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Modernist Mythmaking: A Comparative Study of J. R. R. Tolkien and Ezra Pound

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Senior Thesis

Dickinson College Department of English

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASC. Humphrey Carpenter. *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

Author. Tom Shippey. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

FOTR. J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

Letters. J. R. R. Tolkien, Humphrey Carpenter, and Christopher Tolkien. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien: A Selection*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

OED. Oxford English Dictionary.

Road. Tom Shippey. *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

ROTK. J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Return of the King*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

S. Ezra Pound. "The Seafarer." *Ezra Pound: Poems and Translations*. New York: Library of America, 2003. 236-38. Print.

TTT. J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Two Towers*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

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We heard of the horns in the hills ringing,
 the swords shining in the South-kingdom.
 Steeds went striding to the Stoningland
 as wind in the morning. War was kindled.
 There Théoden fell, Thengling mighty,
 to his golden halls and green pastures
 in the Northern fields never returning,
 high lord of the host. Harding and Guthláf,
 Dúnhere and Déorwine, doughty Grimbold,
 Herefara and Herubrand, Horn and Fastred,
 fought and fell there in a far country:
 in the Mounds of Mundburg under mould they
 lie
 with their league-fellows, lords of Gondor.
 Neither Hirluin the Fair to the hills by the sea,
 nor Forlong the old to the flowering vales
 ever, to Arnach, to his own country
 returned in triumph; nor the tall bowmen,
 Derufin and Duilin, to their dark waters,
 meres of Morthond under mountain-shadows.
 Death in the morning and at day's ending
 lords took and lowly. Long now they sleep
 under grass in Gondor by the Great River.
 Grey now as tears, gleaming silver,
 red then it rolled, roaring water:
 foam dyed with blood flamed at sunset;
 as beacons mountains burned at evening;
 red fell the dew in Rammas Echor.

—J. R. R. Tolkien, “Song of the Mounds of
 Mundburg,” *The Return of the King* (1955)

And then went down to the ship,
 Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
 We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
 Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
 Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward
 Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,
 Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.
 Then sat we amidships, wind jamming the tiller,
 Thus with stretched sail, we went over sea till
 day's end.
 Sun to his slumber, shadows o'er all the ocean,
 Came we then to the bounds of deepest water,
 To the Kimmerian lands, and peopled cities
 Covered with close-webbed mist, unpierced ever
 With the glitter of sun-rays
 Nor with stars stretched, nor looking back from
 heaven
 ...
 And So-shu churned in the sea, So-shu also,
 using the long moon for a churn-stick...
 Lithe turning of water,
 sinews of Poseidon,
 ...
 Olive grey in the near,
 far, smoke grey of the rock-slide,
 Salmon-pink wings of the fish-hawk
 cast grey shadows in water,
 The tower like a one-eyed great goose
 cranes up out of the olive-grove

—Ezra Pound, excerpt from *Cantos I-II, A Draft
 of XXX Cantos* (1930)

Comparing these two poems side by side reveals the points of connection between an unlikely pair of writers: novelist J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), the father of fantasy; and poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972), the father of modernism. Both writers employ Anglo-Saxon tropes in these examples, adapting the features of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse to modern-day English, as in the lines “We héard of the hórns in the hills rínging” and “Bóre us out ónward with béllying cánvas.” In accordance with the metrics of alliterative verse, the lines are both composed of two balancing halves, with each half-line containing two stressed syllables (called

lifts)¹ for a total of four stresses to a line.² The half-lines are separated by a caesura, occurring between “horns” and “in” in the first example and after “onward” in the second.³ Alliteration, the repetition of the consonant sound at the beginning of a syllable, acts as the basic structural principle of Anglo-Saxon poetry by linking together the two half-lines (Baker 13). Here and elsewhere, Tolkien strictly follows the rule that the first stressed syllable of the second half-line alliterates with the first and/or second stressed syllables in the first half-line (Heaney xxix): “We héard of the hórns in the hills ringing.” In the first forty or so lines of *Canto I*, Pound too approximates Anglo-Saxon meter, but less strictly. Like Seamus Heaney and other prominent translators of Anglo-Saxon, Pound does not always use alliteration, he takes the liberty of alliterating on the fourth stressed syllable, and he occasionally includes more than four stressed syllables per line (Heaney xxviii-xxix): “Thús with strétched sáil, we wént over séa till dáy’s énd.” This monosyllabic-heavy line, like Tolkien’s line “foam dyed with blood flamed at sunset,” shows the influence of Anglo-Saxon’s syllabic-based meter.

Both poems also incorporate an Anglo-Saxon poetic convention called a kenning, a compound word acting as a metaphor or metonym for a concept, such as “whale-road” for sea, or “ring-giver” or “treasure-giver” for lord (Baker 14.1). Anglo-Saxon poets could draw on this stock of synonyms when searching for an alliteration. Just as Tolkien signals this poetic tradition in the compound nouns “league-fellows” and “mountain-shadows,” so too does Pound in “sun-rays,” “rock-slide,” and “fish-hawk.” In both poems, the diction feels simple and common because Tolkien and Pound are using words that are Germanic in origin, such as “grey,” “water,”

¹ Marked here by an accent above the stressed vowel.

² The rhythm of Anglo-Saxon poetry differs significantly from the system of metrical feet common in English poetry from Chaucer to the present day. Anglo-Saxon poetry used one of five strict rhythmic patterns, differentiated by the arrangement of lifts and two or more groups of unstressed syllables called *drops* (Baker 13). For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the stressed syllables only and do not discriminate according to the type of rhythmic pattern.

³ Here I use the modern convention of marking the caesura with extra space.

“day,” “shadow,” and “sea,” all of which appear in both poems (*OED*, Etymology).⁴ Inverted syntax (“Long now they sleep” and “Came we then”) further contributes to the antique mood.

As the temporal adverbs “now” in “Long now they sleep” and “then” in “Came we then” suggest, these are narrative poems. Yet they both counterbalance narrative with extreme compression of the image. Color words are often linked with adverbs that locate the poem in a time or place. For example, Tolkien’s use of “now” in “Grey now as tears, gleaming silver” establishes the poem in the present before shifting to the past through the word “then” in the subsequent line “red then it rolled, roaring water.” Pound’s lines, excerpted from *Canto II*, display a similar pattern, but in spatial terms in shifting from “near” to “far”: “Olive grey in the *near / far*, smoke grey of the rock-slide.” To achieve visual immediacy, Tolkien and Pound often eradicate definite and indefinite articles and pack their poems with present and past participles instead, such as “*gleaming silver*” and “*roaring water*” in Tolkien’s poem and “Sea-fowl *stretching wing-joints, / splashing in rock-hollows and sand-hollows*” in Pound’s (*Canto II* 10).⁵ Close reading these two poems side by side reveals that both poets draw heavily on an Anglo-Saxon tradition to craft a narrative poem grounded in rich imagery. The commonality between these two examples is not an isolated instance, but rather foundational to understanding both writers, their works, and the profound connections between these two men.

Preface: An Evolution of Criticism

If Tolkien and Pound are engaged in such similar creative enterprises, why are they never considered alongside one another? This division is largely the result of Hugh Kenner’s seminal book *The Pound Era* (1971), a critical text so influential in shaping our current understanding of

⁴ “grey” 1. grey | gray, *adj.* and *n.*; “water” 1. water, *n.*; “day” 1. day, *n.*; “shadow” 1. shadow, *n.*; “sea” 1. sea, *n.*

⁵ All citations to Pound’s *Cantos* are to *Canto* and page number from the New Directions edition.

modernism that it has become part of the tradition itself. Before Kenner's study, most critics considered Pound passé, favoring the work of poet T. S. Eliot instead. Upon Eliot's death in 1965, the London *Times* dubbed Eliot "The Most Influential English Poet of His Time" (Rainey 87). Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis, one of the men largely responsible for defining the discipline and canon of "English literature" as we know it today, included Eliot but not Pound in his genealogy of English literature (Eagleton 32-33). Kenner challenged the widely held assumption of Eliot's supremacy. As the title of Kenner's work suggests, *The Pound Era* reclaimed Pound as a central figure—if not *the* central figure—of twentieth-century poetry. Arguing that Pound shaped the literary bent of his entire generation, Kenner not only successfully incorporated Pound's work into the "high" literature of the academy, but also made Pound's name synonymous with modernism.

Because "modernism" is such a highly contested term, a definition may prove useful for the reader before turning to Tolkien. "Modernism" as a literary movement has its roots in the mid-nineteenth century. Some date its inception to 1890, others to the turn of the century, still others to 1910 (Hirsch 386). Its tenuous temporal boundaries extend into the mid-twentieth century and perhaps beyond (Davis 2).⁶ Generally, the period of "high modernism" refers to the years 1910-1930. In the 1920s, modernism increasingly came to connote avant-garde experimentation in the arts and a break with tradition, exemplified by Pound's famous dictum, "Make it New!" Accordingly, modernist poetry generally eschewed traditional forms in favor of asyntactical language and collagist techniques (Hirsch 386-87), though Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins note in their Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion of Modernist Poetry* (2007) that

⁶ Marjorie Perloff provocatively suggests that modernism persists into the twenty-first century (Davis 2).

modernist poetry encompasses a dizzying array of binaries.⁷ Despite this diversity, modernism retains its typical associations with fragmentation, alienation, the loss of old beliefs, and the individual's struggle to find order in a chaotic modern world (Nicolay 11). Michael H. Levenson perhaps says it best in his book *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1984): "Vague terms still signify. Such is the case with 'modernism': it is at once vague and unavoidable" (vii). As in Levenson's study, for the purposes of this paper the term "modernism" will suffice to ground us in a particular literary and social history.

The publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937 and the composition of *The Lord of the Rings* from 1936 to 1949 place Tolkien firmly within the modernist epoch (Nicolay 17). Yet critics as far back as Humphrey Carpenter in *The Inklings* (1977) dismiss Tolkien as essentially "unmodern": "Though Tolkien lived in the twentieth century he could scarcely be called a modern writer" (qtd. in Rosebury 147). For Carpenter, Tolkien's only literary context is that of the Inklings, an Oxford coterie of mainly Christian fantasy writers headed by Tolkien and fellow don C. S. Lewis. This understanding of Tolkien has remained largely unchallenged. To offer just one important example, John Garth in his book *Tolkien and the Great War* (2003) highlights Tolkien's backwardness in choosing to work in a "medieval" literary style: "Tolkien's stylistic values reverse Ezra Pound's famous modernist exhortation to 'Make it New!'" (291). For these critics, Tolkien is a man incongruous with his contemporaries.

