

CHAPTER SIX

THE OXFORD FANTASISTS

CLIVE STAPLES LEWIS,
JOHN RONALD REVEL TOLKIEN, AND
FREDERICK MAURICE POWIEKE

I

SAVE THE BELOVED LAND

In the early forties, during the height of the war years, while a bomber moon shone down upon the deer park on the grounds of Magdalen College, Oxford, a half dozen dons and their friends, who were also writers and lived in or near Oxford, gathered on Tuesday evenings in the rooms of the Magdalen College tutor in medieval literature and political theory. The Magdalen tutor was C. S. Lewis—Jack to his friends. They drank beer and tea, smoked heavily in the British manner, throwing their cigarette ashes on the worn carpet, and read to each other from, and caustically commented on, written work in progress. The group came to call themselves the Inklings. One of this group in Jack Lewis's rooms was an editor of the Oxford University Press, the dramatist and novelist and Christian polemicist Charles Williams, who was relocated by the press in Oxford from London for the duration of the war. He died there in 1945. Another of the Inklings was a lawyer, Owen Barfield, later Jack Lewis's executor, which was eventually to be not a small job.

Another Inkling was the reclusive professor of Anglo-Saxon, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, called Ronald. In the late twenties and early thirties he was renowned as an authority on Old and Middle English. He was the leading scholar on the subject of two precious fourteenth-century poems written anonymously in the Midlands, about seventy miles from Oxford, in the dialect of that region. These poems, *Sir*

Gawain and the Green Knight and *Pearl*, are now regarded, along with *Beowulf* (c. 800) and the works of Chaucer (late fourteenth century), as the greatest medieval poetry in the English language. There is no more beautiful poem in any medieval language than *Pearl*, an allegorical elegy for a dead child. Tolkien was responsible for the definitive text of *Sir Gawain*, published in 1925. For thirty years, off and on, he labored on a translation of *Pearl*; it was finally published posthumously, but it was soon superseded by a remarkable metrical translation made by Yale's Marie Borroff.

Despite his prodigious learning and early professional accomplishments, Tolkien's academic career in the early forties seemed on a downward trajectory. In the previous decade his only book publication was a children's fantasy, *The Hobbit* (1937), which had sold well. Tolkien's publisher clamored for a sequel, but as yet he had not produced it, although he desperately needed the money, having a wife and three children in a lower-middle-class suburb of Oxford. Tolkien had no private means, and he had to waste a month every summer picking up a few extra pounds grading examination booklets. Tolkien read to the Inklings miscellaneous sections of what seemed to be a disordered mythological fantasy addressed more to adults than children. Who would want to read this thing? Who would dare publish it? Jack Lewis's response to it was only intermittently enthusiastic.

Lewis in the war years was by far the best known of the Inklings group, both within the academic world and even more among the general public. He had established his reputation as a leading medieval literary historian with *The Allegory of Love* (1936), a pioneering and influential study of medieval romantic literature, which he had written one chapter at a time over a half dozen long summer vacations from his heavy Magdalen College teaching load. He was now rapidly gaining attention among the general public for his children's fiction, for science fiction novels and allegories with a Christian twist, and for a series of BBC lectures that were essentially soft-core sermons.

By 1943 Lewis was the best-known Christian polemicist in Britain, and he had begun to acquire a cult following in the United States. He lived in a fashionable house just outside Oxford with his brother, an army reserve officer and a nonacademic but very capable historian of Bourbon France in the Age of Louis XIV. They were bachelors. The household was dominated by a dragon housekeeper, the mother of Jack Lewis's best friend, who was killed in the First World War. With this difficult woman, Lewis had a bizarre, probably celibate,

repressive, sadomasochistic relationship for three decades. Lewis was slowly becoming affluent from book royalties; he changed his lifestyle very little and gave away part of the money to relatives or to one charity or another.

Tolkien and Lewis were at least visibly good friends as well as colleague luminaries in Oxford's medieval language and literature faculty. Their friendship was always tense because their personalities were so different—Tolkien, reclusive, driven, querulous, unsatisfied; Lewis, calm, affable, outgoing, sociable. Underneath their surface friendship there was a deep rivalry between them, not so much in scholarship as in writing fantasy literature. Of all the medievalists of the twentieth century, Lewis and Tolkien have gained incomparably the greatest audience, although 99.9 percent of their readers have never looked at their scholarly work. They are among the best-selling authors of modern times for their works of fantasy, adult and children's. There are forty million copies of Lewis's work in print. The novel that Tolkien read bits of to the Inklings, with mixed response in the early forties, was finally published with trepidation by Allen and Unwin in three volumes in 1954 and 1955. It has now sold eight million copies in many languages, with about half the sales in an American paperback edition. This is *The Lord of the Rings*.

In the early forties, while Tolkien was grinding his way through his six-hundred-thousand-word fantasy, typing it all himself, with only marginal hope of ever finding a publisher, Lewis's fame grew steadily. In 1949 Jack Lewis's smiling face graced the cover of *Time* magazine, and he gained a huge audience in the United States. It tells you a lot about Lewis and Tolkien that although they shared a huge commercial success in the United States, greater than in their own country by a significant margin, neither ever set foot across the Atlantic. Today there is an institute devoted to Lewis's work at Wheaton College in Illinois, and the number of American doctoral dissertations written on Tolkien grows at a steady pace.

At the end of the war Lewis was the center of a popular transatlantic Christian cult, and his scholarly reputation also advanced steadily—eventually he published five scholarly books—but it is more likely that Tolkien, then regarded by many of his colleagues, possibly including Lewis, as a burnout case and a somewhat embarrassing failure who ought to resign his prestigious chair and give a younger and more productive man a chance at it, whose fame will be of infinite duration. It now looks as though *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the enduring classics of English literature and that a century from now,

while Lewis's reputation will have flattened out, Tolkien will stand in the company of Swift and Dickens as a creator of imaginative fiction and in the lineage of fantasy writers going back to the author of *Pearl*, which he himself rescued from very deep obscurity.

When Rayner Unwin, Tolkien's publisher, was preparing *The Lord of the Rings* for publication in 1954, he asked Lewis to contribute a blurb for the dust jacket. Lewis complied, comparing Tolkien's novel with the writings of the Renaissance Italian poet Ariosto. Tolkien found this praise a bit overdone, and in fact, Lewis had mixed feelings about Tolkien's accomplishment. He did not anticipate the phenomenal popular success of Tolkien's fantasy of mythic quest. He did not expect that out of the shabby converted garage attached to Tolkien's modest suburban house would come a work of such international celebrity.

In terms of shaping of the Middle Ages in the popular culture of the twentieth century, Tolkien and Lewis have had an incalculable effect, and the story is far from ended. Their fictional fantasies cannot be separated from their scholarly writing. Their work in each case should be seen as a whole and as communicating an image of the Middle Ages that has entered profoundly and indelibly into world culture.

Whatever the tensions in their personal relationships, Lewis and Tolkien were important and good for each other. They did not so much influence each other along specific, calculable lines as they encouraged each other to pursue hazardous journeys of creation. For more than twenty years they emboldened, criticized, and reinforced each other. They legitimated for each other their singular careers, in which, while conscientiously fulfilling their teaching responsibilities, they took time (in Tolkien's case almost all of it) from their scholarly work to transmute their medieval learning into mythopoetic fiction, fantasy literature for a mass audience that communicated the sensibility of medieval epic and romance.

