The Brexit Symptom of Tolkien's New English Mythology
By Richard Cooper

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In writing Lord of the Rings, J.R.R.Tolkien once exclaimed that he had wanted to give to the English their own mythology. As the leading philologist of his time in the English speaking world (1925-1959 Pembroke and Merton College, Oxford), and eminent member of the illustrious 'Inklings' – (a reading and study group at Oxford which included C.S. Lewis and Owen Barfield), and having fought in World War One, Tolkien was well placed for such an undertaking. In re-readings of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings one may be impressed by the parallels it draws to current debates on Brexit; the question of how Tolkien's work reveals aspects of the historical British union, of its nations, and of modern consciousness.

National instincts and feelings lie below our conscious appreciation of history. In moments of triumph, the English align their history with the outlook of Empire, likely to cite battles of Waterloo and

Agincourt with the French, or the World Wars; whereas the Welsh and the Scots, would sooner refer to the 1402 Battle of Bryn Glas, where Owain defeats the English, or the reign of Robert the Bruce - in Scottish independence (1306-1329). With regard to Ireland, The 'backstop' clause of the withdrawal agreement of Brexit, has called back into consciousness the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, dormant since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 (2). Significantly, the 2016 European Union Referendum, saw 62% of the Scottish vote for Remain (49% in the UK as a whole). In Wales, Cymru Sovereign was founded in 2016, advocating independence from the United Kingdom and the European Union. How long the union of the United Kingdom can sustain itself, when Brexit already inspires such national soul searching, is a matter with historical precedent.

Within a global context Brexit can be seen framed by a more general global tendency towards populism; these developments not only show a swing from preceding more liberal tendencies, but have brought with them questions about the legitimacy of our democratic systems themselves. Time passes quickly in the media, but the Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018 (3), highlighted the influence on Brexit voters by means of social media. We often hear talk of 'those left behind by globalisation' when speaking of Brexit and Trump's success in the United States. Political discussion oscillates around mass polarised groups such as The European Union versus Sovereignty, or the 'liberal establishment' versus traditional conservatism. As media has developed, it is understandable that a referendum, cynically described by former Prime Minister Clement Attlee (1883-1967), 'a device for despots and dictators', would raise questions about democracy.

The Limits of Populism

For the discerning, authoritarian leadership has been a feature of twentieth century governance and continues to the twenty first. Theresa May's leadership is a continuance of a more presidential style of governance, more dramatically developed under Tony Blair. The cabinet take a less influential role, while advisors and consultants are employed to fill roles once the recourse of the civil service. Alistair Campbell was the the epitome of this under the Tony Blair government. In the 1990s and 2000s, this style of government was tarnished with the designation 'spin': the influence of popular political debate through a concentration on the image and story in the media. Yet interestingly, in the case of Brexit, this drift toward governance by presidential style diktat has revealed a check on such power. Not from Parliament in its broader sense, which has been rightly incensed at the 'bullying' of Parliament by Theresa May, but from a surprising source : the Speaker of the Commons, John Bercow.

The Speaker of the House of Commons acts as a kind of chairman to the proceedings in the UK parliament. He remains politically impartial, but his actions in determining the agenda of debate in the House of Commons have proved to be instrumental at times of impasse. On March 18th 2019, Bercow ruled that Parliament could not put the Brexit deal to a third vote, after the government had been heavily defeated on two previous occasions. The proposed withdrawal agreement motion would have to be significantly changed in substance before it would be allowed to be presented again to Parliament. The ruling dated back to Erskine May, the sourcebook of parliamentary procedure from 1604. Bercow stated that in light of this ruling, Parliament's time should not be wasted by repetitive voting. His critics have denounced him as opportunistic and vainglorious.

Strangely, criticism of Bercow's and Theresa Mays's opportunism, echoes the criticism of the English to be heard from Scots, Irish and Welsh. In history, it has been the relationship to England that has been the decisive factor in the destinies of the former independent kingdoms. Each of the kingdoms: Wales (1283-1536); the Lordship of Ireland (1171-1541); the Kingdom of Scotland (c.843-1707) have distinct and far reaching historical heritage, not easily cowed by English dominance. Legislative and executive power has been concentrated in London, England, yet ironically in present day assertions of independence, England is quiet. History for the English is driven by full identification with 'Britishness,' vis-a-vis the World. This, in spite of the fact that England has been the longest standing of the independent kingdoms (c. 927-1707). What then of England itself? England's regard to the world platform of its ambitions, means that unbeknownst to itself, demanding acquiescence, it acts as a catalyst to the development of the nations around it.

