

TEDDER III, CHARLES F., M.A. Tolkien's Synthetic Myth: Fantasy at the Dawn of the Global Age. (2005)

Directed by Dr. Scott Romine. 38 pp.

Written at the inception of the global age and despite privileging Western traditions, Tolkien's work displays an emergent global consciousness, one which emphasizes the role of local identity in global affairs and posits allegiance and cultural bridge building as a solution and safeguard against worldwide conflict or subjugation under a totalitarian regime. Also, it is suggested that the work bears some generic resemblance to Menippean satire.

TEDDER III, CHARLES F., M.A. *Comic Book Cosmopolis: Globalization and the Superhero*. (2005)

Directed by Dr. Scott Romine. 36 pp.

Superhero comics, generically predispositioned to manifest cultural dynamics, show special aptitude for engaging contemporary issues relating to postmodernity and globalization. Thus, supervillains have been rewritten as terrorists or depersonified systemic failures while, correspondingly, superheroes have been inscribed with a new cosmopolitan ideal of heroic intervention that foregrounds cooperative networking, emphasizes the importance of local/personal motivation to global action, and privileges negotiation over violent conflict.

TOLKIEN'S SYNTHETIC MYTH: FANTASY AT
THE DAWN OF THE GLOBAL AGE
AND
COMIC BOOK COSMOPOLIS: GLOBALIZATION
AND THE SUPERHERO

by

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INTRODUCTION

I consider it a virtue that the following essays combine low-culture texts with high-culture discourse, but at the same time I am aware of the dangers of such a combination: the reciprocal accusations that one is taking the texts too seriously or the discourse not seriously enough. Although along the way I speak to the appropriateness, indeed the generic inevitability, of discovering even the most important themes inscribed within the most seemingly unimportant texts, there is little hope of persuading those who hold a traditional hard line against the incursion of pop culture studies into the field of literary analysis and criticism that such work has value, and even less need to apologize for such work to those who already accept it. That being said, I will, when it seems necessary, touch upon the issue of decorum: namely, the extent to which the popular context or fantastic conventions of a given work prevents even the most sincere reader from recovering a completely sober, well-grounded, in a word *realistic* meaning from it.

The crux of both essays lies in the way we understand the literary-rhetorical functions of fantasy and realism; in other words, to what extent basic verisimilitude or mimeses determines value. The prevailing assumption, evident in the pejorative uses of *fiction, fantasy, fairy-tale, comic-book, or cartoon*, has been that in order to obtain the greatest relevance to the real world, fictive works must mimic the nature or experience of that world in the purest or simplest manner possible. The following two essays offer a challenge to this assumption: the first by demonstrating how real-world bifurcations of

ideology might be mediated through a mythic, fantastic mode of story telling; the second by suggesting that the fantastic mode engages contemporary reality—i.e. space time compression, globalization, the global risk society, postnationalism, and postmodernity in general—more usefully or immediately than simple realism.

There is a danger here of misstatement, for in attempting to compensate for biases against a certain class of texts it is too easy to overcompensate and claim the superiority of those texts. My purpose, however, is not to overturn the existing hierarchy of literature in the academy or the culture at large but rather to account for the persistent popularity of texts such as these despite the limited esteem conventionally expressed towards them. It is as if readers push these texts away with one gesture—as mere make-believe—while at the same time drawing them in with another, funneling massive amounts of money into recent comic-book movies and bestowing an Academy Award on *The Lord of the Rings*. The standard explanation for this, which is that such works pander to escapism, only serves those who wish to maintain the superiority of realism. Moreover, the notion that the fantastic mode relates to reality only in the degree to which it offers escape from it quickly breaks down upon analysis of the ways in which even the most outlandish tales take their substance from real life: what we have is a modulation rather than a rejection of mimicry or mirroring as is typically implied by *realism*.