They were resented and envied by their colleagues, Lewis thereby failing to get the chair he wanted at Oxford and forced to find one at Cambridge (while continuing to live three days a week in his Oxford house), Tolkien losing much of his credibility in his colleagues' eyes. Strengthening each other's resolve, they persevered and transcended the academic world and became international media figures.

Their fantasy writing was a very serious undertaking. It was not done as a hobby or primarily as a moneymaking venture, although they both died well-off from it. They wanted to impart a sense of

medieval myth to the widest audience possible. They wanted to represent to the public the impress of the kind of traditional ethic they derived from their devotion to conservative Christianity. But essentially they wrote as all creative writers do, from some compulsion within their beings, from something beyond the level of consciousness. Tolkien memorably described this obsession in 1953: "One writes such a story not out of the leaves of trees still to be observed, not by means of botany and soil-science; but it grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mold of the mind; out of all that has been thought or seen or read, that has long been forgotten, descending into the deeps."

Lewis and Tolkien had very similar personal tastes and life-styles. They disliked French cuisine and liked plain English food. They did not relish travel abroad or driving motorcars. They were generally hostile to modern technology, although Lewis occasionally took in a film and came to appreciate sound recording. Lewis spoke also for Tolkien when he wrote in 1940: "I am conscious of a partly pathological hostility to what is fashionable." Like nearly all Oxbridge dons of their generation, they had little use for psychoanalysis, and neither ever had psychotherapy. They disliked dressing up and nearly always appeared in worn tweeds and baggy trousers. A brisk walk in the country followed by tea was a high point of each one's day.

They had no interest whatever in the United States and in American culture. They knew lots of people lived across the Atlantic because after their best sellers had appeared, they received innumerable letters from there, usually from women groupies. They courteously and carefully responded to such letters, but they never bothered to learn about the culture and society whence they came. For them the United States was just a colonial land with a thick and affluent population.

Both men were deeply affected by a nostalgia and a love for a rapidly disappearing England graced by the middle-class, highly literate Christian culture into which they had been born. They saw a continuity of this culture stretching back into the Middle Ages, when, in their perception, it originated. For them, these vibrant, imaginative, complex Middle Ages were in many essentials still activated in the donnish world of mid-twentieth-century Oxbridge and the English countryside, if not so much in London. Lewis and Tolkien wanted not only to preserve but to revitalize through their writing and teaching this Anglo-Edwardian retromedieval culture. In the mechanistic, capitalistic, aggressive age of Harold Macmillan and Margaret Thatcher,

it looked as though their program of cultural nostalgia would have little long-range impact. In the 1990s we cannot be so sure of that.

The Lewis-Tolkien philosophy of history is lyrically summed up by Tolkien's quasi hero Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*: "I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must be often to be so, Sam, when things are in danger; some one has to give them up, lose them. So that others may keep them. But you are my heir: . . . and you will read things out of the Red Book and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more."

Lewis saw himself, Tolkien, and his other Oxbridge friends as spokesmen for an "Old European, or Old Western Culture," that was under siege. We know where Lewis and Tolkien would stand in the current dispute about the canon of literature. They were "dinosaurs," and it might be that "there are not going to be many more dinosaurs," said Lewis. But they were going to fight the last good fight. In Lewis's words, "The preservation of society, and the species itself, are ends that do not hang on the precarious thread of Reason: They are given by instinct. . . . We have an instinctive urge to preserve our own species. That is why men ought to work for posterity." This instinctive urge for preservation of humankind is not pursued through natural spontaneity but rather through highly literate discipline. Preservation is mediated through the literature and philosophy of the Middle Ages and the subsequent heritage deriving from and developing out of medieval humanistic culture. Their chief vehicle in this perilous journey of salvation was mythic fiction. As Lewis wrote of the sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser, they sought "to produce a tale more solemn, more redolent of the past, more venerable, than any real medieval romance . . . to hand on to succeeding generations a poetic symbol of the [Middle Ages] whose charms have proved inexhaustible."

Lewis (1898–1963) and Tolkien (1892–1973) differed in their personal lives in two significant respects. Tolkien fell in love when he was sixteen with a girl of his class five years his senior and married her five years later, just before he went to fight in France. He had three children and a stable, happy family life although his wife disliked Oxford for the forty years she lived there, feeling isolated and lonely. When Tolkien retired and had his first royalty checks from *The Lord of the Rings*, she made him move to a residential hotel in a plebeian seaside resort. One of Tolkien's sons also became an Oxford literature don.

Lewis was extremely repressed sexually. He did not marry until 1955 and did not consummate the marriage for several months thereafter. His wife was an ex-Communist New York Jewish groupie with two small sons who forced herself on him. She died of cancer in 1960. From the time he was a schoolboy, Lewis was affected by sado-masochistic fantasies of whipping, "something beautifully intimate and also very humiliating," he reported to a friend.

The other difference between Lewis and Tolkien was in their class background. Lewis came from a comfortably middle-class suburban professional family. His father was a successful lawyer. Tolkien's family was sliding into genteel poverty, greatly accelerated by the death of his father when he was four years old. He grew up in stringent economic circumstances and made it through prep school and college only on a series of scholarships. Lewis was therefore free and easy with money and generous to a fault. Tolkien was, not surprisingly, stingy and tight. He never hired a typist for the manuscript of *The Lord of the Rings*, and until it was set in type, there was only one copy. It was Tolkien's children who for the most part enjoyed the fiscal benefit of his best-selling smash in the last two decades of his long life.

But there were three ways in which the biographies of Lewis and Tolkien are very similar. First, they were outlanders, products of the Empire in its day of autumnal glow. Tolkien (whose family on his father's side came to Britain from Germany in the late seventeenth century) was born in South Africa and spent the first four years of his life there. Lewis was born into the Belfast Anglo-Irish and grew up in Northern Ireland. For them, therefore, England was a place to come home to and all the more to be cherished. At the same time they were at least in earlier years conscious of themselves as outlanders, as colonials.

Secondly, and most important, Lewis lost his mother when he was ten. Tolkien (who had already experienced his father's death) lost his mother when he was twelve. Lewis's father was very remote and unemotional, and Tolkien was a full-fledged orphan, with a local priest as his guardian. Each revered his mother's memory. Early loss of a parent, especially in the case of men, is a powerful stimulant for independence and creativity. It also stimulates a fantasy world of search for a happy time and land, a sublimated reunion with the absent mother.

Finally, Lewis and Tolkien were products of the era of British decline that occupied most of their lifetimes. They fought as officers

in the First World War. Both witnessed scenes of indescribable carnage. From this experience they derived an appreciation of physical courage, an imaginative taste for violence, and a sense of the instability and fragility of life. The "Dark Power" is an ever-recurring threat. All these qualities are reflected in their fantasy novels. Lewis and Tolkien belonged to Britain's posthegemonic generation. The Empire was not lost until after World War II, but in the late thirties and forties, between Munich in 1938 and the abandonment of the raj ten years later, in spite of the dogged Christian heroism of the war, it was pretty clear that Britain's day of wealth and power was over. It was the time of Britannia's "sunset and evening star."