In part, this widespread assumption is the result of Tolkien's own self-mythmaking. In *Tolkien: A Biography* (1977), the only "authorized biography" of Tolkien written by the same Humphrey Carpenter as *The Inklings*, Carpenter describes Tolkien as "the archetypal Oxford

⁷ As Davis and Jenkins argue, "Modernist poetry involves recuperations of history *and* Futurist and Dada abandonments of tradition; arcane *and* demotic registers of language; elitist *and* populist forms of literature" [emphasis theirs] (1). I agree with this more nuanced understanding of modernism and will build on Davis and Jenkins's argument in this paper.

don,” clad in a tweed jacket and puffing on a pipe, seeming “as if he had come from another age or civilization” (5). Such a retro description, which has become entrenched in the public’s cultural imagination, extricates Tolkien from his context and removes him to an unidentifiable past more in line with Middle-earth than modern Britain. Yet this image of the insulated academic is precisely the one Tolkien himself wanted to curate. In his commentary on the draft text of an interview he conducted in 1967, he asserts that he takes little note of contemporary literature: “I read quite a lot—or more truly, try to read many books (notably so-called Science Fiction and Fantasy). But I seldom find any modern books that hold my attention...I am looking for something I can’t find” (*Letters* 377). In this statement, Tolkien opposes himself to the “modern” by aligning himself with the fantasy genre, a genre *The Lord of the Rings* helped to create (James 62).⁸ For critics, the immense popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* and its seemingly traditional narrative structure placed Tolkien outside of the literary avant-garde, but decidedly inside the “low” genre of the fantasy novel, as Tolkien’s prominence in critical works such as Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James’s *A Short History of Fantasy* (2009) attests.

Recently, critics have emphasized the importance of re-contextualizing Tolkien within his broader literary-historical moment. Premier Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey argues that Tolkien is part of a group of “traumatised authors,” including George Orwell, Kurt Vonnegut, T. H. White, and C. S. Lewis, all of whom write fantasy to communicate their war experiences (*Road* xvii).⁹ Yet by supplanting modernism with “the fantastic” as “the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century” (*Author* vii), Shippey centralizes Tolkien in the twentieth century while excluding him from mainstream modernist figures. Other critical works, such as Theresa Freda

⁸ Tolkien’s extensive correspondence with modernist poet W. H. Auden suggests that Tolkien was not as out of touch with his contemporary milieu as he claimed to be. See Tolkien’s letter to Robert H. Boyer in 1971 discussing his acquaintance with Auden, whom he calls “one of my great friends” (*Letters* 412).

⁹ Shippey suggests this idea in both of his two most important books: *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2000) and *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (2003).

Nicolay's *Tolkien and the Modernists* (2014), Brian Rosebury's *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (2003), and Jim Casey's "Modernism and postmodernism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012) compare Tolkien to such modernists. However, all three reflect the sustained critical tendency to position Tolkien in opposition to the literary history of modernism. Nicolay argues that Tolkien and the modernists represent divergent literary responses to shared preoccupations, such as the rise of industrialism and the loss of the pastoral. In a limited study focused almost exclusively on theme, she argues that Tolkien responds to modernity by affirming human connection and traditional moral values, while the modernists focused on "the failure of communication and community in the post-war world-as-wasteland" (3). Rosebury arrives at a similar conclusion, arguing that although Tolkien's works are "modern" in the broad sense of the word and even share some similarities with modernist texts,¹⁰ they lack the modernist trademark of irony (154). Like Rosebury, Casey acknowledges certain similarities between fantasy novels and modernist literature, but he emphasizes their differences: fantasy draws heavily on the traditional formal conventions of myth, history, and fairy tale, while modernists reject tradition and such "conventional approaches" in favor of experimentation; fantasy is characterized as "low" or popular literature, while modernist literature is elitist. Casey concludes that Tolkien's novels are more characteristic of postmodernism than modernism (115). The binaries on which Casey founds his argument are the very binaries this paper seeks to destabilize by comparing Tolkien and Pound.

In all four of these studies, Pound is conspicuously absent. This oversight might be explained by the critics' deference to generic boundaries, as they generally restrict their comparisons to other prose writers. Yet this reason does not explain why Shippey, Nicolay, and

¹⁰ According to Rosebury, these similarities include the adaptation of myth, a rich historical awareness of past literature, and a lack of explicit Christian doctrine (150-51).

Rosebury mention T. S. Eliot, but not Pound, in their discussions of modernism. Such a pre-Kenner conception of modernism is puzzling, but it explains Rosebury's conclusion that the principal modernists, most of whom died before or during Tolkien's composition of *The Lord of the Rings*, were too old to be considered Tolkien's contemporaries (147-48).¹¹ Born in 1885, Pound is only six years older than Tolkien, and they died just one year apart in the early 1970s. Their overlapping lifespans mean that they both lived and wrote during the social and political upheaval of two world wars. Humphrey Carpenter wrote authoritative biographies of both men. Although Tolkien and Pound wrote concomitantly, no one calls them contemporaries. The comparison is perhaps a counterintuitive one. Pound was an American expatriate living in London, Paris, and later Italy; Tolkien lived in England his entire adult life. Pound's outspoken personality, atheism, and public fascism contrast sharply with Tolkien's reserved nature, Catholicism, and distaste for topical allegory. One wrote controversial, fragmented, and abstruse poetry, the other widely popular fantasy novels. Yet the connections between their works are undeniably present, as my earlier analysis of "Song of the Mounds of Mundburg" and *Cantos I-II* demonstrates.

Whether we call Tolkien "modern" or not, further comparing Tolkien and Pound unearths a counter-narrative of twentieth-century literature that challenges the typical understanding of modernism outlined above. Such a study is possible now that Tolkien scholars have begun to contextualize Tolkien within the twentieth century, and modernist scholars have gained enough temporal distance from the movement to publish revisionary accounts of it. The very reasons Tolkien has been excluded from modernism—his seemingly retro attention to myth and philology, his national identity, the "low"-ness of his popular novels—are the very tools I will

¹¹ Rosebury includes D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, and Virginia Woolf in this list. Eliot was writing *Four Quartets*, his "last important work," according to Rosebury (148). He does not mention Pound at all.

use to reassess modernism. The goal of this study is thus the same one Levenson expresses in *A Genealogy of Modernism*: to construct “a,” not “the” genealogy of modernism, in order to “redeem certain lines of development which have been obscured or neglected” (xi). I frame the comparison around three main, interrelated points of contact, which correspond to the three sections of this paper: Mythmaking, World-building, and Word-building. By examining the similarities and differences between these two writers, this paper ultimately aims to generate not only a better understanding of Tolkien, but also a better understanding of Pound and the “modernist” period in which they both lived.

Chapter One: Mythmaking

Myth and modernism are two sides of the same coin. Myth was a central concept, not only for Tolkien and Pound, but for many of the modernists as well; as Laurence Coupe explains in his book *Myth*, the modernist movement opposed modernity’s impulse for “demythologization” (15), or the attempt to delegitimize myth in favor of scientific rationalism (10). Because the word “myth” is such a slippery term, it is worthy of at least a provisional definition here. The literary sense of “myth” retains the word’s colloquial connotation of falsity or fiction (9). Citing Don Cupitt, Coupe defines “myth” in the literary sense as “a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual” (6). According to Cupitt, myth also deals with supernatural elements or the deeds of heroes, is set in a prehistoric age, and functions to explain phenomena or guide behavior (6). This definition hints at myth’s relations to oral tradition (“anonymous authorship”), nationalism and identity (“a certain community”), magnitude (“universal significance”), and religion (“sacred” and “ritual”). It also suggests that

myth bridges “high” and “low” forms of literature as a “sacred” narrative that is widely known through oral tradition. While I will elaborate upon these cultural and literary associations shortly, for the purposes of this paper, I use the term “myth” broadly to denote “certain narratives which human beings take to be crucial to their understanding of their world” (4).

This definition is compatible with Pound’s and Tolkien’s individual definitions of myth. In a letter dated 1953, Pound defines “myth” as “a relation that recurs, time and again/ the true myth is something that repeats/ and is figured by a great metaphor” (qtd. in Cookson 7). For Pound, narratives repeat throughout history because they reveal fundamental truths. In a letter to his publisher written in 1951, Tolkien also emphasizes the truth-value of myth. Although he defends his tales as “new,” he explains that they inevitably draw on the structures and themes of ancient myth:

After all, I believe that legends and myths are largely made of “truth,” and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear. (*Letters* 147)

Like Pound’s “true myth” that “repeats,” Tolkien argues that the same myths (such as the Fall of Man) resurface because they contain perennial truths, which according to Tolkien can be communicated only in stories or the mythic “mode.”

Knowing more about myth as a term enables us to examine which myths Tolkien and Pound drew on as twentieth-century mythmakers and how they used them in their work. Both writers inherited the nineteenth-century tradition of collecting, reviving, and publishing previously unknown legends, myths, and fairy and folk tales. A number of revivers in this period published collections of folk or fairy tales from Northwestern Europe, most notably the Brothers

Grimm's collection of German fairy tales (1812); *Popular Tales from the Norse* (1851) translated by Sir George Dasent; *English Fairy Tales* (1890) by Joseph Jacobs; and J. F. Campbell's *Popular Tales of the Western Highlands* (1890-1893) (*Road* 346-47). The Finnish national epic the *Kalevala*, pieced together in the 1830s from various songs and lays (*Author* xv), and English writer William Morris's translations of the Icelandic sagas profoundly influenced Tolkien's imagination (*Road* 351). Medieval tales from worldwide became available to a wide audience, as Europeans were introduced to the fantasy traditions of China and Japan (Mendlesohn and James 12-13). A renewed interest in oral tradition paralleled this return to folk and fairy tales. F. J. Child published his famous collection *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* from 1882-1898 (*Road* 347). In 1888, Irish poet W. B. Yeats compiled *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, and Andrew Lang did the same with the Scottish tradition (Wolfe 18). Interest in unearthing and preserving past myths was not isolated to literary studies. Anthropologist Sir James Frazer compiled a highly influential comparative study of myth and religion titled *The Golden Bough* (1890) (Mendlesohn and James 13). Like the modernist period, this (re)turn to myth in the nineteenth century was likely a backlash against the "demythologization" during the Enlightenment era of the previous century (Coupe 10).

The popularity of these texts among the Victorians created a "cult of the medieval" in England (Mendlesohn and James 20). Arthurian legend served as the primary inspiration for Alfred, Lord Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and William Morris sought to retell old myths in order to make forward progress (10). The Victorians looked to Romantic poet John Keats as a model, who similarly used archaism (such as in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci") in order to set himself apart from his contemporaries. Their archaizing creative enterprises were in tension with their modern consciousness, as the Victorians simultaneously looked backward and

forward. Although Tolkien and Pound have a similar dual vision, they are interested in different pasts than the Victorians, and even, as I will argue, different pasts from one another.

Despite their differences, both men emphatically reject the Arthurian myth that so shaped the creative imagination of the Victorian artists and poets. Pound likely did so to distance himself from what he deemed the “softness” and sentimentality of Victorian poetry (Eagleton 41).

