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## A Case for Tolkien as Master of the Sublime

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## A Case for Tolkien as Master of the Sublime

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Tom Moser, Peter Grybauskas, Tom Shippey, Chip Crane, and Verlyn Flieger for their direct hands in helping me to develop these ideas and to arrange them in a cohesive and consumable manner. I would most especially like to thank my soon-to-be wife, Erika, for her support and patience.

## A Case for Tolkien as Master of the Sublime

So, Tolkien is ‘sublime’ now, is he? What has not been said about J.R.R. Tolkien at this point? No reader of this paper will need to be told the titanic significance his name carries in popular culture, and no member of the English literary community will need to be told how unhappy a fact this is to some. Their frustration is at least partially understandable: the University of Maryland English Department (which was long home to Verlyn Flieger) offered a course on Tolkien during the Spring 2023 semester, which 27 students took. In the same department was a course about John Milton, which four students took. Is this not a great injustice to literature professors everywhere? Where is this interest in Joyce, in Proust, in Zadie Smith?

This is a matter Tom Shippey discusses often; he is adamant that the ‘literary critics’ have got it all wrong. Not only have they been unfair in their treatment of Tolkien, but they have done so while poorly promoting the artists they deem as superior, and in Shippey’s words all this has amounted to is them “having done very well, especially in the USA, at chasing university students out of English departments, and off to become Business Studies or Education majors” (Shippey, 9). Whether or not such an accusation is merited is apart from the business of this paper, but certainly the enmity between Literary Critics and Tolkienists exists, and it is an unhappy rivalry. While the former withhold literary resources and the keys to English departments everywhere, the latter withhold a powerful base of energetic scholars and interested students. Why must we suffer this divide? Surely rapprochement is possible, but the task will not be easy, and it will require a good deal of code-switching. Indeed, to truly show Literary Critics the merits of J.R.R. Tolkien, we are going to have to speak their language.

This paper seeks to claim for Tolkien what was once—and perhaps still is—a marker of respect and importance among artists: as having created something ‘sublime’. Rarely, if at all have I seen Tolkien’s work described explicitly as ‘sublime’; not by Classicists, nor by Romantics, nor even by his own fans, most of whom are (through little fault of their own) estranged or exiled from the traditions of literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> It is the aim of this paper to demonstrate to those who may not yet see that Tolkien’s works are not something to only be appreciated by some, but rather *great art*—in the family of Chaucer and Dante—astonishing and sublime, and therefore worthy of serious attention by the Literary Critics.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Tolkien scholarship has never recognised the author’s hand in poetic diction, nor that no one has ever thought to consider Tolkien alongside the sublime. The reference list of this article from Farid Mohammadi is proof enough of the existence of such conversations: <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/lic3.12677> *Beyond environmental imagination: Revisiting J.R.R. Tolkien's literary landscapes in The Lord of the Rings (1954–1955)* Farid Mohammadi, first published: 03 August 2022 <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12677> However, Mohammadi himself admits in this very article that “scholars have often skipped assessing the noticeable aesthetic dimensions of Tolkienian landscapes in favor of other features of his stories” with which I would agree wholeheartedly. Even the most Romantic Tolkienists - Mohammadi being a welcome exception - have sparsely sought to outline explicitly, using textual examples and the language of literary criticism, in what way Tolkien should be considered a wielder of the sublime, as Longinus did with Homer, or Burke with Milton. It is the aim of this paper to provide such treatment, in the hope that it serves the aforementioned purposes of attracting the skeptical.

## I. On the Sublime

But what is the sublime? To even briefly tell the strange and often lonesome life of this word is a task that would require several books, for which reason many are content to use it spuriously and without much consideration for what exactly they are saying. Some, on the more careful side, will mark that they are talking about ‘Wordsworth’s’ or ‘Freud’s’ sublime, and the more anxious may be trapped into writing entire pages of introduction dedicated simply to recounting the different poets and critics which have used it, and how they differed, and where they agreed, in order to provide for themselves some sort of patchwork cloak to wear, and shield themselves from the howling winds of academia. The most scrupulous have been tempted, just to escape the terrifying ambiguity of it all, to feverishly write an entire manifesto on the concept of the sublime and set it against Burke himself. They would not be the last to throw a hat into that ring, and they would certainly not be the first.

