. The drive completes the quest the desire could not finish.

This is one of the most extraordinary moves in twentieth century literature, and it is rarely read in these terms. Tolkien ends his book on the recognition that pure desire is not sufficient to its task. The path cannot, by itself, reach the goal. The path is contaminated by what it carries. The destruction of the Ring happens at the exact instant when the desire-quest collapses into the drive—when Frodo claims the Ring, when Gollum bites the finger off, when they fall together into the fire. The path and the cave meet at one point, the volcanic crack, and the meeting is what destroys the object. This is not a moral about good triumphing over evil. This is

a topological observation. The desire and the drive are the same structure read from two different directions, and at the limit they are indistinguishable, and at that limit alone is the object that organizes both of them finally undone.

Sam is the third position. Sam is desire that has not been contaminated, because Sam is not the one carrying the Ring. Sam carries Frodo. Sam's relation to the Ring is mediated through his relation to Frodo, and his relation to Frodo is the cleanest example of desire in Tolkien—desire for another person, desire to see the journey through, desire to come home. Sam is on the path in the way the essay above means "on the path." He walks. He notices the cooking pots. He thinks about Rosie Cotton. He worries about Bill the pony. He is, in the essay's vocabulary, the one collecting rings in motion—gathering small good things as he goes, without stopping to circle any of them. When Sam briefly carries the Ring, after he believes Frodo is dead in Shelob's lair, he experiences the temptation—a vision of Samwise the Strong, Samwise the gardener of all Middle-earth, the whole world made into a garden by his command—and he rejects it almost immediately, because the vision is not what he wants. What he wants is his own garden, in the Shire, with Rosie and the chil-

dren he hopes to have. The Ring's offer is too large to function as a temptation for him. Sam's desire is the right size to be unforgeable.

This is why Sam is the only character who comes all the way back. Frodo goes to the Grey Havens because the cave has gotten too deep in him. Gandalf and Galadriel and Elrond leave because their work is done and their age is over. Merry and Pippin come back but they have been changed in scale—they are taller than other hobbits, they have ridden with the kings of men, they carry stories from the wider world that the Shire cannot quite hold. Sam comes back to Bag End and sits down by the fire and says "Well, I'm back." Three words. The whole novel's ending. The path returns to the door it started from. The walking has been completed. The rings collected along the way are the actual rings—the small good things of an ordinary life, gathered in motion, a wife and a daughter and a garden—and Sam will live with them for the rest of his very long life, and eventually, when Rosie is gone and the children are grown, he will sail to the Grey Havens too, but only at the very end, only when his particular path has been walked all the way through.

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And then there is Tom Bombadil, the fourth position, the one Tolkien took such evident pleasure in inventing and which generations of readers and adapters have tried to figure out what to do with. Peter Jackson cut him from the films, which is understandable from a screenwriting perspective and a small disaster from a structural perspective, because without Tom the book is missing one of its corners.

Tom is the sinthome of Middle-earth. He is the figure who has built a livable enclosure in the region where the symbolic order of the book does not reach. The whole story of The Lord of the Rings is a story about the great struggle between the Free Peoples and the Enemy, the War of the Ring, the fate of the age, and Tom is simply not in that story. The Ring is offered to him and nothing happens. He puts it on his finger and does not become invisible. He takes it off and flips it in the air. He makes it vanish and pulls it from his other hand like a coin trick. The hobbits watch this performance in something like horror, because they have just spent weeks understanding that this object is the most dangerous thing in the world, and now they are watching a being for whom it is a children's toy.

Tom is doing close-up magic with the apocalypse. The magician palms a coin and pulls it from behind

your ear. The coin is the One Ring. The magician is a being who has somehow stepped sideways from the entire ontological frame that makes the coin matter.