Tolkien’s reasons were more nationalistic than aesthetic. Though familiar with Arthurian legend, Tolkien rejected it as being “associated with the soil of Britain but not with English” (*Letters* 144). The inception of “King Arthur,” a legendary British king, dates back to the post-Roman era in the fifth century A.D., but as Shippey explains, “the Arthurian tradition was originally non-English, indeed dedicated to the overthrow of England; its commemoration in English verse was merely a final consequence of the stamping-out of native culture after [the Battle of] Hastings [in 1066]” (*Road* 38). The Norman victory at Hastings effectively eradicated most of Old English tradition, except for *Beowulf* (38). As a result, England’s native and pre-Christian tradition remains unknown (305). Tolkien was keenly disappointed that England lacked its own national mythology: “I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands” (*Letters* 144). Tolkien envied the “much better-preserved” Welsh, Irish, and Norse folk traditions (*Road* 306), and above all, the Finnish (*Letters* 144). Ironically, he drew upon the mythologies, folk traditions, and heroic legends of these other Northern European countries in his project to craft a distinctively English mythology.

The result of these efforts was Tolkien’s mythological world of Arda. Within Arda is the continent of Middle-earth, home to races of Men, Elves, and Dwarves, among other creatures, including Tolkien’s most famous invention: Hobbits, or “little people” who reside carefree in

their country home called the Shire (*FOTR 2*). Tolkien's two most important works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, take place in Middle-earth. Published in 1937, *The Hobbit* is a children's book about a Hobbit named Bilbo Baggins who joins a group of dwarves seeking to reclaim their mountain home from the dragon Smaug. Darker in tone, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy tells the story of Bilbo's nephew, Frodo Baggins, who inherits the magic ring that Bilbo found on his adventure. Frodo discovers that the ring in his possession is actually the One Ring, the Dark Lord Sauron's source of power. Frodo begins a quest, along with his gardener Sam Gamgee and seven other companions, to destroy the Ring in Sauron's stronghold of Mordor, the only place it can be unmade. While Tolkien never references his Northern European sources directly in these texts, he uses them as inspiration for individual races or species, and even some plot points.¹²

Geographically and thematically, Pound draws on a much wider pool of myths than Tolkien, reflecting Pound's desire, expressed in a letter to James Joyce in 1917, to create a poem "all about everything" (qtd. in Cookson xxiii). Begun in 1915, *The Cantos* is a long epic poem in 116 parts that Pound worked on for most of his life (*ASC 287*). For the purposes of this paper, I restrict my study to the first thirty *Cantos* in the volume, originally published as *A Draft of XXX Cantos* in 1930 (*ASC 474*). Pound explains that he sought to create a modern epic, a genre that he famously defined in 1930 as "a poem including history" (qtd. in Cookson xxiv). Unlike a traditional epic poem, however, *The Cantos* has no discernable plot and therefore cannot be easily summarized here. The poem is perhaps better characterized as a collage or a "fugue," a musical term Pound used to describe his technique of introducing a short phrase or "melody" to

¹² Shippey explains Tolkien's method of modeling aspects of his narrative on "single poems, tales, phrases, images" (*Road 62*). To offer just one of many examples, Shippey suggests that Tolkien's depiction of the Elves stems from the description of the hunting king in the medieval poem *Sir Orfeo*, which links elves with the wilderness and music (62-64).

be taken up later in the poem (qtd. in Cookson xxiii).¹³ For example, *Canto XVII* elaborates on a number of themes introduced in earlier *Cantos*, such as the celebration of Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility and the natural world hailed by the name of Zagreus here (“ZAGREUS! IO ZAGREUS!”)¹⁴ (76), but first introduced in *Canto II* as Lyæus. The “vines” in *Canto XVII*’s opening line (“So that the vines burst from my fingers”) (76) echo Lyæus’s line from *Canto II* (“the vines grow in my homage”) (9). Along with this musical structure, parataxis—juxtaposing two elements without a conjunction—attempts to provide an organizing principle, though Pound suggests self-doubt in his final *Canto*: “I cannot make it cohere” (*Canto CXVI* 796).

In 1955, Pound asserted that the main goal of his “Cantares” was “To give the truth of history” (qtd. in Cookson xxvii). Yet the “truth of history” Pound conveys is really a Poundian *myth*, as he privileges certain myths from a patchwork of civilizations and cultures in compiling his “history” of the modern world. Unlike Tolkien, who rejects Greco-Roman myth for its paganism (James 67), Pound frequently describes visions of Greek gods in his early *Cantos* (Cookson 9). Accordingly, the world of *The Cantos* is a polytheistic one, as the discussion of Dionysus in the last paragraph suggests. In addition to Dionysus/Zagreus, Pound alludes to Hermes and Athena, two prominent figures in Greek mythology, and repeats the plural “gods” twice within three lines in *Canto XVII*: “And under the almond-trees, gods, / with them, *choros nympharum*. Gods, / Hermes and Athene” (77). As Carpenter explains, here Pound depicts “what Ezra called ‘the original world of the gods,’ the pagan pre-Christian dawn in which Classical deities walked the earth” (ASC 144). Pound likely found the PanHellenic myths

¹³ Cf. Diana Wynne Jones’s argument about Tolkien’s structural innovations in *The Lord of the Rings*: “*The Lord of the Rings* is organized in movements, just like a symphony, but with this difference: each movement has an extension, or coda, which reflects partly back on the movement just completed, and partly forwards to what is to come” (qtd. in Mendlesohn and James 48-49).

¹⁴ “IO” means “hail” in Greek (Cookson 29).

particularly alluring not only because the modern conception of myth descends from the Greeks (Coupe 9), but also because they offered the possibility of something akin to religion without Christianity. In contrast to Tolkien's devout Catholicism, Pound was raised Presbyterian (*ASC* 29), but he felt ambivalent toward Christianity because of its association with the British Empire (118) and became increasingly disillusioned with organized religion (127).

While Pound rejects Christianity and idealizes this "pagan pre-Christian dawn," Tolkien considers *The Lord of the Rings* "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (*Letters* 172). For this reason, according to Tolkien's letter, he ironically "cut out" any mention of religious practices in his world, and "absorbed [the religious element] into the story and the symbolism" (172). Why eliminate religion in "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work"? As Shippey notes, Tolkien's Catholicism lies in tension with his literary and scholarly interest in old tales of pagan heroes, as well as his desire to write about England's pre-Christian era (*Road* 199). Faced with the problem of crafting a Christian work about an ancient society living before Christ, he modeled his solution on the Old English poem *Beowulf*, "the single work which influenced Tolkien most" according to Shippey (*Road* 344). Although the *Beowulf*-poet was Christian, he does not damn his virtuous characters for being pagans, and the majority of the poem avoids mentioning Christ at all (*Road* 198-99). Like the *Beowulf*-poet, Tolkien occupies a middle ground straddling Christianity and pagan myth. In contrast to Pound's "pagan pre-Christian dawn," Shippey characterizes *The Lord of the Rings* as "a story of virtuous pagans in the darkest of dark pasts, before all but the faintest premonitions of dawn and revelation" (199). Despite the writers' differing attitudes toward the pagan past, PanHellenic myth in Pound's *Cantos* and veiled Christian myth in *The Lord of the Rings* both function to integrate the religious and the secular.

Although Classical mythology is an important part of *The Cantos*, Pound intertwines Greek myth with ancient Eastern traditions, Provençal and medieval sources, historical figures from a range of cultures and time periods, allusions to his literary predecessors, and even his own personal memories. For example, William Cookson notes that *Canto IV* opens with the destruction of Troy (“Troy but a heap of smouldering boundary stones”) (13), then transitions to “the world of Provence,” which Pound associates with the world of the old gods (Cookson 10). Pound parallels the personal history of Guillem da Cabestan, a late twelfth-century Provençal troubadour, with the Greek myth of Philomela, Procne, and Tereus before breaking abruptly into the myth of Actæon, as told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Cookson 10-11). He begins with a direct description of the myth, then filters the myth through the voice of troubadour Piere Vidal (Cookson 11): “Then Actæon: Vidal, / Vidal. It is old Vidal speaking” (*Canto IV* 14). As Cookson explains, “Much of IV overlays classical myths with Provençal themes” (10). This technique of “multi-layered allusion,” as Carpenter terms it, exemplifies Pound’s basic structural principle throughout *The Cantos* (ASC 290). Other *Cantos* contain myths of Pound’s own invention, such as the “Greek” myth of Ileuthyeria and the “Chinese” myth So-shu in *Canto II* (Cookson 8). By mixing his own myths with old myths, Pound elevates himself as a mythmaker, gives his poetry mythic status, and aligns himself with certain traditions.

Despite the range of myths that Pound invokes, he grounds his *Draft of XXX Cantos*, and therefore his entire volume of *Cantos*, in a specifically Anglo-Saxon tradition. In *Canto I*, Pound translates a medieval Latin version of *The Odyssey* by Andreas Divus into an approximation of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse modeled on *The Seafarer* (ASC 291). In this opening, Pound chose the “Nekyia,” or the underworld story of Book 11 of *The Odyssey*, because he believed it was older than the rest of the text, demonstrating his interest in antiquity and ancientness (ASC

291). As the beginning of this paper shows, Pound adapts the rules of alliterative verse for modern English. Although he often breaks the four syllable stresses per line rule, he retains the basic structural principle of two half-lines (the caesura often signaled by commas) linked by strong alliteration: “Men many, mauled with bronze lance heads, / Battle spoil, bearing yet dreory arms” (4). Pound’s use of “dreory,” from the Old English word *dréorig* meaning “bloody,” deepens the Anglo-Saxon connection (Cookson 5). Although the alliterative verse is paired with Homer’s Greek epic, the clear presence of Anglo-Saxon poetics reveals that Pound, like Tolkien, aligns himself with an English, epic tradition and the Anglo-Saxon “race.”

Pound’s appropriation of this Anglo-Saxon tradition is strange because he is American by birth. Like Tolkien, Pound identifies with his Anglo-Saxon ancestry; however, his relationship to his heritage is both one of pride and ambivalence. Spurning immigrants as “impure” (*ASC* 737), Pound considers himself a member of what he calls “the more deeply rooted population,” which Carpenter explains as “the Anglo-Saxon colonial Americans from which [Pound] himself sprang” (*ASC* 7). Pound here ties purity to “rootedness.” In 1920, Pound bitterly complained: “I am racially fifteen parts English, the remaining sixteenth part Celtic, and I was born in a country where the Anglo-Saxon stock is now said to be in a minority” (qtd. in *ASC* 361). Pound’s numerical precision in breaking down his racial composition reveals his pride in his purity. As this quote suggests, Pound’s nationalism depends on “othering” immigrants, particularly Jews. His outspoken anti-Semitism made him a controversial figure in both politics and literature throughout his life. Despite his seeming Anglophilia as an American expatriate living in London, he ultimately rejected England too for its ignorant public and “decayed intellectual-artistic state” (*ASC* 366). In 1921, he moved to Paris (378) and later Italy, where he became embroiled in the fascist movement—a political orientation indivisible from nationalism—led by the Italian

dictator Benito Mussolini (457). Pound's "nationalism" and sense of "nation" is therefore problematic at best. The diversity within *The Cantos* reflects Pound's cosmopolitanism, though he gradually turns away from Anglo-Saxon myths after displacing himself from England and begins to embrace Chinese ones in particular.¹⁵