But this is not to say that there is no common idea of the sublime. Tentatively, it can be assumed that most discussing the sublime are referring to some sort of arresting of the senses, caused by the consumption of literature, poetry, music, opera, a painting, a natural vista, prayer, or generally anything considered artful. Longinus, a Greek literary critic of late antiquity, wrote in a letter: “a sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash, and exhibits the whole power of the orator in a moment of time” (Havell, I-cc. i). Of course, in this letter (*Περί ὕψους*) Longinus uses the Greek *ὑψους* and not the Latin *sublimis* from whence the translator provides ‘sublime’, but the exceeding tendency of Latin translators to render the title as *De Sublimitate* (or some variant thereof) reflects the shared meaning between the words, which both can be described to mean lofty, or high.<sup>2</sup> ‘Sublime’ is indeed preferred by this paper; where *ὑψος* is derived solely from the adverb *ὑψη* meaning ‘up’ or ‘above’, the etymological element of *-liminis* in *sublimis* carries the added image of proximity to some sort of border, and the Oxford Latin Dictionary cites *sublimis* as meaning not only elevated, but elevated *above* something else.<sup>3</sup> Consider Lucan’s usage of *quercus sublimis* to describe Pompey as an oak tree towering powerfully above all other trees.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore the most appropriate word for the usage of this paper.

The Oxford English Dictionary first cites the appearance of the word ‘sublime’ in English in a 1567 Psalter, and the increased frequency of its appearance in the late 17th century reflects the 1674 publication of Nicholas Boileau’s extremely popular French translation of Longinus’s letter. It was in 1757, however, that Edmund Burke published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, and in it describes the sublime as “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke, I:vii).<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth, born thirteen years after, would at the age of 28 write the following:

<sup>2</sup> The work is first translated in 1554 by Francisco Robortello, who translates *ὑψους* as *grandi sive sublimiorationis*, and again in 1560 where Giovanni da Falgano translates it into Italian as *il Sublime*. Boileau’s translation into French is likewise *du Sublime*. Some argue that the Vatican manuscript titled *De altitudine et granditate orationis* (ms. Vat. Lat. 3441) is actually the first Latin translation of Longinus’s work, but this rendering of *ὑψους* clearly seems to have been uncommon. Exceedingly few English translators have declined to make use the word ‘sublime’, but a notable exception is George Grube in 1959.

<sup>3</sup> This was pointed out to me by classicist professor Patrick Callahan first on March 17th, 2022, in a lecture hosted at the University of Maryland by the Thomistic Institute titled, ‘The Crass and the Sublime’. Notably, after this lecture Callahan went on to say during the question and answer session that the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, specifically *The Lord of the Rings*, could not and should not be considered works of the sublime.

<sup>4</sup> This description is in Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, Book 1, lines 136–43

<sup>5</sup> This paper does not intend to deal heavily with parallel conceptions (ie, Kant) of the sublime in German literature and philosophy, most of which align enough with their English cousins that they do not require mentioning.

“And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man”.<sup>6</sup>

And on this passage romantics professor David Sandner points out the prevalence in Wordsworth’s ‘dwellings’ of the vast, the incomplete, and the infinite. He proceeds: “The mind, suddenly free from the phenomenal through indefiniteness and suggestiveness, experiences the sublime. The sublime is centred in subject not object, in a dissolution into unity that reveals an absolute essence – to the mind” (Sandner, 4). It is in the house of the Romantics that the sublime comes to mean something more vague and yet more particular—it is a lifting up, a raising of the spirit to the heavens, incurred by all sorts of things, which as said before are typically ‘artful’—and it is in the house of the Romantics that the sublime still dwells... for now.<sup>7</sup>

## II: Depth and Incompleteness

One of the clearest and most widely understood ways in which Tolkien is said to rise above his peers is his mastery of ‘depth’.<sup>8</sup> This is consistently argued—perhaps most strongly of any Tolkienist—by Tom Shippey, who often says it is the reason behind the primary appeal of *Lord of the Rings*.<sup>9</sup> Addressing critics in the 1996 *Film Portrait of J.R.R. Tolkien*, he powerfully delivers the following statement:

“when somebody says the histories and genealogies are not in the least necessary to the narrative, now that’s dead wrong; that’s not only wrong, that’s stupidly wrong. Actually, what they give to the narrative is something which Tolkien was very aware of and which he often talked and wrote about, and which he valued very much, and that is depth. So you don’t just have as it were a flat, garish, shiny surface, you have something which has depth behind it, and a feeling that this is a world where you can ask a question about it and you’ll get an answer. And if you ask a question about the question or a question about the answer than you’ll get