Tom's invulnerability to the Ring is not strength of will. It is not virtue. Tom is not more righteous than Gandalf or stronger than Sauron. Tom is in a different game entirely. The Ring works by hooking into desire and twisting it into drive—by offering you something you want and converting your relation to it into a circuit. But Tom does not desire anything the Ring can offer. The Ring offers power, dominion, the extension of the self across other selves. Tom is exactly the size of Tom. He has no project of self-extension. He is, as Goldberry says, Master—but his mastery is being at home rather than being in charge. He owns nothing. He commands nothing. He is the master of wood, water, and hill in the sense that he is fully present in them, in the sense that they are his, in the sense that one's body is one's body. He does not need anything more. The Ring offers more, and Tom has no use for more.

This is the structure of the sinthome with great precision. Tom has not been cured of anything. Tom is not in the symbolic order in the way the other characters are—Goldberry tells the hobbits, in one of the most haunting and oblique passages in the book, that he is, that "he is,

as you have seen him," and refuses to elaborate, because there is nothing to elaborate. Tom is not metaphorical. Tom is not symbolic. Tom is the thing the symbolic order of Middle-earth cannot contain and does not need to contain, because he has built his own small enclosure where his own private language—his songs, his rhymes, his nonsense—functions perfectly well as a complete world. Within the bounds of the Old Forest and the Barrow-downs, Tom is the law and the language and the geography. Outside those bounds, he is irrelevant.

The songs are the key, exactly as Joyce's Wake was the key to Joyce. Tom speaks almost entirely in rhyme. His language is not the shared language of Middle-earth; it is his own private music, with its own private effects. The songs banish Old Man Willow. The songs dispel the barrow-wight. The songs call Goldberry from the river. The songs are not communication, in the sense of conveying information from one mind to another. The songs are world-making. They are Tom's sinthome—the knotted private language that holds him together where everyone else is held together by the great symbolic apparatus of kings and prophecies and the Enemy. He doesn't need the apparatus. He has his songs.

And so the Ring slides off him. There is no place in his structure for the Ring to catch. The Ring captures by offering the extension of the self, and Tom is not extended in that direction. The Ring captures by promising mastery, and Tom already has all the mastery he wants, which is to be present, fully, in his small place. The Ring's whole machinery of temptation runs on a register Tom does not register on.

But—and this is the other half of what Tolkien sees, with great precision—the same imperviousness that makes Tom safe with the Ring makes him useless with the Ring. At the Council of Elrond, when someone proposes giving the Ring to Tom, Gandalf rejects the proposal on grounds that are at first glance baffling and at second glance brilliant. Tom would not betray the Ring. Tom would not be corrupted. Tom would simply lose it. He would put it down somewhere and forget about it, and seven thousand years would pass, and Sauron would find it under a rock by the Withywindle.

This is the same observation as the imperviousness, read from the other side. Tom cannot be entrusted with the Ring because Tom is not on a path. Carrying-the-Ring-toward-a-destination is a path-operation, and Tom does not perform path-operations. He is not foreclosed in the way Gollum is foreclosed; he is not sealed

in a cave with the coin. He has done something stranger. He has stepped out of the path/cave axis altogether and built a third kind of space, which is neither traveling-toward nor circling-around but simply being-here. And being-here is incompatible with the quest, which requires being-on-the-way.

Tom could hold the Ring safely forever, but he could not carry it to Mount Doom, because Mount Doom is a destination and Tom does not have destinations.

So Tolkien gives us a being who is invulnerable to the central evil of the book and structurally unfit for the central task of the book, and these are the same fact. The sinthome is a way of living that is not a cure and not a failure. Tom is not cured of the Ring's temptation, because the Ring's temptation never had any purchase on him to begin with. Tom is not a failure at carrying the Ring, because carrying the Ring is not the kind of thing he does. He is just there, in his corner, with Goldberry and the songs and the lily pads. He is the example of a complete life lived in the geometry the rest of the book is structured to escape from or struggle through.