Living in England his entire adult life, Tolkien's Englishness is much more straightforward. Shippey even goes so far as to call Tolkien an "ethnic" writer, arguing that his writings reveal his desire to return his "beloved country" to an "uncorrupted" time (*Road* 352) before the Normans marred the English language with French (41). Like Pound, Tolkien uses alliterative verse in his works to evoke an Anglo-Saxon past. He links this poetic tradition with the Riders of Rohan, called the Rohirrim, by modeling much of their poetry on alliterative verse, as I suggest in my analysis of the poem "Song of the Mounds of Mundburg" at the beginning of this paper. As Bārbala Stroda notes in "The Use of Folk Poetry in Fantasy Genre Literature," the opening lines of "Lament of the Rohirrim" ("Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?") (*TTT* 118) are based on the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wanderer* ("Where now the horse? / Where now the rider?") (359). While the people of Rohan exemplify Anglo-Saxon Englishness, the Hobbits embody modern Englishness. Tolkien links his mythology to our present-day Earth by claiming that Hobbits "are relatives of ours" and that "Those days, the Third Age of Middle-earth, are now long past, and the shape of all lands has been changed" (*FOTR* 2-3). The inclusive first-person plural that Tolkien employs ("relatives of *ours*") is actually exclusive. Tolkien locates the Hobbits, "our" relatives, in a geographic analogue for Northwestern Europe: "the regions in which Hobbits then lived were doubtless the same as those in which they still linger: the North-West of the Old World, east of the Sea" (3). As Shippey notes (*Road* 69), Tolkien associates the Hobbits more specifically with modern Englishness

¹⁵ By 1940, Chinese ideograms take a central place in *The Cantos* (Beinecke).

through their anachronistic fondness for pipe-weed and their taste for “fried fish and chips,” a classic English dish (*TTT* 294). Further, their humble, rural lifestyle in the countryside of the Shire (“they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth”) reflects the shifting definition of “Englishness” in the first half of the twentieth century (*FOTR* 1). As Terry Eagleton explains in his essay “The Rise of English,” “essential Englishness” developed the connotation of “rural, populist, and provincial rather than metropolitan and aristocratic” (37). The descendants of the Hobbits—those included in the “our”—therefore share the Hobbits’ implicit English national identity.

Tolkien’s nationalism is most evident in one of his *Letters*, written c. 1951, in which he describes his intention to construct “a body of more or less connected legend” that he could “dedicate simply to: to England; to my country” (144). This “body,” Tolkien continues, “should be ‘high,’ purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long now steeped in poetry” (144-45). What is the “gross” that Tolkien alludes to? Earlier in the same letter, Tolkien’s use of the first-person plural suggests an answer: “[the legend 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 the Aegean, still less the East)” [emphasis added] (144). Especially in such close proximity to the exclusionary “our” of “our ‘air,’” the implicitly racializing language Tolkien employs here (“purged of the gross”)—a particularly charged locution post-World War II—borderlines uncomfortably on Pound’s description of immigrants as “impure” (*ASC* 737) or “unwashed animality” (qtd. in *ASC* 298).

Tolkien’s use of “high” here deserves further elaboration, as he himself calls attention to the word by offsetting it within quotation marks, which function like the verbal expression “so-called.” The distinction between “high” and “low” literature developed in the early twentieth

century along with the institutionalization of English literature under the leadership of Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis. As Eagleton suggests, “high” literature encompassed texts worthy of study or “Scrutiny,” the apt title of Leavis’s 1932 critical journal (31). In line with Leavis’s “coterie-minded” sensibilities (36), “high” literature was “rich, complex, mature,” inherently valuable, and understood by an elite (33). Widely read by the masses, lucrative, and considered unworthy of serious study, “low” or popular literature opposed Leavis’s values (34).

At first, Tolkien’s intention to create a “high” body of legend would seem antithetical to the accepted designation of Tolkien’s novels as “popular literature.” However, I do not think Tolkien is aligning himself with an “avant-garde” sensibility in this quotation. Rather, I think that Tolkien is connecting England’s oral poetic tradition with “high” art and alluding to the elevated mythic mode. As I suggest earlier, myth bridges “high” and “low” forms of literature; it is sacred, symbolic, frequently heroic, and often communicated through the “high” form of poetry, but it is also conveyed to the masses through oral tradition. Before tales were written down, poetry functioned as a mnemonic device, allowing the narrative to be ingrained in a culture’s collective memory. Tolkien comments on the simultaneous preservation and mutability of this communal oral tradition in *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Bilbo’s walking song appears twice in close succession. The first time, Bilbo sings the line “Pursuing it with eager feet” (38). Some pages later, Frodo speaks the rhyme verbatim to Bilbo’s original except Frodo changes “eager” to “weary” (82). The rhyme has evidently become a part of Frodo’s oral memory, as he explains that he recited it seemingly extemporaneously: “It came to me then, as if I was making it up; but I may have heard it long ago” (82). Frodo cannot remember the source of the song because it is so deeply rooted in his mind that he feels it is his own. In fact, he unknowingly makes it his own by changing “eager” to “weary” in order to

reflect his present feelings toward his journey to Mordor. Tolkien thus points to the anonymity and communal nature of oral tradition, a simultaneously “high” and “low” form.

Using Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* as a framework, Shippey argues that *The Lord of the Rings* evades categorization because Tolkien incorporates “high” and “low” generic modes in his style, from the “low mimesis” of most novels, to romance and myth on the other end of Frye’s spectrum (*Road* 210-11). As Shippey contends, Tolkien carefully crafts his prose to reflect this compromise, using inverted syntax (as in the line “To that the Elves know not the answer”) (qtd. in *Road* 220) to create “a strong archaic effect” (220-21). Yet Tolkien nevertheless fulfills his audience’s expectations for low mimesis through elements such as the banter of the Hobbits (211-12). Tolkien further complicates this “high”/“low” binary by integrating poetry, a traditionally “high” form, into his “low” prose. Shippey ultimately terms *The Lord of the Rings* “a romance for an audience brought up on novels” (226).

Pound shares Tolkien’s liminal position between “high” and “low,” and once again, the link is oral tradition. Pound would seem to exemplify “high” literature; his use of poetry over prose, his elitism, and his support of avant-garde art all mark him as such. Yet in 1937 and again in 1955, Pound calls his *Cantos* “the Tale of the Tribe” (qtd. in Cookson xxiv, xxvii) a phrase borrowed from a speech in 1906 by Rudyard Kipling. In his book *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic*, Michael André Bernstein explains that “the Tale of the Tribe” refers to the power of words to record and pass down the tribe’s unifying stories and values (8). The storyteller—the person possessing “the magic of the necessary word”—therefore has “a great moral and political as well as artistic responsibility” (8). By using this phrase to describe his *Cantos*, Pound identifies with this conception of the artist’s role in society and suggests that he wants his poetry to embody this intensely communal aspect of the oral folk

tradition.¹⁶ Pound's method of oral/aural composition reinforces the oral tradition underpinning "the Tale of the Tribe." Although *The Cantos* are in a written form, Cookson recommends that they be read aloud, and Hugh Kenner affirms the orality of Pound's poetics: "if there was ever a modern poet it would seem pertinent to compare to Homer...it was Ezra Pound...[he] composed orally/aurally" (qtd. in Cookson xxii). Yet for all its connotations of primitive community, the word "Tribe," like Tolkien's "our," is exclusionary. The *OED* defines "tribe" as a community "claiming descent from a common ancestor" (n. 1.a) or "a particular race of recognized ancestry" (n. 1.b). Pound may view himself as the bard, but he is the bard only for those races or "tribes" in *The Cantos* that share his Anglo-Saxon heritage and anti-Semitic values.

Irish poet W. B. Yeats complicates this discussion of nationalism and "high" versus "low" literature and refocuses our attention on modernism. As Anne Fogarty explains in her article "Yeats, Ireland and modernism," Yeats is frequently considered a peripheral figure in modernism because of his age (he was born two decades before Eliot and Pound) (126), his interest in mysticism and the occult, and most importantly, his active participation in the Irish literary revival (144). In "Yeats, folklore, and Irish legend," James Pethica explains that the Irish literary revival was a political and aesthetic movement beginning in the 1880s and 1890s to revive Irish folklore, myth, and heroic legend, as well as the oral tradition of the countryside, in order to construct an authentically "Irish" national identity (140). Proclaiming in 1886 that "great legends...are the mothers of nations," Yeats's belief that nationalism is rooted in a country's folklore and oral culture echoes Tolkien's endeavors to create a "body" of legend for his "beloved country" (qtd. in Pethica 130). As previously noted, Yeats published a number of collections of Irish folklore (129), and his early poetry shows that, like Pound, he considered

¹⁶ Pound's invocation of community undercuts Nicolay's commonly held thesis that a central aspect of modernism was the isolation of the individual (16).

himself the bard for his Irish “Tribe” (137). Yet his patriotic interest in the “low” literature of “the Irish people” increasingly became pitted against his attraction to “high art” (Watson 56). In his 1901 essay “What is ‘Popular Poetry’?” Yeats attempts to reconcile these competing impulses by contending that coterie art and democratic art are one and the same: “There is only one kind of good poetry, for the poetry of the coteries, which presupposes the written tradition, *does not differ in kind* from the true poetry of the people, which presupposes the unwritten tradition” [emphasis added] (qtd. in Watson 56). Here Yeats unites written and oral tradition, “high” and “low,” in a way that illuminates Tolkien’s and Pound’s analogous enterprises.

In a common conclusion, Fogarty places Yeats in an Irish strain of modernism in opposition to Pound’s: “If the thrust of Poundian modernism was to ‘Make it New,’ then the impetus of Yeats’s equally innovatory vision was to recover the old and the immemorial” (131). Yet Fogarty’s formulation misunderstands “Poundian modernism,” as I have shown that Pound is also keenly interested in the “orality” and “communal” culture that Fogarty identifies as separating Yeats from his contemporaries (132). Moreover, all three men are mythmakers; after Yeats gradually lost faith in the Irish literary revival in the early twentieth century, he turned to non-Irish myths, particularly Classical mythology like Pound, and, in Tolkienian fashion, even created his own elaborate mythology about the cyclicity of history (Pethica 142). As my comparison to Tolkien and Pound suggests, Yeats need not be such a problematic figure in modernism. Through their interest in myth, nation, and oral tradition, Tolkien, Yeats, and even Pound all occupy a liminal space between “high” and “low” that seeks to “recover the old” and “Make it New.”

* * *

Now that we have explored *which* myths these writers use as mythmakers, and the nationalistic implications of these choices, we can turn to *how* these writers construct their mythologies and the differing effects of their shared techniques.

Chapter Two: World-building

Both writers use techniques such as allusion, catalogue, and the integration of foreign languages to engage in what Mark J. P. Wolf calls world-building. In *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, Wolf defines world-building as the creation of an imaginary, complete, and consistent world that is separate from, yet connected to what Wolf terms our “Primary World” (23). Wolf implicitly upholds Tolkien as exemplifying the world-building enterprise by using Tolkien’s term, “subcreation,” to refer to “the making of a secondary world” (23). In “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien explains “subcreation” as “creating under,” because humans must take pre-existing concepts from the world God created and combine them in new ways (23). Framed in such terms, Tolkien’s “subcreation” reflects the modernist dictum to “Make it New!” Interestingly, in 1915 Pound described the role of the poet in similarly “subcreative” terms: “The essential thing in a poet is that he build us his world” (qtd. in Cookson xviii). Accordingly, Pound constructs the multifaceted world of *The Cantos* by taking fragments from history and literature and combining them to form a collage. This method parallels Tolkien’s taking “new combinations of existing concepts” to subcreate the new species, new languages, and new geography of Middle-earth (Wolf 24).