The Historical Role of Art

Through their historical relationships with each other, the different nations of the British Isles come to define themselves anew. It was notably John Wycliffe (1320s to 1384), characterised as the evening star of scholasticism, and the morning start of the English Reformation, who would inaugurate in his criticism of Roman Catholic corruption, the far reaching split in European history between Protestantism and Catholicism, determinate in the Irish 'troubles' following Irish independence in 1948. In 1922 the Irish Free State was founded; a symptom of the more continental conflicts of Britain in World War One and Two, followed by the Republic of Ireland Act of 1948. We have to look back to pre 1284, when Wales, England, Scotland, and Ireland were last a compendium of independent kingdoms. In contradistinction, it was in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (1801-1922) when they were most densely unified. Each nation goes through a dialectical transformation of national identity through relation to the unified whole of the British Isles, Europe and the World.

What strives to transform humanity on the world stage in times of social upheaval, cannot always be adequately expressed due to conflict, and so often we may see a wider social impulse reflected in art. A most pertinent example can be seen at the time of the Thirty Years War (1616 -1648), fought in Central Europe, but to which Britain remained removed. With Rembrandt (1609-1669) we see the exact observation of nature combined with creative personal and historical imagination. Rembrandt's 'Self Portrait at the Age of 63,' painted in 1669, shows with precise painterly attention to detail, a thinking and feeling subject, in this case Rembrandt himself. We are led through the exquisite furrows of his brow, to fully identify with the 'soul' before us, evoking a seeming unfathomable mystery of the inner man, yet a mystery we can 'touch' in its

immediate presence. That 'man,' in its wider sense, may be part and subject of a historical drama, is further displayed with Rembrandt's 'Belshazzar's Feast,' ca. 1635. National Gallery, London. We again see the depth of painterly detail, complimenting an emotional scene of atmospheric colour. Rembrandt characterises here the ability to fully commit to the perception and depiction of a living image, to feel into and empathise with subject before us, and indeed to thereby create a new pictoral perception of a historical event. Rembrandt's source was the Old Testament of Daniel (5: 1-6, 25-8), it tells of a banquet where the Belshazzar, Regent of Babylon, blasphemously served wine in sacred vessels stolen from the Temple in Jerusalem. The writing appears on the wall, a message from above, proclaiming God's judgement of Bashazzar: That very night Belshazarr is killed. The historical impulse here portrayed in Rembrandt's paintings brings to artistic expression the scientific and spiritual strivings in Britain and on the European continent: coming to a peak under James 1st in Britain (1558-1625), or the blossoming of the occult arts under Rudolph 2nd in Hungary (1576–1612). The Scientific Revolution is often cited as marked by the two works of Copernicus and Newton: The publication in 1543 of Nicolaus Copernicus's (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) as the beginning of the Scientific Revolution – placing the Sun rather than the Earth at the

centre of the universe, while interestingly, the completion of the Scientific Revolution is attributed to the "grand synthesis" of Isaac Newton's 1687 *Principia* – Newton's work formulating the laws of motion and universal gravitation completed the synthesis of a new cosmology. With Rembrandt, in the middle of this period, we have a creation of the synthesis of human emotion and exact perception. But not only this, his work also equally provides us an impetus, an example of how to perceive an event of history itself : by examining the detailed facts of history, and living into them, we may bring them to a living reality before us.

  Something similar occurs in the twentieth century with Tolkiens Lord of the Rings: In another artistic medium, and in another historical time. We see first of all symbolically that Tolkien gives us The Race of Elves in their concern with the mysteries of nature, beauty and song; The Dwarves in their city building in the mines of the earth, and The Race of Men in their intrigues of corruption, tradition and honour; three representatives for twentieth century culture, industry and politics. Beyond this, The Hobbit, that new creation of Tolkien, exemplifies the bourgeois village dweller, oblivious to the momentous events of the world around him, yet destined for hard trials, momentous for Middle Earth. The Hobbit is not only an

abstract meditation on the individual within twentieth century Modernity, but also Tolkien's archetype by which to examine the fate of a spiritual fellowship within the modern world, whose goal is to awaken to the challenge of that modernity.