The response to economic and imperial decline was in the Britain of the forties a literary ambience of despairing resignation, suspicion of and incapacity to sustain an advanced technological society, and an intense but short-lived Christian revival. The leading British writers of the period—T. S. Eliot in poetry and drama, F. R. Leavis in literary criticism and cultural commentary, J. B. Priestley in fiction, Arnold Toynbee in metahistorical speculation—shared this temperament. It even affects the later writings, the satirical fantasies, of George Orwell. Translated into focus on the bureaucratic establishment, it is a theme also in C. P. Snow's novels.

Britain hadn't recovered psychologically before the sixties, possibly the eighties, perhaps never, from those miserable photos of February 1942, showing slim, diminished, embarrassed British officers in their little khaki shorts surrendering Singapore to exultant, masterful Japanese generals, or those heart-stopping photos of smiling young British bomber crews about to leave for their near-suicidal night missions over Germany in 1943 and 1944 and the loss of 59,000 air crews, the cream of a generation, at least half of them secondary school and college graduates. In addition to these irreversible traumas, there was after 1945 souring national austerity, fuel shortages, food asperity, a humiliating subordinate satellite relationship with the United States, and ignominious retreat from the tropical Empire, where nothing was recovered from centuries of prodigious effort and idealism.

This was the sad ambience, the bitter, depleted world in which Lewis and Tolkien wrote. They had, however, a more positive response to these conditions and events than the postimperial stoicism, cultural despair, and resigned Christian pessimism that were the common response of their British contemporaries. They were not prepared imaginatively and intellectually to withdraw and accept defeat. Out of the medieval Norse, Celtic, and Grail legends, they con-

jured fantasies of revenge and recovery, an ethos of return and triumph. As Chaucer said in *Troilus and Criseyde*, they aimed to "to make dreams truth and fables histories." A mythopoetic vision of medieval heroism was to be communicated to the masses through fantasy stories. "That something which the educated receive from poetry," Lewis wrote in 1947, "can reach the masses in stories of adventure, and almost in no other way."

II

THE MEDIEVAL IMAGINATION

Biographical studies of Lewis have slowly emerged. Most valuable are Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (1979), which, as the title indicates, is mostly focused on the 1940s scene in Oxford, and a 1988 book by George Sayer (*Jack: C. S. Lewis and His Times*) that is memoir as well as biography and is uneven but informed and insightful in places. To these highly sympathetic biographies there has been added a more hostile portrait (*C. S. Lewis: A Biography* [1990]) by the prolific British novelist and biographer A. N. Wilson: Lewis "was argumentative and bullying. His jolly, red, honest face was that of an intellectual bruiser. . . . He was frequently contemptuous in his remarks about the opposite sex."

In 1985 British television boldly presented a film, *Shadowlands*, depicting Lewis's relationship with Joy Davidman, the American to whom he was married for five years. A stage play derived from the TV film has since been presented in London and New York. In the TV film, Claire Bloom was miscast as Joy Davidman. The actor playing Lewis, Joss Ackland, although taller than he was, did facially resemble him. Lewis was a handsome man in that heavyset British manner. He came through in *Shadowlands* as a generally wise and generous person and as extremely kind to Davidman's two sons by a previous marriage (that was true), even paying for their attendance at an upscale boarding school.

Shadowlands communicates accurately that Jack Lewis brimmed with self-confidence. He had very firm opinions about everything, including the Middle Ages. For Lewis the quest for the Middle Ages was the pursuit of "the compulsive imagination of a larger, brighter, bitterer, more dangerous world than ours." In his view, this medieval imagination was the product of the tense interaction of three cultural traditions. One was the romantic tradition that attained its highest

development in the courtly literature, the love poetry of the aristocracy of northern France, southern England, and the Rhine Valley in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries—the world of “courtly love.” A second strand in medieval imaginative culture lay in the vast and complex, often university-based, learned conception of a cosmic and world order that came to fruition in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and is expressed both in academic treatises and in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which draws heavily upon this systematic learning. Underneath these two cultural traditions, courtly love and the learned structure of cosmic order, lies a third force, the pristine instinctive feeling of a warrior society that became hedged about and largely, but not entirely, submerged by the consciously developed other two cultures.

This is the essential Lewis view of medieval literature and art. When he began to propound it, in the mid-1930s, it was very much a vanguard conception. No one in the English-speaking world had up to then the learning, insight, and courage to attempt such a sophisticated definition of high medieval culture. There had been valuable discussions of particular poets and treatises on philosophy and theology. But Lewis tried to define the essence of the twelfth-century literary imagination and did so in a formula that has withstood the challenge of a half century of research and reflection: The world view in twelfth- and early-thirteenth-century literature is the product of the romantic courtly tradition interacting with a search for learned order while to some extent perpetuating the underlying instinctive feeling of a warrior society.

How does this medieval culture, so defined, relate to us? How does it affect our consciousness? Medieval culture is both different from ours and very much in communication with ours, Lewis believed. In this way there is an ambiguous, tensile, and creative relationship between the medieval heritage of literature and art and our own way of thinking and seeing. To read medieval “literature aright you must suspend most of the responses and unlearn most of the habits you have acquired in reading modern literature.” It is easy enough to perceive that “in every way, if we have not outgrown, we have at least grown away from, *The Romance of the Rose*,” the French romantic masterpiece of the late thirteenth century. On the other hand, “such a view would be superficial. Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations. Being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving something behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort we are still. Neither the form nor

the sentiment of this old poetry has passed away without leaving indelible traces on our mind." So here is the second quality of medieval literature, after its tripartite foundations in romance, learned order, and primitive instinct: It is both separate from us and highly accessible to us and interactive with our own being. In the language not of Lewis but of Freud and Jacques Lacan, it is our other.

A third characteristic of medieval culture as seen by Lewis is its paradoxical combination of generalizing visions of unity with an intense concentration on the particular. Do medieval literature and art tend to be generalizing or do they concentrate on detail? Both, says Lewis, and this is their peculiar quality: "Medieval art attains a unity of the highest order, because it embraces the greatest diversity of detail."

This view exhibited compatibility with the contemporary principles of neo-Thomism, a theory about the Middle Ages developed in the 1930s and 1940s, originally under the influence of a group of theologians and cultural commentators on the liberal wing of the French Catholic Church. It had its greatest impact in France and the United States. Among its protagonists were Jacques Maritain, a philosopher who taught at the Sorbonne in Paris and after 1941 at Princeton, and Étienne Gilson, the historian of medieval philosophy, who held chairs in Paris and Toronto. In the United States neo-Thomism gained support not only in Catholic institutions like Fordham University, in New York, but also at the University of Chicago, where its spokesmen were the philosopher Richard McKeon and the educational theorist Mortimer Adler. It was embraced by the University of Chicago's activist and controversial president, Robert Maynard Hutchins. What neo-Thomism projected was an image of a medieval culture tending always on the side of synthesis and unity. Against the fractious, atomizing nature of modern culture and the disordered curriculum of modern education, medieval culture was held up as an ideal contrast of striving to bring everything together. St. Thomas Aquinas was particularly praised for his efforts to integrate Catholic theology with Aristotelian philosophy, the vanguard science of the day.

Lewis, too, affirmed that medieval man was "an organizer, a codifier, a builder of systems." He talked about "the essentially bookish character of their [medieval men's] culture, and their intense love of system." Lewis could therefore be appealed to, and was, by the neo-Thomists to support their point of view and confirm their program, which was to sustain traditional learned order ("the Great Books" in Chicago parlance) in the midst of the disturbing variety and instabil-

ity of modern life. Lewis's phenomenal popularity in America in the 1940s and 1950s stemmed partly from the compatibility of his perception of medieval culture with neo-Thomist principles.