Ironically, the mark of a “complete” world is its endlessness. In his book *Digimodernism*, Alan Kirby argues that Tolkien ushered in a new genre: “the endless narrative” (155). Kirby defines “endlessness” as “a narrative form based on modes drawn from ancient or medieval oral

legend, and therefore immensely long, heroic, and externalized, structured by the regular opening and closing of episodes within the whole” (160). This concept resonates with both Tolkien’s and Pound’s interests in ancient myth, orality, and the epic mode. Significantly, both texts are massive. Pound’s *Cantos* is an epic poem of some 800 pages; in 1917, Pound called his own work in progress “an endless poem” (qtd. in Cookson xxiii). Although the individual *Cantos* are bite-sized, Pound suggests perpetuity within these interconnected closed episodes. From the outset, Pound signals the “endlessness” of his narrative by beginning *Canto I* with the word “And” (3). Aligning Pound with the epic tradition of Homer, this “And” begins Pound’s work in medias res. Pound further emphasizes “endlessness” by ending *Canto I* abruptly with the phrase “So that:” (5). The colon suggests that more must follow in order to complete the sense of “So that” syntactically. Like Pound’s “endless poem,” Tolkien’s mythology is extensive, covering a span of over 6,000 years in a trilogy over 1,000 pages long. The enormity of both writers’ projects suggests an anxiety about documenting history and preserving the past, even a fictional one, after the turmoil of two world wars in the twentieth century.

In both *The Cantos* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the writers world-build and signal the presence of myth through allusion. This literary device traditionally points to a referent outside of the text that the reader is supposed to know. Structurally, the allusions in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Cantos* function similarly because they are frequently decontextualized and presented without explanation. For example, “Treebeard’s Song” from *The Two Towers* references the names of a number of places unfamiliar to the reader. Treebeard, part of an ancient species of tree-herds called Ents, chants a poem chronicling how the woods have changed over the years: “And now all those lands lie under the wave, / And I walk in Ambaróna, in Tauremorna, in Aldalómë” (71). A sentence describing the woods and a section break follows

the poem, and the names Ambaróna, Tauremorna, and Aldalómë are never mentioned again in the rest of the trilogy. This example typifies Tolkien’s method of internal allusion. The phrase “internal allusion” may seem contradictory, but I use it to mean an allusion to a referent outside of the narrative, but within the fictional world that the author has created. In other words, the various references to characters and places are all contained within Tolkien’s own invented mythology of Middle-earth.

In contrast, Pound’s allusions in *The Cantos* are generally “external” in that they reference other literary works, existing mythologies, or historical figures.¹⁷ You may have noticed that I rely heavily on Cookson’s close reading of *The Cantos* in the previous chapter. Part of what makes Pound’s *Cantos* so notoriously difficult to read is that the poem centers on obscure allusions layered atop one another. For example, *Canto I* opens with allusions to Homer’s Greek epic poem *The Odyssey*, including the witch Circe (“Circe’s this craft, the trim-coifed goddess”) as well as Perimedes and Eurylochus, companions of the hero Odysseus (“Here did they rites, Perimedes and Eurylochus”) (*Canto I* 3; Cookson 5). Simple enough. Yet *Canto IV* features a slew of less recognizable but still “external” allusions:

Père Henri Jacques would speak with the Sennin, on Rokku,
 Mount Rokku between the rock and the cedars,
 Polhonac,
 As Gyges on Thracian platter set the feast,
 Cabestan, Tereus (16)

As I mentioned in the previous section, *Canto IV* links the story of Guillem da Cabestan, a late twelfth-century Provençal troubadour, with the Greek myth of Tereus, both of whom appear in the final line of this excerpt. As Cookson explains, the rest of the allusions here are not directly

¹⁷ The exception to this rule is the myths that Pound invents, but these are few.

related; for example, “Père Henri Jacques” is a Jesuit who respected Chinese religion, and “Polhonac” refers to Héraclé III, the Viscount of Polhonac in the twelfth century (13). Although some key allusions reappear in later *Cantos*, all of the references are usually presented without elaboration, just like Ambaróna, Tauremorna, and Aldalómë in Tolkien’s poem.

Although some of Pound’s allusions (such as those to *The Odyssey*) may be at least vaguely familiar to readers, most (like “Père Henri Jacques” or “Cabestan” above) are too obscure to communicate any meaning. Because allusion in *The Cantos* is so frequent and foundational to the text’s meaning, the reader requires “elaborate exegesis” to arrive at even a basic understanding of the text (*ASC* 355). Such “exegesis” may take the form of guidebooks such as Cookson’s *A Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* that I have been using. The result for many readers is alienation, as the allusions seem to rely on the specialized knowledge of an intellectual elite. Yet even the most prominent member of the English literati in the 1920s and 1930s—Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis—found Pound impenetrable (Eagleton 30). Leavis, who institutionalized the discipline of English literature and notably excluded Pound from the canon of “high” literature worthy of academic scrutiny (33), denounced the obscurity and “pedantry” of *The Cantos*: “even when one is fully informed about Mr [sic] Pound’s allusions, one’s recognition has no significant effect: the value remains private to the author” (qtd. in *ASC* 475). For Leavis, the only intellectual elite capable of understanding Pound’s allusions is Pound himself.

Because Pound alludes to existing bodies of knowledge generally better understood by a literary elite, he creates a hierarchy of knowledge, with himself at the top. Yet Tolkien’s “internal” allusions also create a similar structure of specialized knowledge. Because Tolkien is the only person who knows anything about “Ambaróna, Tauremorna, and Aldalómë,” for

example, he equalizes the rest of his readers while placing himself in a position of singular authority. Both authors therefore undercut the traditional purpose of allusion: to more efficiently and powerfully convey a concept or idea by drawing upon a common pool of knowledge. Instead, the allusions in both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Cantos* call attention to the erudition of the author. In both cases, each author makes himself into the myth of the person who holds the key to his work.

For readers living in today's post-Tolkien world, it might seem obvious why *The Lord of the Rings* enjoyed such widespread and sustained popularity, while *The Cantos* received mixed and oftentimes hostile reviews.¹⁸ Despite its pedantry, *The Lord of the Rings* is unequivocally more accessible and entertaining to readers. Yet Shippey explains that the publishers of *The Lord of the Rings* took a huge gamble: "No market researcher in the 1950s could possibly have predicted its success. It was long, difficult, trailed with appendices, studded with quotations in unknown languages which the author did not always translate, and utterly strange" (*Author* xxiv). Shippey's description could easily be applied to Pound's *Cantos*, which are also long, difficult, foreign language-filled, and "utterly strange." Understanding these similarities can help us better discern and articulate the text's exact points of divergence.

The crucial difference between the two texts is that in *The Lord of the Rings*, potentially alienating devices such as allusions, foreign languages, and historical catalogues are

¹⁸ Upon its publication in 1937, *The Hobbit* was such an immediate success that Tolkien's publishers Allen & Unwin requested a sequel. *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954-55 (Mendlesohn and James 46). The sales figures for the trilogy were consistently high (*Author* xx), skyrocketing with the U. S. paperback in 1965 (Mendlesohn and James 49). This popularity persisted, and *The Lord of the Rings* topped almost every poll of favorite books in the United Kingdom at the end of the twentieth century, much to the chagrin of professional critics and journalists (*Author* xx-xxi). *The Cantos* hardly enjoyed the same widespread popularity. Although some praised Pound's rhythmical sense, *The Cantos* "made a poor impression on most readers" (*ASC* 292). However, with the publication of *The Pisan Cantos* in 1948, the Fellows in American Letters of the Library of Congress awarded Pound the Bollingen Prize (788). By awarding the work of a traitor and fascist, the decision caused public controversy, but a literary elite still legitimized Pound's work in a way Tolkien's never was.

supplementary or gestural, whereas in *The Cantos*, they are essential to understanding. For example, Tolkien places historical details in footnotes or in the Appendices, about 150 pages at the end of *The Return of the King* that include tables of foreign alphabets, family trees, and lengthy chronologies, also known as annals. The reader can choose to read these to supplement the narrative, but none of the information is necessary to understand the novel's plot. Pound shares Tolkien's "encyclopedic impulse," as Wolf terms it (30), in his "documentary method of presenting history" (Cookson 22), but he does this *within the body of his poem*. For example, *Canto XXVI* is comprised primarily of annals of the city of Venice from over the centuries (Cookson 41), detailing names, dates, and fragmented dialogue: "To Bernard Justinian, 28th. of October: / 'Segundino is to come back with the news / Two or three days after you get this'" (122). Similarly, Pound includes prose extracts of letters in *Cantos IX-X*, including one entirely in Latin that describes the burning of militia leader Sigismundo Malatesta's effigy (Cookson 24). Some critics, such as Clark Emery, defend Pound's technique by arguing that Pound seeks "to recapture the intensity of life being lived, and, instead of bringing history to the reader, to bring the reader into history" (qtd. in Cookson 21-22). According to this interpretation, Pound uses over a dozen languages in *The Cantos* because he wants the reader to "speak the language of the time, the dialect of the place" (qtd. in Cookson 22). The "fragmentary information" that Pound provides through allusion, foreign language, and catalogue thus seeks to create a sense of historical immediacy and immerse the reader as fantasy literature does (qtd. in Cookson 22). Although Pound argues that the foreign words are "not necessary to the sense" (qtd. in Cookson xxv), the content of the Sigismundo letter, for instance, is lost on readers unfamiliar with Latin. Despite Pound's attempted historical authenticity, the epic poem's fragmented form denies the reader's expectations for a coherent narrative, leading to the widespread critique that the foreign

languages make the text “difficult” (qtd. in Cookson xxiii).

Pound’s disregard for these critiques reveals his elitism. In response to such criticism, Pound replied: “One can’t stop merely because some people haven’t read Latin” (qtd. in *ASC* 292). Deeming the public a “mass of dolts” (199), Pound viewed his art as independent from an ignorant audience: “WHAT audience...Are these the vermin for whom one should write footnotes?” (qtd. in *ASC* 478-79). By contrast, Tolkien’s decision to embed supplementary material in optional paratexts shows his awareness of his wide audience of men, women, and children of all ages (*Road* 324). This method therefore accounts for *The Lord of the Rings*’s greater popularity because it allows Tolkien to retain a degree of pedantry without alienating his readers. Even when allusions occur within the primary narrative, understanding them is not essential to understanding *The Lord of the Rings* because, unlike Pound’s poem, Tolkien’s novel balances allusion with a coherent plot and other traditional narrative techniques. As Shippey notes, allusions such as “the *famous* Belladonna Took” or “the great Thorin Oakenshield *himself*” function to “create a sense that more information exists round the edges of the story” (74). Like the Appendices, such words hint at backstories about the world and its peoples to enrich and extend the narrative, and consequently, immerse the reader in Middle-earth.