  There are deeper eternal reflections in Lord of the Rings besides these more preliminary, which provide a backdrop to philosophical reflection. Of many quotes that could be taken, but a few…

  "Frodo himself, after the first shock, found that being the master of Bag End was rather pleasant. For some years he was quite happy and did not worry much about the future. But half unknown to himself the regret that he had not gone with Bilbo was steadily growing. He found himself wandering at times, especially in autumn. About the wild lands, and strange visions of mountains that he had never seen came into his dreams. He began to say to himself:' Perhaps I shall cross the river myself one day.' To which the other half of his mind always replied :'Not yet'."
            J.R.R Tolkien The Lord of The Rings, Book One, p.56.

In respect of Time: In the individual's appreciation for the seizing of the opportune moment. How often do we sense or know something is right for us, yet we shy away from a decision, only to find that later the decision has transformed itself into something new, and we see the situation in a new light; perhaps our feelings deceived us, or perhaps we have to reorient our understanding, yet our underlying sense of conscience, persists. How destiny and life challenges us to question our intuitions, our desires and goals, reveals an often precise sense of decorum about how and when we should embark on a new path in life, or about how that path might progress; our soul willingly identifies with these contemplations of Frodo, depicted by Tolkien, in our own destinies, – in the 'wild inner lands' of our own biographies.

"'It may be your task to find the Cracks of Doom, but that quest may be for others: I do not know. At any rate you are not ready for that long road yet. 'No indeed!' Said Frodo. 'But in the meantime what course am I to take?'

'Towards danger, but not to rashly, nor too straight,' answered the wizard. 'If you want my advice, make for Rivendell. That journey should not prove too perilous, though the road is less than it was, and it will grow worse as the year fails.'"

J.R.R Tolkien The Lord of The Rings, Book One, p.86.

With Destiny: Tolkien here depicts the courage to enter upon a path of self-knowledge and karmic discovery: Tolkien shows here a significant truth of the spiritual path, with a wizard taking the role of our higher self. It is perhaps counterintuitive before adequately grasped, but the mastery of a skill, an attribute or quality, comes through the overcoming and mastery of our own failings. Gandalf the wizard answers Frodo's request for guidance, by suggesting he goes toward danger, not shrink from it, but to embrace it as a chance to find the right way forward. Gandalf's trust is not in his own prowess of learning or 'magic,' but in the Good powers of life itself, to draw out the good that he hopes will result.

"'And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea, and the Sun, and the Snow upon the Mountains! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stranger than the foundations of the Earth. All shall love me and despair!'"

J.R.R Tolkien The Lord of The Rings, Book One, p.476.

At some point, with the light that is created through our inner work in thinking, be that of a higher self, a wizard or a philosopher, we must inevitably come to the spiritual 'trial' of Light, – What is Eternal Time and Destiny: Is our relationship to the world to be one of soley our own creation? In whose service has my inner work been leading, – my own? The danger exemplified here in Galadriel, Elven Queen, is the temptation of a sensual world that we enjoy, devoid of conscious understanding and companionship: – Galadriel passes this test and refuses the Ring. Later in Lord of the Rings, Tolkien shows with Aragorn's enlisting of the Army of the Dead, from the underworld of 'Dunharrow,' his intuitive understanding of the relation of the 'dead' to historical events, – he is also tested. For a narrative that relies on fellowship and an understanding of relationships, the beauty that Tolkien often shows when describing Elves, accompanies philosophical insight into the importance of ethics in relation to the development of the other individuals and races in the story as a whole; this becomes itself a form of beauty, less a temptation in the old sense of the word, but more a trial or test of sincerity, and responsibility.

Built out of his studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, myth and fairy tale, Tolkien depicts the conflict between dark and light, good and evil, inspired by the world of 'faerie' (4). Post World War One, Europe was reeling in shock form the barbarity and mechanised warfare many had witnessed. The war left many questions about human honour, purpose and spirituality hanging in the air, haunting the minds of those who had returned and those who had lost loved ones. Tolkien's conception of the Hobbit came about unexpectedly. Sitting at his study, studying an empty sheet of paper one if his students had handed in, Tolkien looked at the blank space, and then wrote '*in a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit.*' He went on to formulate Hobbits as 'halflings,' man-like but short, with large hairy feet, predisposed to pipe smoking and sentimentality. Their communal consciousness rarely extends beyond the bounds of 'The Shire,' a veritable parody of the English country idyll. The Shire acts as a starting point for Hobbit Frodo's quest to destroy the

Ring of Power, while Tolkien's evil wizard characters of Saruman and Sauron present the lust for power, and the control of mens' minds, as central concerns about which the good powers must orient themselves.

Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves
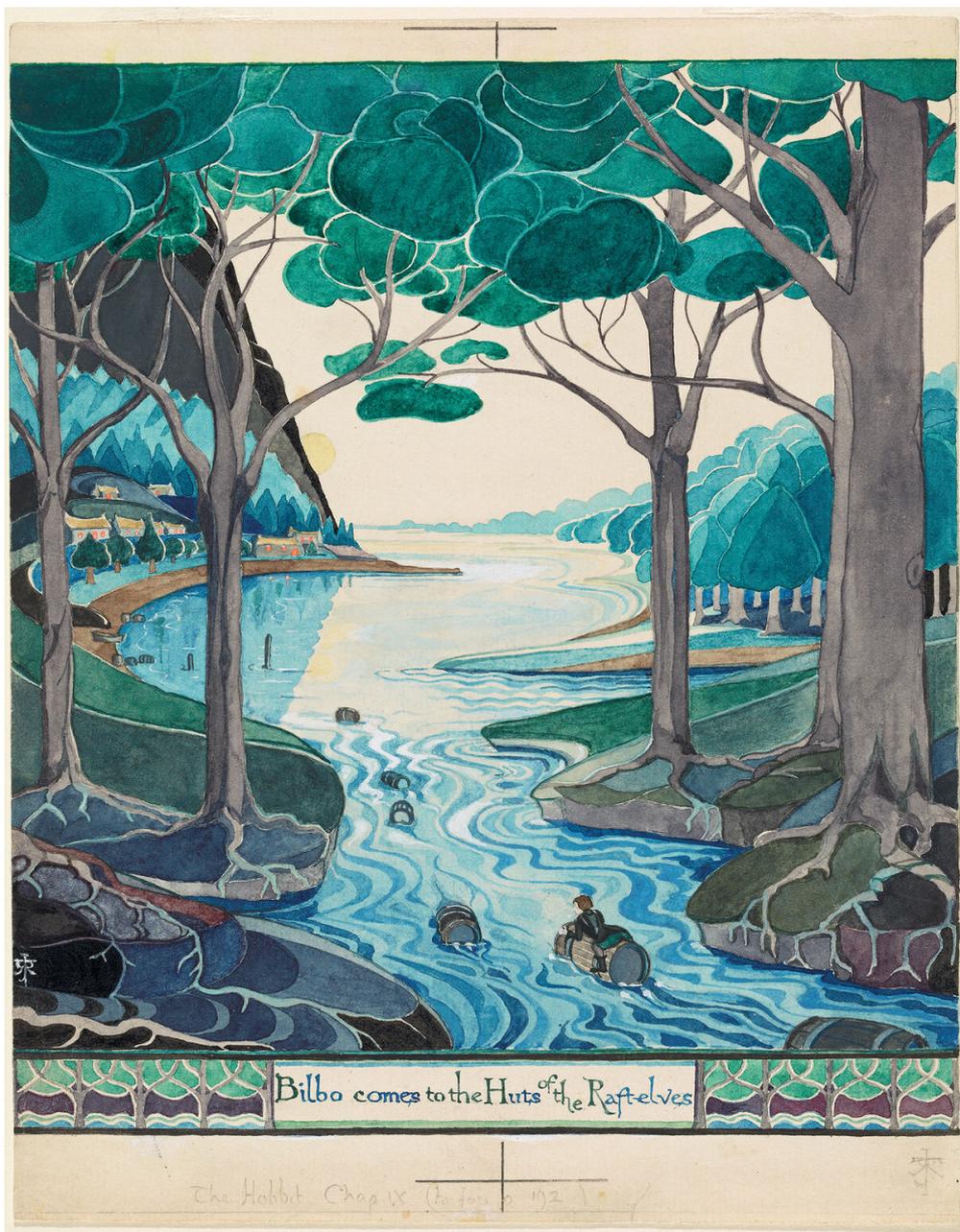
Let us recap the power of Tolkien's Ring. The Ring renders its wearer invisible to those around him, but at the same time makes him visible to the dark lord Sauron's all-seeing burning eye. The more the wearer comes under the Ring's power the more his soul is corrupted. Tolkien describes a from of obsession, an addiction to the power of the Ring; an increasing cold self-centredness that aims to swallow up and direct the fate of the wearer. It takes Frodo's resolute will to persist on the quest to destroy the Ring. Or rather, one should say an inverse quest: a task to relinquish power, to renunciate, and sacrifice, and thereby achieve redemption. In Tolkien's narrative, there is with the search after enlightenment but the battle with darkness. Frodo's task is impossible without the support of the Fellowship, the representatives of Elves, Dwarves, and Men and the wizard Gandalf, but also the four Hobbits: Sam, Merry, Pippin, and Peregrin Took: in total nine good powers to contend with the nine Ringwraiths of The Dark Lord Sauron.