But Lewis saw more deeply into medieval culture than the neo-Thomists did. He knew there was another side entirely to medieval sensibility in contrast with system building, and this was a love of the particular, a propensity to concentrate on small facts and distinctive experience and to relish the individual and the concrete. In that respect, medieval culture had much in common with the modernism of the early twentieth century, in which Lewis, like others of his generation, was educationally reared and which had become inextricably intertwined with donnish Oxbridge mentality.

The medieval imagination, Lewis summed up near the end of his life, "is not a transforming imagination like Wordsworth's or a penetrative imagination like Shakespeare's. It is a realising imagination." Dante was obsessive about "extremely factual word-painting: the details, the comparisons, designed at whatever cost of dignity to make sure that we see exactly what he saw. Now Dante in this is typically medieval. The Middle Ages are unrivaled, till we reach quite modern times [here is an insightful reference to modernist foreshadowing in medieval culture], in the sheer foreground fact, the 'close-up.'" This statement encapsulates Lewis's lifetime consideration of medieval culture. It appears in *The Discarded Image*, a brief, reflective, subdued, almost depressive summing up, published in 1964, one year after he died, which was a final version of the lectures on the medieval imagination that he had been giving at Oxford and Cambridge for many years.

Lewis left a great many questions unanswered or even unasked about the nature of the Middle Ages, although what he had to say was persuasive and largely incontestable. There is an air of closure, of finality about *The Discarded Image*. The open-ended sociological, psychoanalytic, anthropological questions about medieval culture, not to speak of actual literary and linguistic issues, are for the most part resisted in this book. Lewis is here too much the legislator of the truth about medieval culture. It is the truth, by and large, but it is a somewhat narrow truth. It is unfortunate that Lewis did not spend a year or two at Yale or Berkeley, or at the Monumenta in Munich, or the Annalist institute in Paris. He might have been stirred out of his Oxbridge donnish proclivity, which *The Discarded Image* especially represents, to send postcard and command cable messages about the medieval world.

Yet Lewis was a great emancipator in medieval studies in the two other major scholarly works that he published: *The Allegory of Love* (1936) and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (1954). They are bold, original, seminal works that rocked the transatlantic Anglophone world of medieval studies and did a great deal of good. No one would recommend *The Allegory of Love* nowadays as an authoritative study of the immensely important subject of medieval romance. Lewis's book is now obsolete, pioneering but superseded by, in both learning and conceptualization, more recent works such as John Stevens's *Medieval Romance* (1973) and Lynette Muir's *Literature and Society in Medieval France* (1984). But Lewis's *Love* was a watershed in the invention of the Middle Ages because he legitimated the subject of the idea of love and gave academic authority to inquiry into romantic patterns within medieval literature. What heretofore had been only hesitantly and marginally considered was transformed by him into a sober-sided, central, crucial subject in medieval studies.

Lewis's account of nondramatic sixteenth-century English literature (it was for the multivolume, extremely uneven *Oxford History of English Literature* series, and someone else was unfortunately assigned Shakespeare and dramatic literature) is today very much worth reading because of his subtle and passionate argument that Renaissance literature, such as the poetry of Edmund Spenser, is still functioning within the language and concept formations of medieval culture. In other words, Lewis maintained vehemently that contrary to the viewpoint of the followers of Jacob Burckhardt, the Renaissance is only a late and special chapter in the history of medieval culture, not the dawn of a new era.

Lewis was not the only scholar of his generation to argue this emphatically at the time. It had already been done by E. M. W. Tillyard at Cambridge and Douglas Bush at Harvard. Indeed, in the 1950s the claim that the Renaissance constituted a new, secular post-medieval era ran up against conservative Christian sensibility in both Britain and America. In academic circles rebuttal of Burckhardt's conception of the Italian Renaissance as "the discovery of man and nature" occupied the time and attention of any critic or historian who was caught up in the short-lived postwar Christian reaffirmation. Lewis demonstrated, in great detail and with a quality of expository and critical writing he was never to attain again, the myriad ways in which the assumptions and expressive forms of English Renaissance literature perpetuated the medieval thought world and way of speaking.

The case against the applicability of the Burckhardtian view of the Renaissance to sixteenth-century England received its most persuasive articulation in Lewis's influential book. Of course, that did not terminate the debate. It only weighted the scales against the Burckhardtian idea for a decade or so.

There is an interesting proposal in the later chapters of Lewis's book that it was the rise of Puritanism in late Elizabethan England, the advancing tide of Calvinist theology and ethics in the last two decades of the sixteenth century, not the Renaissance literary movement of the early and middle decades of the century, that marked the real rupture with medieval culture. Even this watershed is problematical, however, since so much of Elizabethan Puritanism was itself a revival, in somewhat altered language and tone, of devotional attitudes that lie deep in the medieval past.

The defect of Lewis's *Sixteenth Century* does not lie at the empirical level. It may be conceded to him that the poetry of Henrician and earlier Elizabethan England is still heavily embedded in the thought world and language of medieval classicism and romanticism. It may be recognized also that the Puritanism of the later years of the century reflected some kind of seismic alteration in moral perceptions and personal expectations. The problem that Lewis ran up against is one of historical sociology or large-scale cultural analysis. What do we mean by an era, and what are the signs that it has ended? There is no way of shrugging off this issue. It is what the Germans call *Zeitwende*, the turning from one age to another. This is what Lewis is addressing in *Sixteenth Century*. The problem is that he does not address it directly and self-consciously enough. How do we gauge a change in mentality, a paradigm shift? Looked at from this global perspective, the fact that the poets of sixteenth-century England are still speaking within the referential discourse of the Middle Ages does not inevitably signify that they are still within the bounds of medieval culture. Precisely because Lewis's *Sixteenth Century* shows him in high gear, at his most learned and sparkling best, his book reveals the limitations of Oxbridge thinking at mid-century.

Jack Lewis never wrote the great book on medieval romantic culture and faith that he was capable of writing by virtue of his learning and insight. Instead, he applied these capacities to his fiction, which gained him an enormous audience. These books still sell well, remarkably in that their style now seems fustian Edwardian, out of touch with the later twentieth century. But to a certain kind of middle-class reader in the United States, specifically conservative Christians,

in the Midwest and South, Lewis is still powerfully persuasive in terms of both his message and his low-key style. There is also a coterie of fanatical Lewis disciples among English Anglo-Catholics, who hold frequent cult meetings at Oxford. According to A. N. Wilson, this group dogmatically insists that Lewis never lost his virginity.

Lewis's best-selling and still most readable works of fiction fall into two groups. First are two polemical Christian novels: *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), which was appropriately first serialized in a newspaper, and *The Great Divorce* (1945). It was the transatlantic impact of these novels, plus the Christian trend within Time Inc., at that time under the influence of Clare Boothe Luce, the pious Catholic, sharp-tongued feminist wife of the publisher, Henry Luce, that landed Lewis on the cover of *Time* in 1949. This was also a moment in *Time's* history when a senior editor was Whittaker Chambers, the former Soviet spy and eventual nemesis of Alger Hiss. Now a devout Quaker Christian, Chambers was keen on importing British conservative Christianity to American shores, and his favorite vehicles were Lewis and Arnold Toynbee.