In two of his *Letters*, Tolkien attributes the “attraction” of *The Lord of the Rings* to its ability to offer “glimpses of a large history in the background” (333), and he explains that this suggestion of depth creates a narrative akin to “a Frameless Picture” (412). As Tolkien scholar Michael D. C. Drout notes, Tolkien’s embedded poetry gives the novels what Gergely Nagy calls an “illusion of textuality” and what Drout calls an “impression of depth,” borrowing a phrase from Tolkien himself (4).¹⁹ In other words, the poems, songs, and tales scattered throughout the

¹⁹ Tolkien originally used this phrase to describe *Beowulf* in his famous 1936 critical essay “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics”: “The whole...[created]...the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and

novels, in addition to allusion, are a key component of the expansive internal written and oral history to which the novels continually allude. For example, in *The Two Towers*, Aragorn, the exiled heir to the throne of Gondor and a member of the now broken Fellowship, translates “Lament of the Rohirrim,” a song of the horse-lords of Rohan: “Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing? / Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?” (118). Rather than advancing the plot, poems such as this one serve to slow down the narrative and develop character. In this case, the poem reveals cultural information about Rohan, as the “horse” mentioned in the first line signals the animal’s importance to the Rohirrim, and “helm” and “hauberk,” both pieces of armor, point to Rohan’s war culture.

After reciting this poem, Aragorn suggests that it is part of an anonymous, oral tradition that extends beyond living memory: “Thus spoke a forgotten poet long ago in Rohan, recalling how tall and fair was Eorl the Young, who rode down out of the North; and there were wings upon the feet of his steed, Felaróf, father of horses. So men still sing in the evening” (119). The mention of a “forgotten poet” here suggests Tolkien’s anxiety about the preservation of history as well as the identification of authorship. Many of the Anglo-Saxon texts that Tolkien read as a scholar were anonymous or badly damaged, and part of Tolkien’s academic work was to reconstruct languages or even entire cultures based on extant texts (*Road* 20). However, Tolkien here seems to show faith in oral tradition’s capacity to preserve history, if not authorship. The contrast between the poet from “long ago” and the men who “still sing” his song suggests continuity across the ages. Although the poet himself is “forgotten,” his words and the event they “recall” are remembered. The poem is part of a living oral tradition, a storehouse of poems that comprise the characters’ collective cultural memory. By gesturing to events and traditions

fraught with a deep significance—a past that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow. This impression of depth is an effect and a justification of the use of episodes and allusions to old tales, mostly darker, more pagan, and desperate than the foreground” (27).

existing outside of the primary narrative, Tolkien builds a backdrop of textuality that lends a sense of depth and reality to his world.

* * *

World-building is closely tied to word-building; both are genealogical enterprises. The next section discusses the writers' shared preoccupation with language and compares the linguistic principles on which Tolkien, an academic philologist, and Pound, a translator and would-be linguist, each build his world.

Chapter Three: Word-building

In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien frames world-building as primarily a linguistic endeavor, describing the "sub-creative art" of "Fantasy" as "combining nouns and redistributing adjectives" (143). Similarly, Tolkien asserts that his trilogy is "largely an essay in 'linguistic aesthetic'" (*Letters* 220) and "*fundamentally linguistic* in inspiration" [emphasis his] (*Letters* 219). Naturally, Tolkien would think of his creative work in these linguistic terms because his lifelong profession was philology, which Shippey defines as "the study of historical forms of a language or languages" (*Author* xii). Upon his appointment to the English Department at Oxford University in 1925, Tolkien's official field of study became history of the English language (*Road* 6) and Old and Middle English, as well as Old Norse and Welsh (*Author* xii). A philologist himself, Shippey argues compellingly in *The Road to Middle-earth* that Tolkien's literary pursuits are inseparable from his work as a philologist, detailing how Tolkien constructed entire concepts around single words (57).²⁰

²⁰ For example, Shippey explains how Tolkien invented the race of tree-herds, or Ents, from the Old English word "enta" in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Maxims II*: "orþanc enta geweorc" (the "skillful work of ents") (131). Interestingly, Pound does the same thing with his invented myth Illeuthyeria (*Canto II* 9), based on the Greek word for "freedom" (eleutheria) (Cookson 8).

Yet Tolkien's profession largely marked him as an outsider at Oxford, and his colleagues regarded both his scholarly and creative pursuits with apathy at best and derision at worst. Outside of his small coterie called the Inklings, the English faculty at Oxford generally ignored his novels (Mendlesohn and James 46), and those who noticed disapproved. According to Shippey, one colleague allegedly reproached, "He ought to have been teaching!" (*Road* 44). University culture and politics lie at the heart of this issue. During Tolkien's tenure as Professor of Anglo-Saxon, the Oxford English School was bitterly divided between literature and language, with professors and students of literature enjoying much more respect and prestige (*Road* 23). Initially hopeful that he could persuade others of his subject's appeal,²¹ he became increasingly jaded over his thirty-nine-year academic career. In his Valedictory address in 1959, Tolkien denounced the haters of philology—whom he terms "misologists"—for "dissuading those with philological curiosity from their bent, [and] encouraging those without this interest to believe that their lack marked them as minds of a superior order" (qtd. in *Road* 338). Yet the academic climate was not always against philology. In fact, the discipline enjoyed enormous prestige throughout the nineteenth century (*Road* 8). As Eagleton explains, the hierarchy at Oxford in the early twentieth century was largely the result of England's victory over Germany in the Great War. Because of the upsurge in national pride, the Leavis-led study of English literature gained esteem and supplanted philology—a discipline of German origins—in the English university system (29). As Tolkien commented in 1924, "'Philology' is in some quarters treated as though it were one of the things that the late war was found to end" (qtd. in *Road* 9). Once respected as rigorous, philology became considered outmoded, unpatriotic, and pedantic (Eagleton 29).

Pound shared the animosity of the "misologists," using "philology" as a catchall term to

²¹ See Tolkien's optimistic letter of application to the Professorship in 1925 (*Letters* 12-13).

denote “the heavy, ponderous logic of the nineteenth-century German school of scholarship” (*ASC* 273). In *Canto XIV*, one of the “Hell” *Cantos* modeled on Dante’s *Inferno*, he condemns academic philologists: “pets-de-loup, sitting on piles of stone books, / obscuring the texts with philology” (63). Despite his seeming hatred for the discipline, philology remained one of Pound’s central preoccupations throughout his career, informing his aesthetic sensibilities, his poetics, and his scholarship (Li 188). Like Tolkien, Pound spent many of his university years studying medieval romance languages and philology (187). Yet unlike academic philology, which is comparative and historically-based (*Road* 10), the “philology” Pound practiced was ahistorical and idealist (Li 199). Pound fancied himself a linguist, translating the work of troubadours Guido Cavalcanti and Arnaut Daniel early in his career before devoting himself to Chinese translations (*ASC* 155).

Japanese scholar Ernest Fenollosa heavily influenced Pound’s philological “scholarship,” as Pound liked to call it, an ironic appellation considering his hatred for academics (*ASC* 463). In 1913, Pound was commissioned by Mrs. Fenollosa to finish compiling the manuscripts from her husband’s notebooks after Ernest’s death in 1908 (*ASC* 220). Fenollosa’s manuscripts recorded Chinese poems first by transcribing the original Chinese characters and providing phonetic transcriptions using the Japanese pronunciation of his assistants in Tokyo (265-66). Fenollosa also made a “character-by-character” English translation, followed by a “line-by-line” translation with occasional interpretive notes (266). Pound adapted the manuscripts into modern English free verse and published these Chinese translations in his poetry volume *Cathay* in 1915 (265-66).²² Pound had the benefit of having the original text, but Fenollosa’s attempted literal translations reflected the Japanese sounds of his assistants’ readings of the ideograms (266).

²² The medieval and Renaissance Latin word for “China” is “Cat(h)aya” (*OED* “Cathay” *n.*, Etymology). The title thus reflects the many racial and linguistic layers of Pound’s translations.

Deeming the sound of Japanese superior, Pound continued using this flawed system and, moreover, often carelessly miscopied lines or took significant liberties with Fenollosa's translations, resulting in poems quite different from the originals (267). Many critics praised *Cathay* for its confident diction and style, yet Chinese scholars and linguists have denounced it for its inaccuracies as a translation (270). Despite criticisms, Pound believed *Cathay* showed his expertise in the Chinese language (271). In reality, Pound's methods show his willingness to colonize language for his own purposes.

Along with the *Cathay* poems, Fenollosa's essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" proved hugely influential on Pound's aesthetic and poetic thought (271). In this essay, Fenollosa argues that Chinese is "the ideal language of the world" (qtd. in *ASC* 272). Essentially, any language consists of a system of signs that correspond to referents in the real world. Fenollosa (mistakenly) believed that the Chinese pictorial characters were closer to their real-world referents and therefore less abstract and arbitrary than phonetic languages (*ASC* 272). This idea resonated deeply with Pound's Imagist principles, which stressed linguistic economy and concrete language instead of abstraction ("A Retrospect"). Because of the characters' graphicness, Fenollosa concluded that placing ideograms next to one another showed "some fundamental relationship between them" (qtd. in *ASC* 272). Pound termed Fenollosa's school of thought "The Ideogramic Method," and this technique of juxtaposition guided his subsequent poetry, particularly his *Cantos* (273).

Scholars have since proven Fenollosa's ideas largely inaccurate. Following the theories of semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure, linguists now recognize that the relationship between sign and referent may be "conventionally associated" or arbitrary (Li 195). Kenner explains that Chinese characters are not wholly pictorial in nature: "random similarities of sound have

determined which elements are common to many sets of characters, so that they are not graphed metaphors as Fenollosa thought” (qtd. in Li 195). Erroneous as they may have been, Fenollosa’s linguistic principles nevertheless affirmed Pound’s conviction that he could translate according to an “instinctive, intuitive knowledge” of another language, without knowing grammar and syntax (*ASC* 342). Accordingly, he believed he could determine what Chinese ideograms depicted if only he stared at them long enough (342). In Pound’s resulting “translations,” the lines therefore mean whatever he wants them to mean.

Presumably, Pound’s unconventional method of understanding language would appear horrific and irresponsible to an academic philologist concerned with accuracy, such as Professor Tolkien. Yet in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Hobbits can understand the Elves’ song instinctively: “It was singing in the fair elven-tongue, of which Frodo knew only a little, and the others knew nothing. Yet the sound blending with the melody seemed to shape itself in their thought into words which they only partly understood. This was the song as Frodo heard it:” (*FOTR* 88). The song is then transcribed in the Common Speech, essentially modern English.²³ Frodo’s passive manner of interpretation—sound “shape[s] *itself*” into words in his mind—recalls Pound’s intuitive methods as a translator. In this example, Tolkien alludes to what Shippey terms the “ancient myth” of the “‘true language’,” a prelapsarian language that everyone can understand because the relationship between the referent and the sign is natural and singular (*Road* 106). Like the “true language” Tolkien gestures toward, Pound finds his ideal in the Chinese ideogram, which he believes inherently “means the thing or action or situation” (qtd. in Li 190).