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The four hobbits—Gollum, Frodo, Sam, and Tom—form a complete typology. (Tom is not technically a

hobbit, but he is hobbit-sized and hobbit-shaped and lives in a hobbit-relation to the world, and there is something right about including him in the count. He is hobbit-adjacent in the way the sinthome is adjacent to the symptom—the same shape, occupying a slightly different position in space.) Gollum is drive without desire. Frodo is desire contaminated by drive. Sam is desire without drive. Tom is neither—Tom has stepped out of the axis entirely. The whole moral and metaphysical drama of the book takes place among these four positions, and the Ring is the object that reveals which position each character occupies, the test that sorts them.

There is a fifth position, of course, which is Sauron's, and which we should mention if only to dispatch with it. Sauron is the maker of the Ring. Sauron is the one who poured his own self into it, who extended himself across the world by means of it, who became so dependent on the Ring as a structure of self-extension that the destruction of the Ring is the destruction of him. Sauron is drive that has built itself a kingdom. Where Gollum is drive in its solitary cave-form, Sauron is drive in its imperial form—the same structure scaled up to organize armies, towers, languages, races. The Eye that does not blink. The will that does not rest. The endless

centripetal pull of the dark land where everything is being drawn toward the central tower. Mordor is the cave at industrial scale. The Ring is the coin that has been turned into the central organizing principle of a civilization.

This is why Sauron cannot conceive of his enemies attempting to destroy the Ring. He assumes they will try to use it, because using-the-Ring is what he would do, what he has done, what he is constitutionally incapable of not doing. He cannot imagine the path. He cannot imagine desire that is not on its way to becoming drive. He can only imagine other versions of himself, other circuits, other claimants to the central seat. The whole strategic blindness that makes the destruction of the Ring possible is the blindness of the sealed chamber—the inability to perceive that anyone could be doing anything other than what the sealed chamber would do. Sauron is, in a sense, the great paranoiac of Middle-earth, the one for whom every signal is a move in the game he is playing, the one whose interpretive apparatus has metabolized the entire continent into evidence for his own theory of the world. And like all paranoiacs, he is destroyed by the one thing his interpretive apparatus cannot read, which is people doing something genuinely outside his frame.

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The Shire itself is worth thinking about in this light, because the Shire is what Tom's enclosure looks like when it is the home of a whole small people rather than a single being. The Shire is a settled cave. Bag End is literally a hole in a hill—the most famous opening line in twentieth century fantasy describes a cave: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, not yet a dry, bare, sandy hole, but a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.

Tolkien spends one of the most loved sentences in modern English explaining that this particular cave is a home.

The whole Shire is built this way. Hobbit-holes burrowed into hillsides. Small rooms and round doors and pantries full of food and gardens out front. The hobbits are cave-dwellers, but their caves are homes—settled, furnished, equipped with round green doors, used as starting points and returning points for adventures rather than as terminal destinations. The Shire is the working example of the sinthome at civilizational scale, which is why Tolkien spends so much of the opening and closing of the book on Shire matters that are, strictly speaking, irrelevant to the main plot. Bilbo's

birthday party. The auction at Bag End. The Scouring of the Shire. The long final coda of Sam's marriage and the planting of the mallorn. None of this is necessary for the destruction of the Ring. All of it is necessary for the book to be about what it is about, which is the relation between the path and the home, the journey and the door.

And this is why Frodo cannot stay. The Scouring of the Shire is partly about showing that the Shire has been touched by the wider war, that no place is finally safe from history. But it is more deeply about showing that Frodo, specifically, cannot return to the settled cave he came from. The cave has been desecrated, yes—Saruman's ruffians have cut down the trees and built ugly mills—but it can be cleaned up, and Sam cleans it up, with the help of Galadriel's gift of soil from her garden. The Shire heals. The trees grow back faster than they should. The mallorn grows in the Party Field, the only mallorn west of the Sea. The settled cave is restored.