Lewis's other continuing sale of books is from the seven-volume children's fantasy *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56), which is extremely uneven in quality—some pages read as though they were scribbled on the backs of envelopes on the train to London—but which also has strong sections. Into these nine volumes of fantasy fiction, Lewis put his medieval vision. Here he propounded more dramatically and clearly than in his scholarly writings the medievals' relevant message for us. The first of these messages is the reality of evil, personified by the devil and represented in the materialism, selfishness, corruption, and self-destructiveness of everyday life. Like medieval Catholics, Lewis preached a pessimistic, dualist view of the world as the scene of struggle between good and evil.

Pushed too far, this can result in the heretical Manichean doctrine of the existence of two gods, a god of light and a god of darkness. The devil is not a fallen angel; he is an antigod who slugs it out perpetually with Christ, the good god. Evil is not a perversion of God's good creation and a falling away from or "sinful" rebellion against God (the orthodox Catholic doctrine) but an antimatter, a stain of darkness covering the world and blotting out the sun. This gloomy but dynamic Manichean theology rose in Persia in the third century and penetrated the Latin-speaking part of the Roman Empire by 300. St. Augustine, before his conversion to the Christian Church, was a Manichee for ten years. Later Augustine was the chief theoretician

and polemicist against Manicheanism, but there was always a residual palimpsest of dualism in Augustinian theology.

With the help of the Roman state, Manicheanism was repressed. But it filtered into the East Roman Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire in the ninth and tenth centuries directly from Persia and then into the Balkans, where the Manichee preachers were called Bogomils. Then, presumably following along Mediterranean trade routes, Manicheanism penetrated into southern France, where it was known as Catharism (the religion of the pure) or Albigensianism (after the fortress town of Albi near Toulouse, one of its strongholds). The Manichee or Catharist heresy was suppressed with enormous cost, difficulty, and violence in the thirteenth century by a royal French crusade at the behest of the papacy and by the interrogations and terrors of the Inquisition.

Yet in the seventeenth century, in obscure valleys of the French Alps, there were still Manichees over whom John Milton lamented when they were persecuted ("Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints . . ."). Manicheanism had an obvious appeal to a dour Calvinist like Milton. And like so many British intellectual progeny of Milton, Lewis, an Anglican with Catholic proclivities, had a temperamental disposition toward Manichean dualism, even though he knew that theologically dualism was unchristian. *The Screwtape Letters*, with its convincing embodiment of the devil, is tinged with Manicheanism, as is Milton's *Paradise Lost*, about which Lewis wrote a lengthy commentary, now little read.

In his private letters Lewis's medieval Manicheanism is at times unleashed and blatant. He wrote in 1946 in a private letter to a Catholic priest: "It seems to me that far the strongest card in our enemies' hand [a beautifully concise Manichean remark] is the actual course of the world: and that, quite apart from particular events like wars and revolutions. The inherent 'vanity' of the 'creature,' the fact that life preys on life, that all beauty and happiness is produced only to be destroyed [a very Manichean sentiment]—this is what stuck in my gullet." It also stuck in the gullet of the Catharist saints of thirteenth-century southern France. It is very much a strain in British Protestant culture as well.

The other medieval theme that emerges in Lewis's fantasy fiction is the antidote to evil: to maintain faith in the little imaginative things that grow out of the mundane and to be cheerful and laugh about it. British pessimism is to be alleviated by schoolboy-donnish delight in the little things and momentary experiences that make us feel good,

whether tea and scones, tobacco, cricket, walks in the country, art, sherry, learning, or the brief encounter of heterosexual love. Essentially this is the message of medieval romance: the transformation of the realm of the mundane where the cloud bank of the reality of evil is ever-present, by projection of an imaginative faith out of the stimulations of particular uncostly things that make us feel good. This argument is what makes Lewis still so popular with the American middle-class reader. Smile your way to salvation. Feel good and be good.

Again and again Lewis propounds this idea (it resembles William James's psychological theory in *The Will to Believe* [c. 1897]) in his *Narnia Chronicles*. Thus, in *The Silver Chair* (1953), the witch tries to stop goodness by denying the possibility of putting a romantic shine on the mundane world: "Look how you can put nothing into your make-believe without copying it from the real world, this work of mine, which is the only world." But comes the response: "We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies [Inklings?] playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow." This sounds terribly schoolboy, but then Lewis thought that was his audience. The same kinds of schoolchildren who a few decades before had devoured G. A. Henty's and H. Rider Haggard's fictions of heroism in the Empire now read Lewis by the millions. Now the enemy was not Zulus in Africa or assassins in the Punjab but Manichean types of witches, antigods.

In some places in the *Narnia Chronicles*, Lewis evokes the medieval romance idea somewhat more eloquently: "When you listened to his song you heard these things he was making up: when you looked round you, you saw them [*The Magician's Nephew*, 1955]"; "The new one [Narnia] was a deeper country: Every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as it meant more [*The Last Battle*, 1956]." But the message is consistent, and it is a thoughtful one. Disillusionment, depression, and self-destruction, the reality of evil, come from abandoning faith in the small illusions that attach to the mundane realities of everyday life. This lack of faith in small imaginings leads to a breakdown of large-scale faith, to theological abandonment. When we look with faith, the simple becomes transcendent. The new Narnia looks superficially like the old one, but it has been transformed and ennobled by our vision.

This is the doctrine of an idealistic, well-meaning Oxbridge don of the 1950s that is today compatible with the conservative culture and New Age intimations of Middle America. The great medievals

like Augustine, St. Bernard, St. Thomas Aquinas and Dante might have thought that it was not the ultimate in theology but that it was nevertheless good homiletics, a preaching to the common man. It is a theory that one might expect to prevail in the Britain of the 1940s and 1950s, a time and place of imperial and economic decline, when the struggle against evil and the sanctification of simple things in the Lewis mode was a ready displacement effect substitutive of empire building and getting on. This was a general trend, not surprisingly, in British culture at the end of the war. The David Lean-Noel Coward hit film *Brief Encounter* (1945) exhibits much of the same message of the golden glow of little things (romantic trysts in a dismal provincial train station coffee bar!) as Lewis advocates in his fantasy novels of the period. In this ambience even the Labour government of Clement Attlee ("a modest man," said Winston Churchill, "and he has much to be modest about") looked good.

Lewis thought that the goodness and beauty of common acts in everyday life, one of the messages of medieval romance, could comfort his troubled countrymen. The best life was following the call to high adventure. If that was no longer possible in postwar Britain, keeping the faith through intimate imaginings would preserve the community and provide a microcosmic heroism. This conviction, too, was an ingredient of medieval romance.

III

THE LONG JOURNEY

Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is much bolder, ambivalent, problematic, closer to the actual texture of medieval romance than Lewis's fiction. Tolkien's work had by the end of the 1980s generated a cottage industry of literary criticism, much of it from small colleges in the American Midwest and South. Two books of special interest, worth reflecting on, were published on Tolkien in Britain in 1983. One is T. A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth*. Shippey is an academic scholar and a medievalist of stature. His book on Tolkien (of which Tolkien read an early draft) is a suggestive, well-informed, and for the most part readable effort at a standard major work of literary criticism, such as one might attempt of any prominent novelist. The other volume, edited by Robert Giddings (*J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land*), is entirely different. It is a collection of idiosyncratic but often

interesting papers by a group of leftist teachers in British polytechnics (community colleges), writing under the influence of Britain's leading Marxist literary critic of the older generation Raymond Williams (a Cambridge don who died in 1987) as well as the pioneering student of popular culture the literary sociologist Richard Hoggart.