For both writers, this search for a linguistic ideal stems from their interest in the origins

²³ In Appendix F “On Translation,” Tolkien explains how he “translated” the Red Book of Westmarch, the fictional “source” of Tolkien’s entire narrative: “In presenting the matter of the Red Book, as a history for people of today to read, the whole of the linguistic setting has been translated as far as possible into terms of our own times....The Common Speech, as the language of the Hobbits and their narratives, has inevitably been turned into modern English” (*ROTK* 459).

and limitations of language as a system of signification.²⁴ Pound understood Western phonetic language as fallen, mediated, and arbitrary (Li 190). Shippey contends that Tolkien did not share the modernist struggle against the inadequacy of language because philology proved that language and the people who use it unconsciously abide by certain laws (*Road* 336-37). Yet Shippey oversimplifies. Before or after his embedded poetry, Tolkien frequently provides prose commentaries in which the character or narrator reflects on the poem presented. These metacommentaries reveal Tolkien's very modernist preoccupation with language, its forms, instabilities, limitations, and variations. For example, Tolkien echoes Pound's preoccupations about the subjective relationship between sign and referent in *The Hobbit*. When Bilbo asks Gandalf why Gandalf's friend, a shape-shifter named Beorn, calls a large rock nearby his home the Carrock, Gandalf responds: "He called it the Carrock, because carrock is his word for it. He calls things like that carrocks, and this one is *the* Carrock because it is the only one near his home and he knows it well" (115). As Shippey notes, the circularity of Gandalf's explanation suggests the "arbitrary" nature of language (*Road* 101). Because signs do not inherently correspond to their referents, different languages proliferate. Tolkien frequently points to the problems of translation in his works, such as Aragorn's explanation following his recitation of the "Song of Beren and Lúthien": "'That is a song,' he said, 'in the mode that is called *ann-thennath* among the Elves, but is hard to render in our Common Speech, and this is but a rough echo of it'" (*FOTR* 218). Because the song is "hard to render in our Common Speech," Tolkien suggests that certain concepts or thoughts can only be expressed in particular languages.

Similarly, the phrase "rough echo" indicates the dilution of the song's original meaning after

²⁴ Pound and Tolkien would have been familiar with the nineteenth century's search for linguistic origins. Beginning in the eighteenth century, William Jones theorized a common root language that would link Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Germanic, and Celtic. In the nineteenth century, philologists systematically studied this root language, termed Indo-European, but its existence was never proven (*Road* 10).

translation and the resulting inability to communicate completely across cultures. Yet language's shortcomings are not limited to translation alone. Tolkien goes a step further in the metacommentary preceding Frodo's elegy for Gandalf to suggest the fundamental inadequacy of human language for communicating thought entirely: "his thought took shape in a song that seemed fair to him; yet when he tried to repeat it to Sam only snatches remained, faded as a handful of withered leaves" (*FOTR* 403). This image of "withered leaves" suggests the futility of conveying the fullness of one's thoughts to another. As all three of these examples show, Tolkien, like the modernists, consistently calls into question the efficacy of language as a means of signification.

Both writers suggest that the ideal or "true" language is closer to music. Pound and Tolkien equally yearn for poetry's original connection to song through oral tradition. Edward Hirsch explains that "song was originally inseparable from poetry—they were one and the same, and all poems were meant to be chanted and sung, sustained by oral tradition" (591). Pound echoes this connection between poetry and song in his belief that "poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music" (qtd. in Cookson xxii). Music was an essential part of Pound's ideas about poetry, as he studied the work of folk musicians and troubadours (*ASC* 386-7) and sought to capture "the musical phrase" in his metrics ("A Retrospect"). As Cookson notes (xxii), the title of Pound's work, *The Cantos*, is derived from the Latin word for "song" (Hirsch 90), and as I discussed in Chapter 1, the structure of *The Cantos* as a whole is based on a fugal or musical pattern. Tolkien similarly equates his poetry with music by calling them "songs" in their titles (such as the "Song of Beren and Lúthien") and using precise verbs to describe how the character performs the verse. For example, when Aragorn recites the "Song of Beren and Lúthien," the narrator specifies: "he began not to speak but to chant softly" (*FOTR* 216). The opposition of "to

speak” and “to chant” here suggests a heightened, musical quality in Aragorn’s chanting different from everyday “low” speech. Such descriptions attempt to convey the auditory characteristics of oral tradition; however, because Tolkien is working within the confines of a written tradition, his poetry can never embody pure song as it did in the past. Tolkien confronts this issue in his first novel, *The Hobbit*, in a commentary preceding the Dwarves’ song: “And suddenly first one and then another began to sing as they played, deep-throated singing of the dwarves in the deep places of their ancient homes; and this is like a fragment of their song, if it can be like their song without their music” (14). The communal aspect and almost impromptu nature of the song are both qualities reflected in oral or folk poetry. Yet the distancing simile (“this is *like* a fragment of their song”) reinforced by the suggestion of incompleteness in the word “fragment” reveals Tolkien’s recognition of the gap between oral and written poetic traditions.

The character of Tom Bombadil best exemplifies Tolkien’s conception of the “true language” in which poetry and music are one. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the four Hobbits meet Tom, the master of the Old Forest, when a hostile tree named Old Man Willow attacks them. The Hobbits hear a voice “singing carelessly and happily, but it was singing nonsense: *Hey dol! merry dol! ring a dong dillo! / Ring a dong! hop along! fal lal the willow! Tom Bom, jolly Tom, Tom Bombadillo!*” (134). Although (or, perhaps, *because*) Tom’s song consists largely of a string of nonsense syllables, his words lack meaning but retain a magical quality. Tom’s song functions firstly as enchantment (“Frodo and Sam stood as if enchanted”) (135) and, later, incantation. Tom teaches the Hobbits “a rhyme to sing, if they should by ill-luck fall into any danger” (151). When an evil creature called a Barrow-wight attacks the Hobbits, Frodo sings the song and successfully summons Tom to aid them (161). Tom has a particular command over

language, as he defeats both Old Man Willow and the Barrow-wight by singing “stronger songs” (161). He suggests that each natural being has a song that he has mastery over; he says of Old Man Willow: “I know the tune for him...I’ll sing his roots off” (135). As Shippey asserts, the Hobbits and other creatures of Middle-earth can instinctively understand Tom because he has not yet “sunk into prose” (*Road* 106-7). As the “Eldest” creature in Middle-earth (*FOTR* 148), he represents the “root” or “true” language, potent because it is close to both nature and song. Although Pound scoffed at the supernatural or fantastical, the metaphor he uses to describe his *Cantos*—the Tale of the Tribe—implies that the Tribe’s bard has “the magic of the necessary word” (qtd. in Bernstein 8). This belief in the magic potential of language is deeply entrenched in folkloric tradition and embodied literally in Tolkien’s character of Tom Bombadil.²⁵

It is a short step from ideal language to linguistic ideology. For Tolkien and Pound, questions of race underpin both myth and language. Chapter One considered nationalism in relation to myth, and I will now extend that discussion to language. In “Philology and Power: Ezra Pound and the Regulation of Language,” Victor P. H. Li argues that Pound uses philology as “an instrument of linguistic regulation, an exertion of power in the service of a linguistic idealism” (189). In other words, Pound exploited philology for fascist purposes. Li contends that by reforming language, philology for Pound becomes a restorative and purifying enterprise (192) that secures the health of the nation (188). Pound promotes his linguistic ideology in two primary ways: first, through the study of etymologies,²⁶ which “recovers the original meanings of words

²⁵ Daniel Albright in “Yeats and Modernism” argues that unlike Eliot and Auden, Yeats believed in poetry’s “archaic and magical aspect”: “The long tradition of British poets, from the savage bards who could make trees walk by casting spells, to the refined sorcery of Yeats, may find its complement and antidote in the later Modernism of Eliot and Auden” (62). However, comparing Yeats to Tolkien and Pound, also active during “later Modernism,” complicates Albright’s opposition.

²⁶ Li argues that for Pound, etymology is “a discourse of truth based on the authority of origins.” By stripping a word from its socio-cultural history and uses, Pound actually practices “the regulative procedures of exclusion and rarefaction,” leaving only a “mythic word” in its place (206).

corrupted by social misuse or historical neglect” (192); and second, through the revitalization of the vernacular (195-96). The latter point requires further elaboration. Pound defines the vernacular not as “the daily speech” of the common people, but rather as organic “utterance” free of belles lettristic language (qtd. in Li 197). Elsewhere, Pound explains that poetic language should be “dignified, more intense, more dynamic, than to-day’s speech as spoken” (qtd. in *ASC* 163), but “*nothing* that you couldn’t in some circumstance...*actually say*” [emphasis his] (qtd. in *ASC* 192). Li describes the paradox in Pound’s desire for a “high” vernacular: “Pound’s argument vacillates between an appeal to an ideal natural speech and a snobbish revulsion from the realities of an actual vernacular” (Li 200). His dogmatic linguistic philosophy once again instates a hierarchy with himself on top and silences a whole class of people. By suppressing the language of the masses under the mask of “truth” or naturalness, Pound’s “linguistic idealism” serves his fascist goals (Li 208).

While Tolkien took a less outwardly militant approach to philology, he too thought that some languages were inherently “better” than others. In a 1954 lecture, Tolkien posited what Shippey terms “an aesthetics of sounds”: Tolkien’s theory that certain combinations and patterns of sounds made some languages, such as Gothic, Finnish, and Welsh, intrinsically pleasing (*Road* 113-14). As Shippey explains, “He thought that people could feel history in words, could recognise language ‘styles,’ could extract sense (of sorts) from sound alone, could moreover make aesthetic judgments based on phonology” (114). Tolkien’s theory is strangely similar to Pound’s conception of language, echoing the idea that people can understand a language to some extent without knowing it, as well as the exclusionary principle of an aesthetic standard of judgment.

Underpinning this theory is the notion that language innately corresponds to race. In *The*

Fellowship of the Ring, Bilbo recites an original poem to see if the Elves can discern Bilbo's verses from Aragorn's. When the Elves are unable to do so, Bilbo asserts that their racial differences should make their linguistic differences obvious: "If you can't distinguish between a Man and a Hobbit, your judgement is poorer than I imagined. They're as different as peas and apples" (*FOTR* 265). Tolkien incorporates this idea into his embedded poetry by varying formal qualities such as meter, rhyme, line length, and diction according to each character's race.²⁷ For example, in *The Hobbit*, the goblin songs feature trochaic meter, frequent caesuras, and emphatic spondees alongside onomatopoeia to give the song a primeval, chant-like feel and match the goblins' "horrible stony voices": "Clap! Snap! the black crack! / Grip, grab! Pinch, nab!" (60). In Appendix F "On Translation," Tolkien suggests that the "verbal vigour" of a race's language is tied to morality and purity. He explains that the language of Orcs and Trolls is "degraded," "filthy," and "too long removed from good to retain even verbal vigour, save in the ears of those to whom only the squalid sounds strong" (*ROTK* 460-61). Judging languages based on their aesthetic merits results in a linguistic/racial hierarchy, and Tolkien here borrows Pound's vocabulary of purity, vitality, and ethics to privilege certain languages over others.