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<sup>6</sup> From Wordsworth’s *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour*. July 13, 1798

<sup>7</sup> Aside from a few dubious attempts to link the sublime with technology and postmodernism, the concept has remained largely untouched. That being said, there has been one remarkable work on the sublime in recent years by Tsang Lap Chuen, who has put forth *The Sublime: Groundwork towards a Theory*, a treatise of such a high quality that it may one day be included in conversations such as these as the final chapter; his name may end the list which begins with Longinus. However, because his ideas are relatively un-tested, and because this line of thought deals chiefly with the works of a 20th century man, Tsang does not come into this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Not every aspect of Tolkien’s conceit of depth will be touched upon in this paper, and for a comprehensive survey of other ways Tolkien manufactures depth in his work, see the fantastic 2014 article: Drout, Michael D. C.; Hitotsubashi, Namiko; Scavera, Rachel (2014). "Tolkien's Creation of the Impression of Depth". *Tolkien Studies*. 11 (1): 167–211.

<sup>9</sup> Most notably in *Road to Middle-Earth*. Shippey has been asked what the primary appeal of *Lord of the Rings* is too many times to count, and does not always give the same answer. Other notable answers he has given include quality of imagination, thematic message (appealing to the common person, that is), and its ‘northern’ tenor.

more answers, because it's all there already, and that gives you an illusion of reality. But the illusion has been deliberately created."<sup>10</sup>

In his *Road to Middle Earth*, Shippey argues as well that this depth was not just a way to improve the attractiveness of the narrative, but it was in and of itself attractive to Tolkien. Early on within, he says “one sees that the thing which attracted Tolkien the most was darkness: the blank spaces, much bigger than most people realise, on the literary and historical map” (Shippey, 38). These words have been extremely influential in Tolkien scholarship, mainly due to the implication which Shippey presents next: that Tolkien’s motivation was to attack these blank spaces, and invent the missing pieces to the puzzle. Under such a framework of interpretation, Tolkien’s works are a fascinating intellectual experiment: the job of perhaps not a great artist, but a great philologist, who was also a worthy artist. He sought blank spaces, and for amusement invented things to fill those spaces. Then, after he had written a bit of these experimental poems and stories, he continued, eventually fashioning them into Middle-earth. This is certainly an aspect of the sublime; the feeling of pursuing a thread. If Tolkien successfully create an ‘illusion of reality’, reality is quite a big thing to wrap one’s head around, and in attempting to do that very thing the reader is forced to confront the infinite.

It is very recently, however, that this idea has significantly grown from Shippey’s initial assessment, most notably in Peter Grybauskas’ 2021 book *A Sense of Tales Untold*, which as the description reads “highlights Tolkien's restraint—his ability to check the pen to great effect”. Grybauskas writes: “Tolkien’s engagement with the *Maldon* fragment is a useful reminder, however, that his creative response was not simply to fill the gap—he needed to make space still for untold tales” (Grybauskas, 86). In this new and exciting view, Tolkien sought the darkness Shippey speaks of not because he desired to fill it, but because he was truly and genuinely attracted to it, for what it was and is: the sublime. Consider what Edmund Burke recognised:

“Infinity, though of another kind, causes much of our pleasure in agreeable, as well as of our delight in sublime images. The spring is the pleasantest of the seasons; and the young of most animals, though far from being completely fashioned, afford a more agreeable sensation than the full-grown; because the imagination is entertained with the promise of something more, and does not acquiesce in the present object of the sense. In unfinished sketches of drawing, I have often seen something which pleased me beyond the best finishing; and this I believe proceeds from the cause I have just now assigned” (Burke, II:xi).

This should instantly inspire connections in the mind of the experienced Tolkienist. Of course Tolkien loved the darkness; it was a feeling of infinity and potential—the sublime—which called to him. More importantly, he did not just love it as a consumer, but he deliberately and intentionally recreated it in his work, just like any artist capturing the things he loved. He ensured it was a central aspect of his creation. Verlyn Flieger, in her lecture *Waiting for Earendel*, uses Eärendil’s story as an example of this: in theorising that Tolkien never intended to complete the tale of Eärendil, she postulates bleeding evidence at the heart of Tolkien’s mythology.<sup>11</sup> To Flieger, Eärendil was so attractive to Tolkien because he was constructed to evoke the same sublime feeling found in historical myths such as *Wode*, myths that were dark

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<sup>10</sup> See: [A Film Portrait of J.R.R. Tolkien - 1996 \(Subtitles\)](#) at the 83 minute mark.