Shippey is highly sympathetic to Tolkien; Giddings and his colleagues are nearly all hostile. They are very upset by Tolkien's popularity. The sales figures of *The Lord of the Rings* are cited again and again, as if they were a social crime committed by Reagan or Thatcher. Roger King proposes that Tolkien's popularity *and* his thought world fit into the era of "the privatization of cultural consumption" in the late sixties and seventies. Instances of this trend are held to be antiurban environmentalism, rock recordings that could only be studio-created and therefore could only be listened to privately (for example, the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*), and computer games. This world of suburban, affluent privatized fantasy is identified as Tolkien's world and accounts for his notorious commercial success. Nigel Walmsley offers a similar explanation for the explosive popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* and the renewed and enhanced success of *The Hobbit* in the late sixties. These were literary artifacts that fitted in with the era of psychedelic drugs and of communes in remote places. "*The Lord of the Rings* provided the alternative course of cerebral atavism for those in Britain and America who did not want to stray beyond the end of the block."

Obviously there is a measure of truth in what King and Walmsley say, but there is also a great flaw. They help explain (but only in part) the burgeoning popularity of Tolkien's work, what made it a phenomenal best seller, but they do not explain or account for what was in Tolkien's mind when he wrote these books, mostly in the 1930s and 1940s. He was not, of course, of the generation of rock music, flower children, LSD, and computer games or of that cultural ambience. There is nothing in Tolkien's letters to indicate that he became attuned to or was even aware of the new youth culture. There is, indeed, one window of connection between the pre-1914 world in which Tolkien grew up and the youth culture of the late sixties and seventies. In Edwardian and neo-Georgian England there was a group of counterculture aesthetes, as they were called then, whose homoeroticism and opiate proclivities do remotely anticipate the culture of the age of the Beatles. Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Aubrey Beardsley are the obvious examples. But there is no empirical biographical

evidence that Tolkien—an orphaned, devoutly Catholic, provincial, immensely studious, introverted scholarship boy—ever was involved with this socially upscale Edwardian counterculture.

Shippey's concern is to ground Tolkien's work in his scholarly medieval interests: in his mastery of northern philology and Norse mythology. Yet Shippey does not re-create the psychological process by which this medievalist learning is drawn upon and transformed in *The Lord of the Rings*. In Shippey's valuable book the dynamic of creativity that inspired and shaped Tolkien's work is only partly exposed.

Tolkien's family-appointed biographer (and editor of his correspondence) Humphrey Carpenter does not dare try. His useful biography (1977) deals almost entirely with the pedestrian externals of Tolkien's life and offers very little about the imaginative process and literary psychology that went into it. It is curious that there are provocative passages in Carpenter's edition of Tolkien's letters (1981) that the biographer does not try to explicate in the narrative work that is based on the correspondence. Apparently this reserved approach suited Christopher Tolkien, an Oxford don and his father's literary executor and, in the case of the correspondence, a collaborator with Carpenter.

In some ways Tolkien is his own best critic. Rarely has an imaginative writer of renown so freely unburdened himself in his private letters to requests for explanations of the intention, meaning, and origin of his work. Tolkien was temperamentally incapable of not responding to a well-meaning and intelligent inquiry, although many of these replies, after being extensively drafted for several pages, never were mailed. They were, however, retained in his papers and published in his selected correspondence in 1981. Among such self-critiques, and one that he did mail, was a ten-page explanation of what *The Lord of the Rings* is all about that he sent in as a book proposal to Milton Waldman, a senior editor at Collins Publishers. Tolkien engaged in several years of frustrating and ultimately futile negotiations with Waldman until the book was finally taken by Rayner Unwin of Allen and Unwin, the publisher of *The Hobbit* in 1937 (as a ten-year-old boy in 1937, Rayner was also the chief reader for publication of that manuscript).

It is an ironic publishing story that Collins would probably have published *The Lord of the Rings* if Waldman had not chanced to go away on an extended vacation at a critical moment in the negotiations and disappeared into an inaccessible Italian village. It is also a nice piece of publishing gossip that Sir George Unwin and Rayner Unwin were so doubtful of the work's commercial possibilities that they tied

Tolkien to a cheapskate contract that paid no advance against royalties, only a share of the profits after the publisher's costs were recovered. In the end, of course, Tolkien made more money this way. *The Lord of the Rings* gave a condition of affluence to Allen and Unwin that it had not enjoyed since the 1920s. It was also a big boost to the American hardback publisher, Houghton Mifflin, and even more so to Ballantine, the American paperback publisher (after a brazenly pirated edition by a mass paperback outfit, Ace, had been forced off the market).

In 1938, in a public lecture a year after *The Hobbit* was published, Tolkien—aware of heavy academic eyebrows being raised at this kind of publication by the holder of one of the senior chairs in the Oxford English faculty—pithily and cryptically explained how he had come to write a children's fantasy: "A real taste for fairystories was awakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life by the war." The excruciating experience in the trenches during World War I impacted, then, on an innate love of philology, the study of the structure of language, to generate a pseudomedieval fantasy; that is what Tolkien said. The key here is the love of philology, with which Tolkien became fascinated while still in school. As a scholarship student in the English faculty at Oxford he turned out not to be a first-rate literary critic but to have a phenomenal capacity for what was then called philology and what we would now call comparative linguistics, and this became his major undergraduate study. His mastery of this field (with very little instruction) got him his first job when he got out of a military hospital, working on the famous *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language on Historical Principles*. The language structure that Tolkien was devoted to was of a kind that has not been pursued since the 1940s. The historical approach that was inherited from the nineteenth-century German scholarship (the diachronic method so called) has now been replaced by an anthropological and psychological analysis of language (the synchronic method). Tolkien could be regarded as the last great representative of the science of historical philology that in the Anglophone world has passed out of the curriculum, to be replaced by Noam Chomsky's antihistorical transformational grammar.

Within his science of historical philology, Tolkien was mainly interested in the northern world of Old English, Old Norse, and Celtic languages. One of the skills he had was the ability to create a whole grammar and vocabulary of an early but extinct northern language from a very few fossilized fragments. This capability was, however,

by no means unheard of among the old historical philologists; there were a half dozen scholars in Germany in the early twentieth century who could do likewise. What made Tolkien unusual as a philologist was that having created this previously extinct language, he could then imaginatively elaborate for it an epic literature such as may have once existed but had in the mists of time disappeared.

To put it another way, Tolkien regretted the disappearance of these pristine northern languages and their (assumed) literature and compensated by re-creating the literature. Even when a language survived, the literary remains were small. *Beowulf* was the only major work of pre-Christian (in Tolkien's view) Anglo-Saxon culture. So Tolkien set out to elaborate from nothing an imaginary epic and made the challenge even greater by doing it not in a surviving early northern language but one that had all but disappeared and he had first to reconstitute.

Tolkien claimed that he imagined first the language, then the story of long journey and quest (epic) in that language. Then he pretended that he was translating from that epic into modern English, retaining proper nouns and a few other key words—a triple-decker work of imagination. Obviously there were a few other historical philologists of his generation who had the scientific capability of doing this, but Tolkien produced not a few specimen pages of the pseudotranslated fantasy work but a six-hundred-thousand-word narrative that was published in three volumes as *The Lord of the Rings*. To do this, he needed not only science and literary imagination but also obsessive living in a personal fantasy world for more than two decades. Tolkien is a prime example of being what the British psychiatrist R. D. Laing called “a successful schizophrenic.” This is what lies behind *The Lord of the Rings*. It is the most astonishing monument to the old historical philology ever developed and the most extended and difficult piece of pseudomedievalism ever imagined.