Political Drama with a View to the Future

To put the established system in question in modern day Britain, is to conversely hear that life has never been better, unemployment is at an all time low, and prospects for the country are bright. However, Brexit and wealth obscure many deep fissures in British society. Drugs, crime and violence, have become a visible scourge that the nation struggles to contain or understand. Knife crime and gang culture among young people has become something terrible, with many lamenting the cuts in police numbers since the economic crises of 2008. The question of societal morality and ethics comes ever to the fore. If the future of the United Kingdom continues to be shaped by the swing from Conservatism to Socialism, each less dissimilar to the other, it is difficult to see how lasting change could occur, or that change might be needed, so the space for new political ideas whether from nation or political party lies open.

What strikes one as especially modern about the powers of evil, obsession, and psychology in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, is the relevance of such images to the challenge of popular media. In the Brexit process, although ever hopeful, watching frustrated and angry members of the British Parliament in the face of a stubborn and intransigent government is a sorry sight. All the while, the public at large is left to founder on television shows and internet entertainment to explain the intricacies of decisions that are difficult to follow. Rather than suffer the proposed 'place in Hell', recently suggested for the British post Brexit by the European Union's Donald Tusk, Tolkien may remind us of the need to take a distance from pressing concerns, and the importance of art in fostering this process.

The courage to confront chaos and disorder and raise it to awareness marks the modern path of the spirit. Are the British to be seen as Hobbits leaving the Shire of the European Union, to engage on a perilous forlorn quest from an insularity of their own making? As England has historically demanded much of its neighbouring kingdoms, Brexit as a constitutional crisis is welcome indeed if it prompts an awakening of national solidarity between the nations of the British Isles. On the world stage, a fellowship of the nations of the British Isles has potential charm as well as historical power, no less, the potential new fellowship with Europe and to the world; Brexit, thus aside form any value judgement, leaves a new space open to the future. Moving to this globalised future beyond the British Isles, it has to be surmised that the interplay of union and independence will bring trials and realignments, globally and domestically, before conscious synthesis is regained. Perhaps by that time, as Hobbits of the 'Shire' with an Elven awareness, a new age will be upon us – one that Tolkien had an inkling of.

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(1) **Painting by Tolkien.** Tolkien was a fine painter alongside his literary works, his paintings reflect a sensibility that has moved deeper into the effects of image and story; to evoke inner landscape and perception – and able to depict nuance of light, dark and colour, with a tender precision.
(2) **The Good Friday Agreement,** 10 April 1998, was a peace agreement between the British and Irish governments. The talks leading to the Agreement addressed issues which had caused conflict during previous decades.
(3) **The Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal** was a political scandal in early 2018. It was revealed that Cambridge Analytica had taken the personal data of millions of people's Facebook profiles without their consent and used it for political purposes.
(4) **A fairy** Wikipedia (also *fata*, *fay*, *fey*,[1] *fae*, *fair folk*; from *faery*, *faerie*, "realm of the *fays*") is a type of mythical being or legendary creature in European folklore (and particularly Celtic, Slavic, German, English, and French folklore), a form of spirit, often described as metaphysical, supernatural, or preternatural. Myths and stories about fairies do not have a single origin, but are rather a collection of folk beliefs from disparate sources. Various folk theories about the origins of fairies include casting them as either demoted angels or demons in a Christian tradition, as minor deities in pre-Christian Pagan belief systems, as spirits of the dead, as prehistoric precursors to humans, or as elementals.
(5) **Painting by Tolkien.** 'Bilbo Comes to the Huts of the Raft Elves.'