<sup>11</sup> See: [Waiting for Earendel](#)

and veiled and lost forever, preserved only in passing comments of unhappy praise: “because the matter is long and fabulous, I passe it ouer”.<sup>12</sup>

### III: The Vastness of Time and Space

That Tolkien was enthralled by the concept of time at least was believed by Tolkien-consumers early on, not least of all by Denys Gueroult himself, who pointedly asked Tolkien why time and longevity was so appealing to him in the 1964 interview.<sup>13</sup> Tolkien responded by saying the two should not be conflated, but admitted that the first (time) he thought greatly desirable—and this is most apparent in *Leaf by Niggle*—and the second (longevity) he found deeply attractive. Certainly any reader will agree *The Lord of the Rings* carries strongly the musk of antiquity, which in turn inspires thoughts about the greatness of time, and this should be considered an aspect of the sublime.

That Tolkien was enthralled by the vastness of the mundane world is less attested, and harder to demonstrate. However, on both the vastness of time and space, consider Burke once more: “Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime. This is too evident, and the observation too common, to need any illustration” (Burke, II:vii). In obedience, this paper says no more on the matter, only to attempt to demonstrate that a sense of dimensional greatness was indeed appreciated and recreated by Tolkien. Consider this passage from *The Silmarillion*:

“The song of Lúthien before Mandos was the song most fair that ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall ever hear. Unchanged, imperishable, it is sung still in Valinor beyond the hearing of the world, and the listening the Valar grieved. For Lúthien wove two themes of words, of the sorrow of the Eldar and the grief of Men, of the Two Kindreds that were made by Ilúvatar to dwell in Arda, the Kingdom of Earth amid the innumerable stars. And as she knelt before him her tears fell upon his feet like rain upon stones; and Mandos was moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has been since” (S, 186-7).

This type of passage really ought to be read more than once; it is a truly remarkable piece of writing and bears much to be discussed. First is the string of words: “the song most fair that ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall hear”. Immediately the reader is asked to contemplate the importance of this: most fair? That ever in words was woven? How many other songs have there been, and this is the most fair? Most sorrowful? That ever the world shall hear? For the rest of time, until the universe ends? Not only does such a statement elevate the song of Lúthien, but by calling to mind the ‘ever’, the stretch of time both backward—so clearly that of men and elves the origins themselves are invoked—and forward, Tolkien creates a sense of immeasurable vastness. “Beyond the hearing of the world” he writes, “amid the innumerable stars”. What else is this but the sublime? And finally, Mandos is “moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has been since”. Once more is the stretch of time revealed, this time more explicitly.

This passage from *The Silmarillion* ought now to be compared with the departure of Scyld Scefing—a passage of similar length in *Beowulf*—and for the sake of the comparison the reader is asked to suffer Tolkien’s own cumbersome translation as one which reflects his thoughts on the poem:

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<sup>12</sup> This is the tragic gloss of Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*, written in 1598 by literary historian Thomas Speght. The full comment is: “Concerning Wade and his bote called Guingelot, as also his strange exploits in the same, because the matter is long and fabulous, I passe it ouer.” This is one of five concrete pieces of evidence that there was a ‘Tale of Wade’ in northern antiquity, and unfortunately it is the most informative of the five. Tolkien was deeply moved by the Wade story, and Earandel is in many ways a recreation of the figure.

<sup>13</sup> See: [J.R.R. Tolkien 1964 interview \(Subtitles\)](#) at the 11 minute mark.

“There were many precious things and treasures brought from regions far away; nor have I heard tell that men ever in more seemly wise arrayed a boat with weapons of war and harness of battle; on his lap lay treasures heaped that now must go with him far into the dominion of the sea. With lesser gifts no whit did they adorn him, with treasures of that people, than did those that in the beginning sent him forth alone over the waves, a little child. Moreover, high above his head they set a golden standard and gave him to Ocean, let the sea bear him. Sad was their heart and mourning in their soul. None can report with truth, nor lords in their halls, nor mighty men beneath the sky, who received that load” (Tolkien, 14).