Tolkien explained his starting point to the poet W. H. Auden in 1955: “It has always been with me: the sensibility to linguistic pattern which affects me emotionally like colour or music . . . the deep response to legends (for want of a better word) that I would call the North-Western temper and temperature.” In 1947 he defended his fantasizing this way: “Fantasy remains a human right in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made; and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of our maker.” So his medieval-like fantasy had divine sanction. On another occasion he explained the end product of his linguistic and imaginative endeavors by saying

that his "typical response upon reading a medieval work was to desire not so much to make a philological or critical study of it as to write a modern work in the same tradition." *The Lord of the Rings* is thus a modern reconstruction of a fragment of medieval culture.

The narrative was to fit into the traditions of English culture as Tolkien perceived it: "I had in mind to make a body of more or less connected legend which I could dedicate simply: To England; to my country. It should . . . be redolent of our 'air' (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe, not Italy or Aegean, still less the East), and while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in [existing] Celtic things). It should be 'high,' purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land steeped in beauty." Tolkien could become very annoyed when someone compared his work with Richard Wagner's—there is a ring involved in both stories, but that is all, he said—but it is clear from this statement that Tolkien shared with Wagner a faith in the elevated ethos of the Nordic peoples. That accounts in part for the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is genteel Nordic neoracism in the form of neomedievalism.

This Nordic ethos of reserved courage and unilateral dedication is the saving grace of Tolkien's quasi-hero Frodo in his long journey through and against the force of darkness. The landscape through which Frodo and his friends move in *The Lord of the Rings* is essentially a medieval environment. There are Germanic barbarian types of hordes. There are decayed cities. There are comfortable pockets of momentarily quiet and enclosed country. And there is war, threat of war, destruction of war, and memories of war:

Horsemen were galloping on the grass. . . . From the heavens . . . ships put out to sea; and out of the East Men were moving endlessly: Swordsmen, spearmen, bowmen upon horses, chariots of chieftains, and laden wains. All the power of the Dark Lord was in motion.

Fire glowed amid the smoke. Mount Doom was burning, and a great reek rising. . . . All hope left him. . . .

All dead, all rotten. Elves and Men and Orcs. The Dead Marshes. There was a great battle long ago, yes, so they told him . . . when I was young. . . . It was a great battle. Tall Men with long swords, and terrible elves, and Orcses shrieking. They fought on the plain for days and months. . . . But the Marshes have grown since then, swallowed up the graves; always creeping, creeping.

This was the way it was in France around 1450, after the Hundred Years' War, or in France around 480, after the Germanic invasions. "High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light."

Here is the medieval world at its most bellicose, destructive, and terrible moments: the Age of the Barbarian Invasions in the fifth and sixth centuries; the Hundred Years' War in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This is imaginatively evoked, graphically described, but it is conventionally medieval, a given, a stock scene well constructed. What is surprising and original in *The Lord of the Rings* is not the power of darkness but the force for good led by Frodo. This departs from the medieval heroic image. Frodo is not physically powerful, and his judgment is sometimes erratic. He wants not to bring about the golden era but to get rid of the Ring, to place it beyond the powers of evil; not to transform the world but to bring peace and quiet to the Shire, to remove threats and promote stability and civility: These are the purposes of his long journey. It is not a romantic quest of nobility. It is the wish of the little people in the world. It is a common man's rather than an aristocratic ethos. The outcome of the incredible journey and perpetual struggle is not glory but weariness: "For the fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved and pitiable thing."

Frodo, who, more than anyone else, is responsible for having saved the beloved land from darkness and war, is not hailed and rewarded at the end as the Once and Future King. He is treated more like the wounded veterans of the world wars (Tolkien included) who were ignominiously shunted aside by their ungrateful homelands. Mordor is destroyed, the Shire is saved, but Frodo's wounds do not heal in Middle-Earth. He "dropped quietly out of all the doings of the Shire, and Sam was pained to notice how little honor he had in his own country." Resigned to "defeat," Frodo leaves the Shire. "It [the dream] is gone for ever, and now all is dark and empty."

There are two ways to interpret this pessimistic conclusion to the long journey and great struggle. Tolkien is saying that in the modern world there are no rewards for heroes. They do not become kings; they become ailing veterans on abysmal pensions and fade away in loneliness and poverty. If his philological capability had not rescued

him by gaining for him first a job at the *Oxford Dictionary* in 1918 and then his first teaching job at the University of Leeds, that would have been Tolkien's as well as Frodo's fate. Or Tolkien may be saying that this is the way it really was in the Middle Ages: not the Arthurian heroism of golden knights but the wearying, almost endless struggle of the little people against the reality of perpetual war and violent darkness to find a hiatus of peace and security for their families and communities. *The Lord of the Rings* is thereby a medieval story, but a counterromance, telling it "like it really was," not the way the court poets told it to flatter their lords. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive; Tolkien may be commenting on both the twentieth century and the medieval world.

In his remarkable ten-page book proposal to Milton Waldman of Collins Publishers in 1951, Tolkien addressed the meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*. Modern criticism has long denied to an author interpretive authority over his own work. Indeed, there has been a recent tendency to give greater legitimacy to "reader response" and "interpretive communities" of English literature professors than to authors. It is still, however, interesting how Tolkien, an eminent practitioner of criticism and literary history, explains his own work, even if it may be acknowledged that the meaning is thereby precariously shifted from the tale to the teller. The Ring, he tells Waldman, represents "the will to mere power, seeking to make itself objective by physical force and mechanism and so also inevitably by lies." Evil in the world is domination, and it is mechanistic domination; the enemy is the world of machines that strangle life and goodness, even when mechanization seeks to benefit humankind (obviously the flower children of the late sixties who embraced Tolkien were responding to this attitude): "The Enemy in successive forms is always 'naturally' concerned with sheer Domination, and so [is] the Lord of magic and machines; but [that is] the problem: That this frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others."

Tolkien violently objected when one of his admirers wrote him to comment that *The Lord of the Rings* reads like an allegory against communism. It is just a story, he said in response, not a message of contemporary significance. Tolkien may not have been intentionally writing a cold war allegory against the Soviets—that would be a very hazardous thing for an Oxford don to do in the late forties—but his book can be read, and was by himself, as an argument against the mechanistic state and society that commit evil even when their inten-

tions are good. What more effective condemnation of socialist government or the regulatory and welfare state of late capitalism can be made?

Conjoined to this is the antiheroic theme, or rather the theme that heroism lies with ordinary people. Tolkien tells Waldman that his book teaches that salvation against the enemy occurs this way: "Without the high and noble, the simple and vulgar is utterly mean; and without the simple and ordinary, the noble and heroic is meaningless." Here is where *The Lord of the Rings* differs from the aristocratic Arthurian tradition. Tolkien agrees with Lewis in admiring the sensibility of the little people. In a letter of 1956 Tolkien affirmed that "Middle-Earth is just . . . the inhabited world of men." So in spite of Tolkien's professed distaste for allegory, *The Lord of the Rings* is a grand allegory, about both the Middle Ages and the twentieth century.

