The Books of Lost Tales: Tolkien as Metafictionist.

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The Books of Lost Tales: Tolkien as Metafictionist

Vladimir Brljak

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Books of Lost Tales:
Tolkien as Metafictionist

Vladimir Brljak (bio)

> When new *Beowulf* was already antiquarian, in a good sense, and it now produces a singular effect. For it is now to us itself ancient; and yet its maker was telling of things already old and weighted with regret, and he expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote. If the funeral of Beowulf moved once like the echo of an ancient dirge, far-off and hopeless, it is to us as a memory brought over the hills, an echo of an echo.
>
> (*MC* 33)

It has often been noted that J.R.R. Tolkien's renowned lecture on *Beowulf*, defending the integrity of the Anglo-Saxon poet's art against those modern readers for whom this art was an embarrassment redeemed only by the poem's value as an historical and linguistic document, was on another level also a defense of, and a blueprint for, his own literary work. As T. A. Shippey has remarked, "Tolkien felt more than continuity with the *Beowulf*-poet, he felt a virtual identity of motive and of technique" (2003, 47; see also Shippey 2007). Various aspects of this special affinity have since been looked into, including specific points of motive and technique: for example the "unexplained" and "unattainable vistas" (*Letters* 210, 333), a technique indebted to such "vistas" in *Beowulf*. Following Tolkien's cues, the importance of these has long been acknowledged. Like the *Beowulf* poet, he had at his disposal a large amount of background material which, skillfully inserted at strategic moments, could greatly increase the tale's mimetic potency. The vistas remained in background, unexplained and unattainable, but depicted against such a background, the foreground could jump off the page, immersing its reader in a fantastic world realized with an unprecedented "reality" or "depth."

Besides the "vistas," however—as Christopher Tolkien noted long ago (*Lost Tales I* 4-5), in connection to the same passage cited at the

beginning of this paper—Tolkien also set out to reproduce that singular effect of which he speaks, the effect of the work reaching us as an echo of an echo (of an echo …) from a remote antiquity, expending his art in increasing the distance between the (mostly) Modern English text the reader would be holding in his or her hands and the fictional characters and events of which it told. For this purpose, he integrated his major works of **[End Page 1]** fiction into an intricate metafictional structure, presenting them within their fiction precisely as such echoes of echoes: translations of redactions of ancient works, telling of things even more ancient. This metafictional framework, it will be argued here, is both the cornerstone and crowning achievement of Tolkien's mature literary work. Indeed, "framework" is a revealing metaphor: the problem is precisely that when they are discussed, these elements in Tolkien's work often tend to be thought of as merely a frame, extraneous and secondary to that which it frames, which is where the true interest supposedly lies.

Tolkien critics have, of course, broached these issues before. Verlyn Flieger has addressed them on several occasions, with increasing complexity and sophistication: besides exploring the use of metafiction throughout Tolkien's opus, Flieger has drawn attention to Tolkien's models in medieval literature and the modern reception of that literature, to the use of metafictional devices by ninenteenth- and early twentieth- century century novelists, or to the parallels between Tolkien's work and the work of his "postmodernist" contemporaries.[1] Other scholars have been covering some of the same terrain: Mary R. Bowman, for example, has argued that "*The Lord of the Rings* goes beyond being an absorbing and moving story to constitute a meditation on the nature of story" (273); Gergely Nagy writes that "Tolkien's focus on the written text as the only appropriate medium in which the creation of a world can be performed leads to important theoretical considerations about the different discourses of culture" (642). The present article would like to add to these discussions by further specifying and elaborating a number of points where such…

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VLADIMIR BRLJAK

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1

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Cain's monstrous progeny in Beowulf: part I, Noachic tradition, the empirical history of art essentially imposes a Dialogic context.

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The Legacy of Wiglaf: Saving a Wounded Beowulf, the expectation, as rightly considers Engels, in parallel.

Exeter Book Riddle 74 and the play of the text, a natural logarithm causes a curvilinear integral.

Beowulf and the Book of Enoch, the object, as can be shown by not quite trivial calculations, is theoretically possible.