Here is found similar language, and similar rhetorical tools in employ. The reader is told of treasures “brought from regions far away...” what regions? The ‘far away’ invites the contemplation: how far can far away be? How big is this world? And these treasures “must go with him far into the dominion of the sea”. Into that awful place? Consider what place on earth is more evocative of the infinite than Ocean, written as a proper noun in Tolkien’s translation. We are shown a similar, if perhaps simpler, reminder of the stretch of time: “nor have I heard tell that men ever in more seemly wise arrayed...” to the invocations in the description of Lúthien’s prayer. Lastly, we are told the men—beneath the infinite sky, no less—know nothing of where that boat went; specifically ‘who received that load’. It has vanished into the unknown—the vast.

Tolkien most profoundly handles the vastness of time in *The Silmarillion*, and in a decidedly Beowulfian way. Consider the following quotations therefrom, to present a few: “but he came never back, nor looked again upon Middle-earth” (53), “Elwë Singollo came never again across the sea to Valinor so long as he lived” (55-56), “None have ever come back from the mansions of the dead, save only Beren son of Barahir, whose hand had touched a Silmaril; but he never spoke afterward to mortal Men” (104-105), “his likeness has never again appeared in Arda” (107), “his voice rang in the mournful hollows that had never heard before aught save cries of fear and woe” (110), “behind them came the black armies of the Orcs in multitudes such as the Noldor had never before seen or imagined” (151), “the Eldar had never before allowed Men to use this waybread, and seldom did so again” (202).

Compare the previous quotations with the following from *Beowulf*, again in Tolkien’s translation: “Never have I seen so many men of outland folk more proud of bearing” (22), “Never in days of life before nor later with harder fortune guards in hall he found” (33), “Never aforetime had the Scyldings’ counsellors forseen that any among men could in any wise shatter it” (35). The Danish borderguard in *Beowulf* is responsible for two particular lines: “Never have armed men more openly here assayed to land” (20) and “Never have I seen on earth a greater among men that is one of you” (20) are reflected clearly by the words of the Rohirric gate-guard in *The Two Towers*: “Never have we seen other riders so strange, nor any horse more proud than is one of these that bear you” (113). This is an intentional pattern in both the *Beowulf* poet’s and Tolkien’s styles of speech; by continually making mention of the past, and not just part of the past but the entire track of time from the beginning of creation, they constantly remind the reader of the largeness of the world and the greatness of its age, and inspire feelings of the sublime.

#### IV: Fog, Shadow, and Death

Tolkien’s commentary on the Scyld Scefinf passage is priceless toward discerning further his thought. In his notes he writes: “More interesting, however, are the concluding lines, and the suggestion that Scyld went back to some mysterious land whence he had come. He came out of the Unknown beyond the Great sea, and returned to it” (Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 151). Here are



choice words: the mysterious and the unknown. Again Tolkien writes about the mood surrounding Scyld's departure: "It was *murnende mod* filled with doubt and darkness" (Tolkien 152). Once more Tom Shippey's word 'darkness' is found, here not at all in the context of literature or depth of any fictional world but rather of this world. This is another form of the infinite: the foggy margins of the world.

There is nothing for it now but to provide a generous selection of examples in Tolkien's work where this idea is found, beginning with *Kortirion among the Trees*, whose latter passages on departure have a familiar tone. Lines 82-85 read

"Then their hour is done,  
And wanly borne on wings of amber pale  
They beat the wide airs of the fading vale  
And fly like birds cross the misty meres" (*Lost Tales I*, 34).

Here we see seminal glances of the 'darkness': words such as wan, pale, wide, fading, mist allude to the great dusk which the leaves fly to. 'Misty meres' is eerily reminiscent of *mistig moras*, the terrifying but equally unknown lair of Grendel. Meres and *moras* are similar only in sound, but the resemblance is a happy accident, if not a subconscious influence in the mind of a young Tolkien. Later on are lines 108-118:

"Now are thy trees, old grey Kortirion,  
Through pallid mists seen rising tall and wan,  
Like vessels floating vague, and drifting far  
Down opal seas beyond the shadowy bar  
Of cloudy ports forlorn;  
Leaving behind for ever havens loud,  
Wherein their crews a while held feasting proud  
And lordly ease, they now like windy ghosts  
Are wafted by slow airs to windy coasts,  
And glimmering sadly down the tide are borne" (*Lost Tales I*, 35).