A year after its publication, Tolkien had another try at explicating its meaning. This time he was metaphysical in his interpretation: "I do not think even Power and Domination is [sic] the real center of my story. . . . The real theme for me is about something much more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality: The mystery of the Love of the world in the hearts of a race 'doomed' to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts of a race 'doomed' not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete." The theme in this interpretive version is very medieval. It would be instantly recognizable by Augustine, Bernard, and Dante: the ambivalence of human life, love and anguish, departure and return. It was a mystery central to medieval anxiety and passion, the never-ending human story before the Second Coming, as medieval intellectuals conceived it. *The Lord of the Rings* in this interpretation projects the tragedy of humanity without divine grace, grandeur without fulfillment, quest without finality. In December 1953, just as he was finishing the book, Tolkien described it to a Jesuit priest in this way: "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision."

The different ways in which Tolkien, in his day the holder of the senior chair in the Oxford English faculty, interpreted his own work are argument for those who would now fashionably divest an author of his own intellectual property, taking away his capacity to legislate on the meaning of his own work. *The Lord of the Rings* exists, apart from what Tolkien said at one time or another it was supposed to mean. It was largely a product of the realm of fantasy in the uncon-

scious; that was its ultimate source. Therefore, what Tolkien later consciously thought about it is interesting, but not authoritative as to the work's meaning. I have to confess that I am not an enthusiast of *The Lord of the Rings*. I would not have been able to predict its phenomenal success during those ten years or more after the war when Tolkien was carrying his one copy back and forth on the train from Oxford to London in search of a publisher, reasonably afraid to put this single copy in the mails. *Rings* is one of the classic cases that demonstrate that great books are made great by the reading public, which finds something there that powerfully connects to its feelings. This is an inexplicable phenomenon that no one critic or publisher can anticipate.

The Lord of the Rings does in indelible fashion capture three salient aspects of medieval civilization. First, it communicates the experience of endemic war and the fear of armed bands that was a frequent condition of the period from 400 to the middle of the eleventh century and again from about 1290 to the late fifteenth century. The dark force of incipient terrorism in the form of armed invasion was a constant threat and fell particularly on village society, the common people. This is communicated in *Rings* in a dramatic fashion that no conventional historical exposition can come close to matching.

Secondly, *Rings* makes us feel the circumstances and conditions of a long journey undertaken not by a great nobleman with a powerful retinue but by an ordinary soldier with two or three companions. This kind of distant journeying by obscure people over long distances, for one reason or another, we know from stray references, was a much more common occurrence at all times in the Middle Ages, but especially after 1100, than we might a priori predict from the kind of primitive transportation system the medievals had access to. People of modest social status in surprising numbers traveled long distances, mostly on foot. This is a strange fact of medieval life, and *Rings* is centered on this event. Tolkien convinces us that the way this happened was that some local village leader got it into his head that he had to do something to help or save his people, something had to be carried a very long distance, some contact vaguely imagined had to be made, and off the person and two or three companions went on their incredibly long, footsore journey. These journeys were rarely documented for us in the Middle Ages and almost never in detail. Tolkien, by imagining such a journey, has graphically re-created an important but poorly understood facet of medieval social life.

Thirdly, Tolkien stresses for us what C. S. Lewis also believed:

that medieval heroism was not a special manifestation of aristocratic culture but something that existed among people of relatively humble social status. There is something very English about this conviction that the little people of the medieval world were heroic, too. However, not only is it a product of the Edwardian sentimental retromedieval imagination, but it has some documentation in the known realities of medieval English history. From 1194 onward, as Maitland was the first to demonstrate, there is available to us an increasingly detailed record of litigation in the county courts, and most of the "pleaders," as they were called, were strictly local people, small landowners, not the magnates, not the grand nobility. By the fourteenth century these records of litigation in the county courts allow us to look into the lives and feelings of the little people of the countryside—the lesser gentry and the yeoman class. They turn out to be highly articulate, self-conscious, ambitious, intelligent, the instigators of capitalist rationality. No other series of records from medieval Europe, before Florence of the fifteenth century, gives us such detailed insight into the minds of ordinary country or urban society. There are the Frodo types, socially. Thus Tolkien's reconstruction of the mentality of these kinds of people coincides with the evidence from the records of the common law. In this regard Tolkien is Maitland's successor as an archaeologist of medieval society. He also agrees with Bloch's admiration for the medieval peasantry.

Tolkien, like Lewis, made a concrete scholarly contribution to the study of the Middle Ages. Just as Lewis was a pioneer in legitimating the study of courtly love literature as central to medieval culture and had important things to say about the relationship between Renaissance literature and the Middle Ages, so Tolkien brought to the attention of the academic public some neglected masterpieces of medieval literature. Yet the importance of their work as medievalists does not lie primarily in these contributions. It lies in a much broader area, one harder to define. Tolkien and Lewis immersed the twentieth-century reader in medieval worlds and made that person a participant in the highly activated realm of the imagination that at the same time communicates how medieval people thought of themselves and gives us the opportunity to perceive ourselves as possible actors in a medieval place. This is a highly unusual achievement.

Another way of addressing the Tolkien and Lewis contribution is to say that, far beyond the level of being merely popularizers, they convinced us of a medieval world comprised not only of heroes but of little people who were sentient beings with anxieties, ambitions,

and small triumphs we can fully empathize with. Lewis and Tolkien were essentially conservatives, romantics, fantasizers, rejecters of much of twentieth-century culture. They were very different by temperament and ideology from Maitland and Bloch. But they belong in company with those two as inventors of a medieval society we can believe in, project ourselves into, and enjoy.

IV

A PROUSTIAN DREAMWORLD

In 1946, while Jack Lewis, the fellow and tutor of Magdalen College, was turning out his best-selling Manichaean novels, and Ronald Tolkien, the Merton professor of English, was holed up in his garage writing endlessly about Frodo's journey, the regius professor of modern history Frederick Maurice Powicke (1879–1963)—peculiarly called Frederick for the first three decades of his life and then Maurice—was experiencing a crisis. His tenure as regius professor was ending, and the Labour government was engaged in an extensive and difficult search for a medievalist who was also a socialist to succeed him. “Modern history” at Oxbridge at that time still meant after the fall of Rome A.D. 476. Since the regius (royal) chair was established in the reign of George III, appointment to it had lain in the hands of the prime minister. Prime Minister Clement Attlee now had to be satisfied with Vivian H. Galbraith, the leading historical archivist in the Public Record Office. Galbraith looked and talked like a Yorkshire farmer and espoused the populist radicalism of a 1920s Communist. Powicke was not enthusiastic about his designated successor.

Powicke was sixty-seven in 1946 and being forced into retirement from his chair, which he did not wish to relinquish. As he sat in Oriel College in the dingy rooms allocated to the regius professor of history, finishing his enormous manuscript on the reign of Henry III, Powicke felt anxiety about what he would do when soon ejected from his chair and his Oriel rooms. He had been regius professor since 1929, when Stanley Baldwin, the pious, well-read Conservative prime minister had come upon a recently published lecture of Powicke's on “The Christian Life in the Middle Ages” and had been very favorably impressed by its learning, clarity, and subtle balance of admiration for medieval Catholicism with firm devotion to the Church of England. Baldwin rehabilitated Powicke, a native of the Lancashire North who had not done well as a student at Oxford. After this disappoint-