TOLKIEN'S SYNTHETIC MYTH: FANTASY AT THE
DAWN OF THE GLOBAL AGE

Thomas Shippey has commented on the relevance to Tolkien studies of “the idea that one of the main functions of a myth is to resolve contradictions, to act as a mediation between or explanation of things which seem to be incompatible” (179). The following essay seeks to investigate the ongoing appeal of *The Lord of the Rings* by examining a series of such mediations—between romance and satire, science and the imagination, representational and non-representational semiotics, and finally the increasingly urgent mediation between local and global theaters of responsibility and action. Thus it may be said that the stories of Middle-earth are *synthetic* in two senses: they are created or invented in an *artificial* way (compared to the way one supposes genuine myths to arise), and they *synthesize* into a single whole typically bifurcated modes of thinking about and acting in the world.

Once one adopts Shippey’s mediating functions—conflict resolution and explanation—as a means of examining existing Tolkien commentary, the analytical eccentricities of both the critical detractors and uncritical fans come into new focus. *The Lord of the Rings* has often suffered from its generic uniqueness; although it defined the Fantasy category of popular fiction to which it now belongs, its wider reception has been problematic. Positing a synthetic genre, an amalgamation of romance and satire, one begins to hear a pattern in the critical voices: that the satire is weakened by romantic tripe

or the romance tarnished by satiric laughter. Once liberated from the conventional wisdom that Tolkien's literary next-of-kin are mythmakers and compilers of fairytales, an obvious generic relation to Menippean satire emerges, as detailed below. Such satire is itself conventionally synthetic as "a practice whereby a spectrum of particulars, facts, and perceptions of events are brought together to form a uniquely comprehensive and yet particular view of reality" (Kaplan 30). Once granted that Tolkien's work not only celebrates the mytho-linguistic materials comprising it but also employs these elements in important philosophical work—the articulation of a particular worldview—a new understanding of the relevant ideological and linguistic criticism emerges.

The middle sections of the following essay predicate themselves on this generic redefinition and seek to reconfigure the relationship between two major themes within Tolkien studies, the inscribed views of modernism and of language. Some read Tolkien as anti-modern insofar as he opposes mechanization and industrialization; others read a pro-modern stance of moral cognitivism or anti-relativism, which makes Tolkien modern insofar as he is not postmodern. Surely this conflict needs only explanation of its terminology to sort out a stable consensus, and to this end the second section below distinguishes various significances of *modernity* and Tolkien's expressed and implied views of each. Considering Tolkien's theory of language, he was certainly aware, as a scholar, of the incommensurability of signifier and signified; yet in both his aesthetic technique and within the depicted speech of Middle-earth, certain words seem to have a special significance and power, one that has led many commentators to observe that language in Middle-earth defies conventional semiotic theory. But here we need only

look for conflict resolution to reach an understanding of Tolkien's sub-creation as a place which maintains the basic truth that words are not things while at the same time accommodating the common intuition that some words bear a special signification. The third section below schematizes existing commentary on Tolkien's linguistic aesthetics and methodically produces examples from the text to support both views of language, termed the mimetic and the anti-mimetic. Thus one may perceive the techniques by which Tolkien achieves his double effect and the philosophical position, a theory of wisdom independent of both words and things, that it enables.

Finally and most importantly, returning to the notion borrowed from Menippean convention that we may expect *The Lord of the Rings* to present a synthetic worldview, the final section below discusses the work as a mediation between the national era that precedes it and the postnational or nascently global era which follows it. Moreover, this worldview emerges directly from the mediations of modernities and linguistic theories previewed above. Ultimately the work serves to unite two sets of interconnected binaries: romance, positivism, linguistic unity, and nationalism against satire, relativism, linguistic deference, and cosmopolitanism. The mythic process allows Tolkien to formulate a worldview that has the best of the past—authority, righteousness, honor, certainty—and the future—flexibility, multiculturalism, humility, negotiation. Although this position is precarious and the work is often misread either as condoning Eurocentric patriarchal hegemony (a perversion of the former terms) or counterculture escapist mysticism (a perversion of the latter), the final indicator of the work's ideological content comes in its depiction of good and evil. *The Lord of the Rings* presents the defeat of a

totalitarian dark lord at the hands of a multicultural, multinational alliance under the banner of a cosmopolitan king, and thus affirms an optimistic reading of its synthesis as the best of both worlds. The oxymoronic nature of the term *cosmopolitan king* only serves to highlight the mediating, synthesizing technique of the work as a whole.