The similarities between this passage and the departure of Scyld discussed earlier are too close to be coincidence. Note the characterisation of trees as vessels, sailing away forever, into the unknown 'beyond the shadowy bar'. As always, Tolkien's word choice is colourful, or perhaps colourless is a better word in this particular instance: old, grey, pallid mists, wan, vague, far, shadowy, cloudy, forlorn, etc. The first Eärendil poem starts with four lines which carry a similar tune:

"Éarendel arose where the shadow flows at Ocean's silent brim;  
through the mouth of night as a ray of light where the shores are sheer and dim"  
(*Lost Tales II*, 267).

The reader here is encouraged once more to read through these lines several times, and try to picture the image Tolkien is describing. Where does the shadow flow? How far away is this? Can there be anywhere on this earth more evocative of the vast than the absolute edge of—a proper noun here just as in translation of *Beowulf*—Ocean?

As the concluding section of *Kortirion among the Trees* is reminiscent of the departure of Scyld in *Beowulf*, the *Song of Eriol* is reminiscent of the *Seafarer* and *Wanderer* poems. Specifically, consider lines 35-36: "and I, a captive, heard the great seas' flood / calling and calling, that my spirit cried" (*Lost Tales II*, 299) compared with the *Seafarer* lines 58-59: "Indeed now my mind turneth over heart-locks, my spirit over the mere-flood, over whale's

domain turneth wide”.<sup>14</sup> And again consider *Eriol* line 44, describing his exile: “and now the dark bays and unknown waves I know” compared with the *Wanderer* lines 2-5: “though he heavy-heartedly, yond lake-ways long, must paddle with hands the grim-cold sea; must wade the exile’s path”. In all three poems is again this pervasive gloom and darkness: this sense of the distant and the shrouded.

If one were to compile a list of the most frequent words in all of Tolkien’s poetry within parts one and two of *The Book of Lost Tales*, and factor out the mundane (the, it, a(n), etc), this list would read about something like this, in order of most to less frequent: sea, dark, far, night, shore, silver, wander, lone, wind, shadow, whisper, forgot(ten), murmur, dim, grey, and margin.<sup>15</sup> Margin, though only used thrice, is most interesting: how often do poets use the word margin?<sup>16</sup> It is not unseen, but it is by no means a common word. That being said, for Tolkien it is perfectly fitting, and its use should not be surprising by the man whose first map of Doriath bears the heading ‘do not write on this margin’.<sup>17</sup>

The scholar interested in similarities of style between Tolkien and the *Beowulf* poet will descend to encounter a more baleful form of the sublime: sharper yet more dangerous, hidden dark and deep, not used unless at the uttermost end of need. Burke often spoke of terror as a cause of the sublime; with the potentiality in the infinite is the potential for good but also the potential for great, great evil—evil which is all the more terrifying for being unknown. Burke says “to make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary” (Burke II:iii), and in light of this consider an aside in *Beowulf*:

“the fierce killer pursued them still, both knights and young, a dark shadow of death, lurking, lying in wait, in long night keeping the misty moors: men know not whither sorcerors of hell in their wanderings roam” (Tolkien, 17).

Here is evoked the dark shadow of death, keeping the misty moors.<sup>18</sup> It is a shame that many readers of *Beowulf* might never see for themselves what a ‘misty moor’ looks like, and therefore cannot truly appreciate the weight of these words, but those readers are encouraged to pay attention to Tolkien’s descriptions in *The Fellowship of the Ring*’s chapter ‘Fog on the Barrow Downs’, and perhaps spend time on the internet browsing something like ‘yorkshire moors fog’ and looking at pictures thereof. It is truly a terrifying image, one of the most striking I have ever personally seen, and it is responsible for more bogey-men than Grendel in English folk history. The fear which strikes the heart of the observer is primarily in the obscurity of it all: there could be a drop, or a mire, or a werewolf even thirty feet in front of you, and you’d have no idea. What’s moor—no, sorry—more, the horizon often disappears, and the thickness of the fog induces a sense of the malicious potentiality discussed earlier. The worst part is that one can see just enough that is impossible to forget that there *is something* out there, but there’s no

<sup>14</sup> This translation, and that of the *Wanderer* passage, is my own.