Tolkien puts his "aesthetics of sounds" theory into practice in his creative work. Before translating "Lament of the Rohirrim" into Common Speech, Aragorn sings it in its original language to his companions, Legolas the Elf and Gimli the Dwarf:

Then he began to chant softly in a slow tongue unknown to the Elf and Dwarf;
yet they listened, for there was a strong music in it.

"That, I guess, is the language of the Rohirrim," said Legolas; "for it is like to
this land itself; rich and rolling in part, and else hard and stern as the mountains.

²⁷ See Stroda's "The Use of Folk Poetry in Fantasy Genre Literature" for a comprehensive study of how each of Tolkien's races corresponds to a distinctive poetic form modeled on real-world texts such as, for example, nursery rhymes for Hobbit poetry or hymns for Elvish poetry.

But I cannot guess what it means, save that it is laden with the sadness of Mortal Men.” (*TTT* 118)

Legolas can identify the language based solely on the quality of sounds, which ostensibly reflect the character of the “rich and rolling,” “hard and stern” landscape in which the Rohirrim live. Tolkien thus posits an inherent, rather than arbitrary, relationship linking language, race, and land. Unlike the Elvish language, which the Hobbits can understand intuitively, Legolas “cannot guess what it means.” Yet Tolkien again reinforces the potency of poetry’s original relation to song, as the “strong music” in the sounds arrests Legolas’s and Gimli’s attention even though they cannot understand the words, much the same way that Tom Bombadil’s nonsense song enchants the Hobbits.

As I demonstrated in my discussion of “Lament of the Rohirrim” in Chapter One, the language Legolas describes here is based on Anglo-Saxon. For both Tolkien and Pound, the Anglo-Saxon language offers particular aesthetic appeal because the words are more vivid and descriptive than modern English. Shippey suggests that in Tolkien’s “Preface” to C. L. Wrenn’s revision of the Clark Hall translation of *Beowulf*, Tolkien cautioned against translating *Beowulf* “only into polite modern English” (*Road* 44-45). Tolkien believed that such a translation would lose what makes the Anglo-Saxon language distinctive: namely, kennings or figurative compounds that encode the unique perspective and culture of the Anglo-Saxons (45). Like the allure of Chinese characters for Pound, these Anglo-Saxon words provide more graphic depictions of their referents, such as “flæsc-homa” (“flesh-raiment”), “bán-hús” (“bone-house”), and “hreðer-loca” (“heart-prison”) (45), all variations of what modern English calls “the body” (Baker 14.1).

Pound’s translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Seafarer* in 1911 suggests that Pound

shared Tolkien's perspective on this matter. Unlike other translators of the poem, such as Richard Hamer, Pound does not rely on blank verse. Instead, he maintains the poem's syllabic pattern, original line breaks, heavy alliteration, and syntax where possible. Although Pound appears to render the poem nearly word for word, as in his translation of "bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe" (Hamer 186) as "Bitter breast-cares have I abided" (S 236), Carpenter explains that Pound frequently translates individual words of Old English inaccurately. For example, he translates "englum" as "England," rather than the correct "angels," completely altering the original meaning of the line, as he does with the Chinese translations (*ASC* 157). Upon its publication, Anglo-Saxon scholars similarly decried the translation for being riddled with "careless ignorance and misunderstanding" (qtd. in *ASC* 156). Yet Pound's translation was and continues to be widely praised for capturing the "energy" and "character" of the original (156), quite in the way Tolkien suggests in his "Preface." Pound retains the poem's kennings, as in "breast-cares" and his translation of "hwælweg" as "whale-path" (S 238) instead of the modern "sea" (Baker 14.1). He adds "-eth" endings to verbs in order to maintain Anglo-Saxon sound, rather than modern sense. For example, Pound translates "singeð" and "bēodeð" as "singeth" and "bodeth" respectively in order to retain the "th" sound of the Old English letter eth (ð) (S 237). The emphasis on sound, the concrete images conveyed by kennings, and the extreme economy of language in this Anglo-Saxon poem thus resonate with Pound's modern sensibilities.

* * *

Language is the figuring ground for myth, which originally meant "speech" or "word" (Coupe 9). Tolkien and Pound's philological interests in the ancient link between music and poetry, the possibility of a "true language," and the vitality of the Anglo-Saxon language suggest that they share the modernist anxiety about the inadequacy of language and the corresponding

twentieth-century belief that language is healthier if it is tied to physicality (Eagleton 37, 41).

Conclusion: Reimagining Modernism

Ezra Pound's maxim "Make it New!" has attained mythic status in the discourse about modernism. Most accounts of modernism, such as those of Hirsch, Casey, Nicolay, and Kenner referenced in the Preface, are so focused on avant-garde formal innovations and the rejection of tradition that they neglect to interrogate precisely *what* the modernists are making new and *how* newness is figured.²⁸ The narrative of modernism has therefore largely excluded J. R. R. Tolkien because of his adherence to traditional narrative techniques, the popularity of his "low" fantasy novels, and his seemingly antiquated attention to philology and ancient forms such as folklore, heroic legend, and myth. Yet these elements that mark Tolkien as an outsider provide the occasion for a much-needed reassessment of the received narrative of modernism, a literary epoch Hugh Kenner has made synonymous with the name "Ezra Pound." Kenner's emphasis on the "genius" of Pound's "new" poetics, exemplified by Poundian catchphrases such as "the Ideogramic Method" and "the musical phrase," has overshadowed the importance of antiquity and "the old" to Pound's aesthetics. Reincorporating Tolkien into his twentieth-century literary moment helps bring these qualities in Pound to the foreground.

Examining Tolkien alongside Pound highlights the modernist preoccupation not only with recovering and preserving old myth, but also *repurposing* those myths and making them new through the equivalent enterprises of world-building and word-building. Both Tolkien and Pound therefore display an impulse to look backward *and* forward in their creative pursuits.

Myth becomes the focal point around which written and oral traditions, "high" and "low" forms

²⁸ Recall also the false binary in Fogarty's statement that "If the thrust of Poundian modernism was to 'Make it New,' then the impetus of Yeats's equally innovatory vision was to recover the old and the immemorial" (131).

of literature, religious and secular narratives, and questions of national identity coalesce. In their creative work, Tolkien and Pound hearken back to a literary past typified by oral tradition and communal art, when song was equivalent to poetry and when the storyteller was the center of society. By attempting to bridge written and oral traditions in their creative work, Tolkien and Pound undercut the “high”/“low” binary instituted during the twentieth century, one of the very categories that, ironically, has contributed to the gulf separating these two writers. Pound’s discourse of the “Tale of the Tribe” complicates his professed elitism and avant-garde sensibilities, while Tolkien’s integration of “high” genres such as poetry and romance counter his “pop lit” legacy. Their shared interest in the communal aspect of oral tradition challenges the traditional understanding of modernism’s focus on elitism and the isolated individual.

Most scholars agree that myth is a central aspect of modernism, but my comparison between Tolkien and Pound illuminates the specific techniques of allusion, catalogue, foreign language, and textuality that both writers utilize to immerse readers in their worlds. While myth functions as an escape to and from history in both texts, their shared techniques create different reading experiences. Both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Cantos* attempt to construct endless worlds, but Tolkien draws specifically on Northern European sources to craft an English mythology with “depth,” while Pound’s poem of “everything” aims for breadth. Yet as my comparison of the poetry of the Rohirrim and Pound’s *Cantos I-II* demonstrates, both writers ground themselves in an Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition, adapting Old English rhythms and kennings for modern verse. By aligning themselves with this tradition, both Tolkien and Pound identify with the Anglo-Saxon “race” for nationalistic and aesthetic reasons.

My study has shown that Tolkien is more concerned with issues of race than scholars have previously acknowledged. His enterprise to restore England to its roots is a nationalistic

and, perhaps, even a racist one. While Pound's sense of "nation" is less singular and more outwardly fascist, both writers engage in a discourse obsessed with purity, exclusion, morality, and rootedness. This discourse is closely tied to linguistic ideology, which, along with the search for a "true language" to combat the arbitrariness of signification, perpetuates hierarchies based on race. Just as Tolkien believes certain languages to be inherently aesthetically superior, Pound commandeers language under the guise of "truth" for the fascist purpose of silencing others. Their creative works thus reflect broader twentieth-century concerns about patriotism and race in an epoch shaped by two world wars.

Modernism is not just "high," elitist, and avant-garde. It is not simply formal experimentation and a break with tradition. It does not deal exclusively with fragmentation and the isolated individual. We must reframe how scholars have traditionally understood modernism, as well as Tolkien's and Pound's places in literary history. The idea of fantasy and modernism as two separate twentieth-century developments incompatible with one another is erroneous. In reality, both are deeply concerned with myths of origin, myth as escape, myth as community, myth as the locus of national identity, myth as a form of language, and the potential of the mythic mode to bridge "high" and "low." My comparison of Tolkien and Pound acknowledges these men as contemporaries and offers a revised understanding of both writers that changes how we view the trajectory of twentieth-century literature. By dispelling the myths surrounding Tolkien and Pound, my comparison ultimately dispels the myth modernism has made of itself.

Coda: "A Frameless Picture"

The scope of this study extends beyond the bounds of this paper. I have examined only a small portion of both writers' oeuvres, and my analysis could be applied to other works, such as

Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and the rest of Pound's *Cantos*. The link I have begun to draw between Tolkien and Pound could be extended to a tradition of modernist fantasy writing usually ignored by scholars, namely that of Robert E. Howard and Lord Dunsany. The myth of Cimmeria—the same myth Pound invokes by referencing “the Kimmerian lands” in the opening of *Canto I* (3)—forms the basis of Howard's tales of *Conan the Barbarian*. Lord Dunsany explores myth and cosmology in his pseudo-prophetic text *Gods of Pegana* (1904), which would provide an interesting foil to Tolkien's and Pound's world-building enterprises and complicate the religious dimensions of each. The connection to Yeats also deserves a more in-depth exploration. As Drout notes in his Introduction to *Tolkien's Poetry*, future scholarship can trace a genealogy of twentieth-century poets inspired by alliterative verse, including W. H. Auden and Seamus Heaney in addition to Pound and Tolkien (6). Tolkien and Auden's professional friendship has been understudied and would be the topic of a fascinating piece of biographical criticism. The absence of women in this study—a problem symptomatic of modernism as a whole—must at the very least be acknowledged as a shortcoming, to be remedied by future scholarship. Finally, my study opens up questions of readership and audience that I only briefly touch on here: Whom did Tolkien and Pound consider their audiences, and who were their readers in reality? How did these readers relate to poetry? How did they engage with Tolkien's poetry as opposed to Pound's? Did they even encounter Modernist poetry at all? These avenues of study would enrich the counter-narrative of modernism that I have begun in this paper and continue to develop our understanding of both writers, their complex works, and their place in literary studies today.

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