Mediating Mythic Romance and Menippean Satire

If Tolkien's work serves to mediate antithetical points of view, it follows that it will be met by a good deal of confused hostility from readers who subscribe to either point of view exclusively. In reviewing the first edition of *The Return of the King*, W. H. Auden observed that, "Nobody *seems* to have a moderate opinion: either, like myself, people find it a masterpiece of its genre or they cannot abide it" ("End of the Quest" 226). Indeed, a quick sampling of Edmund Wilson's detractions from the same time often leaves fans of the trilogy agape: Wilson accuses Tolkien of a "poverty of invention" (313) and an "impotence of imagination" (314), concluding that anyone enchanted with the story must "have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash" (314). A more sustainable attack on Tolkien comes from C.N. Manlove, who defines the work as a "species of heroic epic" with elegiac character (171-72). However, the story's heroic quest is undercut by destiny, its elegy negated by eucatastrophe, its epic drama ruined by the biased fortune, and its moral judgment weakened by wishful naiveté. Ultimately, the work represents nothing more than the hobby-horse of a deeply neo-aristocratic and antiquarian Oxford don with an "over-simple judgment on the modern world" (206). In short, all of Manlove's objections are to violations of generic decorum, and depend upon our granting his determination of the work's genre.

This uncertainty regarding generic identity persists despite fifty years of acclimation, yet any consideration of the work must first determine the standards by which it is to be assessed. Despite Auden's reference above to "its genre," no one has yet done so: it is not a conventional myth or fairytale because it is artificial, the deliberately fictive product of one mind; it is not a conventional novel because it is too epic and mythic in scope; and it is not a myth or epic because it is as closely narrated and intricately plotted as a novel, albeit with archaism and other stylistic eccentricities. Shippey attributes this difficulty in categorization to the simple fact that Tolkien uses a pastiche of generic conventions to tell his story. Working from Northrop Frye's hierarchy of literary modes, Shippey finds Tolkien's work touching upon all five.

The hobbits, for a start, are very clearly *low mimetic*, at least most of the time...Sam in particular (even more than Gollum/Sméagol) tends to sink towards the *ironic*, indeed his relationship with Frodo contains a hint of the most famous ironic/romantic paring in literature, that of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. (222)

There is a distinction between the *high mimetic* humans Éomer and Boromir and the human-of-legendary-stature Aragorn:

He, his non-human companions like Gimli, Legolas, and Arwen, and all the non-human species of Middle-earth, are figures of *romance*. Finally characters like Gandalf, Bombadil, and Sauron are very close to the level of *myth*...the whole story furthermore aspires in places to mythic meaning. (222)

The implication here is not only that the characters are distributed over several literary modes, but also that the episodes of their adventures are similarly varied, as in the

contrasting Shire chapters that frame the story. Note also that Frye's final mode, *satire/irony*, appears in Shippey's reading as *irony* alone; this begs the question of possible satiric elements in Tolkien's mythology.

One need not look further than Shippey's own source, Frye, to find a description of a satiric form that uses fantastic elements or modality to comment on or engage with the reader/the world at large, Menippean satire. Moreover, Frye's conception of this genre relates to the criticism often leveled against Tolkien.

Menippean satire appears to have developed out of verse satire through practice of adding prose interludes, but we know it only as a prose form, though one of its recurrent features (seen in Peacock) is the use of incidental verse. The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes...thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic...The novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry. (309)

Certainly Wilson maligned the characters for being stick figures—for they are not delivered according to the conventions of realism and naturalism—and C.S. Lewis, by way of defense, called them “visible souls” (15), which is not entirely estranged from “mental attitudes.” More to the point, Ugolnik writes that Tolkien, “strives for world view rather than the portrayal of individual consciousness” (21). Certainly evil in *The Lord of the Rings* operates as a disease of the intellect, at least in the persons of Saruman and Denethor. And although one would not simply label *The Lord of the Rings* a Menippean satire, links between the work and the genre persist once one looks for them.