<sup>15</sup> This is not conjecture, but neither was it an arduous task. I compiled within a document all these poems, selecting at judgement where to exclude repetition. Thanks to the work down at [www.tolkiengateway.net](http://www.tolkiengateway.net), it was quick work with little to no actual labour on my part, and once the list had been compiled all that remained was to run the document through a computer program which identified the most common names. It was a crude survey, for which I hopefully may be forgiven, but its results should be surprising to none.

<sup>16</sup> Most notably is Sir Alfred Tennyson in *Lady of Shalott*: “by the margin willow-veil’d”. Compare this with Tolkien: “from the many-willow’d margin of the immemorial Thames...”

<sup>17</sup> This map is kept in the Bodleian Library: MS. Tolkien S 2/X, fol. 3r.

<sup>18</sup> Death, a concept linked to the sublime by Tsang, exposes the reader to a limit in the life experience, which is as Tsang argues the primary basis of feelings of the sublime. Death was, of course, very important to Tolkien, who described *Beowulf* as ‘elegiac’ in nature, and in the *Tolkien in Oxford* interview famously said “Human stories are practically always about one thing, aren’t they? Death! The inevitability of death.” See: [Tolkien in Oxford 1968 \(subtitles\)](#) at the 16 minute mark.

way to tell what it is. In the meandering mists, a mangy fox could be a dead wolf walking. As the *Beowulf* poet says, “men know not whither sorcerors of hell in their wanderings roam”.

Tolkien employs this idea on two particular occasions in *The Lord of the Rings*, the first being in *Fellowship of the Ring*. Here is what Gandalf says to Frodo, when asked about the attack of the watcher:

“I do not know,' answered Gandalf, 'but the arms were all guided by one purpose. Something has crept, or has been driven out of dark waters under the mountains. There are older and fouler things than Orcs in the deep places of the world” (*FR*, II, iv, 323).

The last sentence in particular is very evocative of this more sinister sublime, the same thing the *Beowulf* poet was getting at when he wrote about sorcerors of hell. There is fear enough in a monstrous tentacled beast, but the idea of a monstrous tentacled beast in the dark waters under the mountains is far more terrifying, because it is unseen, unmonitored, unknown. Far worse is the implication that if this one has been discovered which was previously undiscovered, there may be more things still hiding, of a similar ilk. Again, in *Two Towers*, Gandalf says something similar:

“We fought far under the living earth, where time is not counted. Ever he clutched me, and ever I hewed him, till at last he fled into dark tunnels. They were not made by Durin's folk, Gimli son of Glóin. Far, far below the deepest delving of the Dwarves, the world is gnawed by nameless things. Even Sauron knows them not. They are older than he. Now I have walked there, but I will bring no report to darken the light of day” (*TT*, I, v, 105).

To speak of the unknown as being a factor toward fear, consider that Gandalf refers to these monsters as ‘nameless things’. Tolkien wishes the reader to feel that any attempt to describe these things would have been inappropriate—too horrifying for the reader to handle. In reality, any attempt to describe them would have taken away from the fear and darkness implied by their *not* being described. In referring to ‘nameless things’, Tolkien writes with the same quill that left the tale of Eärendil unfinished: he pulls and stretches at the fringes of his world, leaving them tattered and unkempt. He does this not out of an ambition to sew more things onto the margin, but rather because he loves the fact that there *is* a margin, a shadow flowing at Ocean’s silent brim. This is the ‘darkness’ Tom Shippey saw; this is the sublime.

## V: Turn of Phrase

The last aspect of Tolkien’s art in which this paper intends to show the presence of the sublime is that which was most important to Longinus: what one could perhaps call ‘poetic diction’. Among his five ‘sources of the sublime’, Longinus lists “employment of figures” and “dignified expression, which is sub-divided into (a) the proper choice of words, and (b) the use of metaphors and other ornaments of diction” (Havell, IV.-cc. v). This is, of course, relatively subjective, but nonetheless this paper will attempt as best as possible to provide a convincing example of Tolkien’s skill in these two categories, using as a subject the Song of Durin.