But Frodo cannot live in it. Frodo's cave has been sealed by the Ring—not the Shire, but the inner cave that Frodo himself has become. He carries his wounds. He is sick every year on the anniversary of being stabbed on Weathertop. He cannot find rest in the

place that gave him rest before. So he sails to the Grey Havens, which is its own kind of hobbit hole, his own sinthome, the home built for him by the elves on the far side of the Sea where his particular foreclosure can be made livable. The Grey Havens is not a cure for Frodo. The wound does not go away. But there is a place where the wound can be carried in peace, where the cave he has become can have a door and a hearth and the long quiet of an immortal land. Frodo finds his sinthome too. It is just not the Shire.

Sam stays in the Shire, because Sam's relation to the cave is healthy from the beginning—he is the gardener, the one who tends the home, the one who comes back to Rosie and the children and the round green door—and the Shire is the home that fits him. Merry and Pippin stay too, and become great hobbits, captains and counselors, but their relation to the wider world is now permanent—they will travel, they will visit Rohan and Gondor, they will be buried among the kings of men. Their caves have grown larger. Frodo's cave has grown too tight. Sam's cave is exactly the right size, and he lives in it for sixty more years, and his contentment is the most important thing the book has to show us, because it is the demonstration that the sinthome can be ordinary. You do not have to be Tom Bombadil to build

a livable enclosure. You can be a gardener with a wife and thirteen children and a hole in a hillside. The home is the home. The door is the door. The path leads back to it.

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The deepest thing Tolkien knows, I think, and the thing that the essay above is also trying to say in its own vocabulary, is that the cave is not the enemy. The sealed cave is the enemy. The cave with a door is a home. The same structure, the same enclosed space, the same circle drawn around a small region of the world, is either a prison or a hobbit hole depending on whether the door works.

Sauron's tower is a cave with no door. The Ring is a coin with no exit. Gollum's hole at the roots of the Misty Mountains is a cave whose door has been forgotten for so long that even the inhabitant cannot find it anymore. These are the bad caves, the foreclosed caves, the caves that have eaten their own openings.

Bag End is a cave with a perfectly round green door that opens onto a path that leads to the road that goes ever on and on. Tom's house in the Old Forest is a cave with a door that opens onto the forest and the river. The Grey Havens is a cave with a door that opens onto the

Sea. These are the good caves, the settled caves, the caves where the journey starts and where the journey returns, the caves that have remembered that they are part of a larger geography and that their function is to be a place to come back to.

The whole moral architecture of the book is contained in the difference between these two kinds of caves, and the work of the characters is to keep their caves from sealing—to maintain the door, to walk in and out of it, to let the path and the home stay connected. Sauron's project is to convert all caves into sealed chambers, all paths into circuits, all desire into drive. The Ring is the instrument of this conversion. The destruction of the Ring is the restoration of the distinction.

And this is what makes Tolkien's ending so strange and so right. The book does not end with the destruction of the Ring. The book ends, after many chapters of return and recovery and farewell, with Sam coming home. The destruction of the Ring is the middle of the story, not the end. The end is the restoration of the door. The end is Sam sitting down by the fire with his daughter on his knee. "Well, I'm back."

The path is what generates flow. The cave is what generates home. The door is what connects them.

The Ring is what threatens to seal all the doors and convert all the caves into prisons and all the paths into circuits, and the Ring is destroyed not because anyone is strong enough to throw it into the fire but because the path and the cave meet at the volcanic crack and the meeting unmakes the object that held them apart.

And so the book ends where it began, with a hobbit in a hole. The hole is a cave. The cave has a door. The door is round and green and it opens. The path goes ever on and on, down from the door where it began, but the door is still there, and the kettle is on, and the gardener is home.

Well, I'm back home in the cave now, and thank you so much for reading.

And as for Tolkien himself—

May you rest in peace, you long-winded, crazy motherfucker.