Some of these connections are incidental: Flieger compares the sibylline Struldbrugs with the deathless elves (144). Others are more substantial: Kilby expresses his dislike of the “Scouring of the Shire” as “a satire...on dictators and a materialist culture” which violates the tone of the rest of the story (77). But, more tellingly, Tolkien himself defined fairy stories against works often praised as icons of the Menippean mode, specifically *Gulliver’s Travels* (which Flieger references above) and *Alice in Wonderland*. Tolkien classed Swift’s opus as a traveler’s (cp. fairy) tale and, in the same way, acknowledges the Alice novels as fine dream stories so long as the narrative device of dreaming is distinguished from the ostensibly real land of faerie (“On Fairy Stories” 124-6). The mere fact that Tolkien felt a need to make such distinctions serves to indicate generic kinship.

It would seem that, for Tolkien, the difference between Menippean satire and the fairy tale mode is the presence or lack of a connecting device back to mundane reality—a journey or a dream. Tolkien’s mythos, it is implied, has no such device. But however genuinely Tolkien may have intended this, there is at least one connection between the primary world and his sub-creation, although it is certainly suppressed and no one can be said to travel between the two realms. Tolkien’s prologue and appendixes refers to a *Red Book of Westmarch*, Bilbo’s record of the events of the *Hobbit*, titled *There and Back Again*, but also Frodo’s record of the events of *The Lord of the Rings* and many other bits of Shire legend and trivia. Tolkien figures himself as a kind of editor and translator of this book, having rendered all uses of Westron, the *lingua franca* of Middle-earth, as English. This mock-editorial device for explaining how the novel migrated from the

experience of its characters to the pen of its author is nothing new. It has its place even in the earliest novels, as with Defoe's pretense of being Moll Flanders' ghost writer/editor. Such a device neatly serves to distance the tale from the notion of being made-up: a fiction, fantasy, or fairy-tale in their common pejorative senses. A more pointed (Menippean) example of this trope is the preliminary epistle of *Gulliver's Travels*, in which the fictional character chides his publisher regarding the reception of his book. Swift combines the device that (however playfully) masks fiction as journalism with a complaint that readers are not applying its moral truths readily enough. Tolkien's mock-editorial introductions and appendices serve a similar function.

But no matter how far one may prove that *The Lord of the Rings* bears some resemblance to the *content* of Menippean satires, there remains a certain reluctance (and a healthy one) to classifying Tolkien as a satirist in *tone*. Overall, Middle-earth has the hallmarks of a romance: magical beings, a quest, good and evil knights, exotic settings, adventurous episodes to name a few. And much to the frustration of critics like Wilson and Manlove, whatever Tolkien may be satirizing here it certainly isn't romantic convention. Even his diminutive pacifist hero does not satirize the knightly quester, for Aragorn maintains his epic scale despite Frodo's central role in the story. If anything, Tolkien went to great lengths to defend his literary taste—he *liked* dragons and elves and dwarves and so on, disliked those who looked down their noses at such things, and went to great lengths to chastise anyone who felt fantastic tales might do better without their fantastic elements ("Beowulf and the Critics"). *The Lord of the Rings* does fictively and at length what Tolkien's scholarly appraisals did directly: it uses mytho-romantic

materials to satirize an anti-romantic view of the world. Since the opposite of *romance* on many critical schema is *irony*, and the partner of *irony* is *satire* (this is certainly true in Frye's case), confusion enters in: using romantic conventions to satirize an ironic worldview simply doesn't figure into most preconceived notions of literary structures. But what I have termed here an *ironic* worldview needs delineation. I am speaking of a mechanistic, materialist, industrialized kind of thinking, the kind that dislikes dragons and is often associated with rationalism, the Enlightenment, and the scientific revolution—in another word, modernity. The fact that Tolkien's source materials predate modernity only strengthens their usefulness in working against modernity. But of course the commentary which develops is much more nuanced than mere anti-rationalism, just as *The Lord of the Rings* is more nuanced than pure satire or romance.