In the opening lines, the listener is told “The world was young, the mountains green, no stain yet on the moon was seen” (*FR*, II, iv, 329). Here is seen what Shippey would call ‘quality of imagination’ and what Longinus would call ‘grandeur of thought’ (Havell IV.-cc. v).<sup>19</sup> The moon, stained? Well, certainly it appears to be discoloured, but to imply that it bears a ‘stain’

<sup>19</sup> The Shippey quote is from n.9 just before the 3 minute mark.

is to imply, as the poem does, that the moon was once un-stained, and now it has gotten stained. With the negative connotation of ‘staining’ something (it is unlikely the Dwarves are thinking of church windows), the sum of these implications is to say that the years have been hard indeed, and that the moon, who in his young years was shining and clear, has grown dirty and weary. This is not something that Tolkien expands upon (that is to say, nowhere else in the mythology is there a story about the actual face of the moon getting stained), and it can hardly be seen as an actual marker of the way ‘Isil the Sheen’ works in a physical sense; it is just one of many poetic turns of phrase, the contemplation of which leaves the reader astonished. It is difficult to skip forwards in such a rich poem, but consider now the lines:

“There hammer on the anvil smote,  
There chisel clove, and graver wrote,  
There forged was blade, and bound was hilt;  
The delver mined, the mason built.  
There beryl, pearl and opal pale,  
And metal wrought like fishes’ mail,  
Buckler and corslet, axe and sword,  
And shining spears were laid in hoard” (*FR*, II, iv, 330).

With this passage on the page, consider Longinus:

“one cause of sublimity is the choice of the most striking circumstances involved in whatever we are describing, and, further, the power of afterwards combining them into one animate whole. The reader is attracted partly by the selection of the incidents, partly by the skill which has welded them together” (Havell, IV.-cc. x).

Now read once more the passage from Durin. Is it not remarkable how Tolkien selects the perfect combination of circumstances to fully evoke, in just 8 lines, a Dwarf kingdom at the height of its power? There is such business, such action, such wealth—both literally and literarily—in this section, and a more vivid image is created than some writers could manage in an entire chapter of description.

However, nothing better elucidates the prosperity and ‘unweariness’ of Durin’s folk than the opening lines of the concluding verse: “The world is grey, the mountains old, the forge’s fire is ashen cold”. Immediately the entire poem, from the beginning description of the world and the mountains, to the entire passage given above, is completely torn down. Instead of riches and activity and life, the reader is given words such as ‘darkness’ and ‘shadow’. Lastly:

“But still the sunken stars appear  
In dark and windless Mirrormere;  
There lies his crown in water deep,  
Till Durin wakes again from sleep” (*FR*, II, iv, 330).

Not to mention the exceedingly sublime conceit of Durin first seeing his crown as stars reflected in the Mirrormere, similar in tenor to something like Luke Skywalker witnessing the setting of the twin suns on Tatooine, but with greater sentence (and no help from John Williams), here the conceit reappears in a haunting, Arthurian sense. Longinus says “sublimity is, so to say, the image of greatness of soul. Hence a thought in its naked simplicity, even though unuttered, is sometimes admirable by the sheer force of its sublimity” (Havell, IV.-cc. ix). Here he is referring to the silence of Ajax in the *Nekyia*, but this paper proffers the final line “Till Durin wakes again from sleep” as a like example. The implication is not subtle; Durin

will never wake from sleep, and the poet clearly knows this. The dwarven race will continue to dwindle, and the crown will remain in the depths of the Mirrormere until the breaking of the world. However, none of this is said, and its absence has a far more powerful effect than any written word could produce upon the reader. This Song of Durin is (to my judgement) one of the finer poems produced in the 20th century, and it is not even among Tolkien's best.

## VI: Conclusion

Most likely this small paper will do nothing to repair the damaged relationship between Tolkienists and the Literary Critics. Most of the former will consider it fairly, but few if any of the latter will even read it. The best hope for the reconciliation of these two academic factions is for English departments to swallow their pride, and recognise the necessity of incorporating Tolkien into their course-lists (a trend which is already beginning, despite much gnashing of *White Teeth*). It is my hope only that more Tolkienists continue to cast their nets more deliberately into the waters of literary tradition, which are, as hopefully demonstrated here, eternally rich and fruitful. Shunning the academic elite will do nothing but reinforce Tolkien's unfortunate (and wildly wrong) reputation of having a following of the uneducated and *nouveau-riche*. Rather, it is through treating Tolkien as great artists are treated that we ensure he might one day be recognised for what he is: one of them.

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