Mediating Modernisms

The Menippean mode is noted for its attacks upon intellectualism, but *The Lord of the Rings* was written by an arch-intellectual, an Oxford don and an accomplished scholar. On the other hand, Tolkien studies have often probed his antagonism to scientific modernism and the mechanizing industrialization which has accompanied it, both species of intellectualism to be sure. But to consider Tolkien anti-modern simply because his source material predates the modern era, or anti-intellectual because he objected strongly to particular outcomes of the scientific revolution only gets at part of the dynamic at hand. *The Lord of Rings* consistently upholds a synthesis of science and imagination and excises technological achievement only in its aberrant, soulless manifestations.

It becomes necessary here to distinguish two possible uses of the term *modern*: on the one hand, *modernity*, a rationalistic philosophy or *modus operandi* dating from the Enlightenment; on the other, the industrialized, mechanized *modern* or contemporary world that results from the attempt to master and utilize such knowledge. Both the pure and the applied forms of modernity share an underlying convention: the hope of correct comprehension or representation of the world. This commonplace forms the basis for Tolkien's synthesis of two often conflicting ideals—industry and ecology.

Let us begin by recalling that, although Tolkien may love a good fairy story, his career was founded upon philological study, a rigorously scientific branch of the language arts. Suggesting that Tolkien may have somehow cast out rationality to raise up fantasy is absurd, and close reading shows that “Tolkien is never less than respectful towards rationality, or science as a mode of knowledge, whatever its abuses” (Rosebury 178). Any confusion here is rooted in an assumption that science and rationality assumes a materialist worldview, which is not always the case. Tolkien's apparent views seem to resemble renaissance thinking: Duriez has pointed out the connection to Leonardo da Vinci, who held that reality could only be completely comprehend through a balance of scientific observation and “exact fantasy” (22). The roots of science as investigation into reality then might (although often have not) include systematic investigation in metaphysics. Rosebury also sees Tolkien as grouping the artist and scientific impulses to comprehend reality (176).

In fact, without a notion of a rationally comprehensible reality, Middle-earth would have gone unmade or would have been made less well. All non-mimetic fictions,

including science fiction and horror as well as fantasy, rely on a realistic style to make their outlandish materials “feel” real, and this in turn also relies on the ability to imagine impossibilities in a way that makes them seem possible. Koravos observes that “in general, the history of the second world is based on reason,” albeit one that has been “marked by struggle between two conflicting forces of good and evil” (“Realistic Fantasy” 32). Nearly everything in Middle-earth—especially the geography and the climate—behaves in a realistic manner. Even the political systems and culture cues seem to merit belief, and individuals operate according to recognizable psychology: Tolkien’s characters are “based on reason, and therefore realistic and credible” (32). Although hobbits and wizards may have been incorporated into the LSD culture of the first wave of Tolkien enthusiasts, the work itself could only be composed by a sober mind confident in its own powers of invention and representation.

Of course, if we characterize Tolkien as a renaissance rather than an Enlightenment intellectual, we have perhaps set him only to oppose modernism rather than mediate between that point of view and the post-modernism which came to ascendancy not long after *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1955. Contemporary postmodern movements sometimes find affinity with renaissance or pre-modern thinkers. Patrick Curry certainly reads Tolkien as a link between pre- and post-modernism, “suggesting that just as there was life before modernity, so there can be after it” (25). However, postmodern notions of “history’s sheer contingency” and its opposition to grand narratives (which Curry speaks to) run counter to the fact that Tolkien’s history of Middle-earth is as grand a narrative as any, albeit a fictional one. Countering Curry,

Rosebury rejects “nothing but story” post-modernism (177), and Birzer points out that Tolkien was neither a typical modern who holds myths as lies, nor a postmodern who holds a given myth to be one of many equally truth myths (xxiii). The anti-modern half of Tolkien’s mediations, then, does not arise from the philosophical connotation of modernism; rather, he rejected secular modernism’s results while at the same time maintaining faith in its underlying vision of a rationally comprehensible universe.

Tolkien’s disappointment with the contemporary world—heir of the scientific revolution—and his fears about the apparent direction in which industrial culture was headed echoes another British writer of non-mimetic satires: George Orwell. The connection between Tolkien’s villains and Orwell’s have been made often. Shippey notes that Saruman is “on his way to doublethink” in his plans to both ally with Mordor for the sake of his own benevolent ends (76). Robinson also reads Saruman as reformer-villain who seeks to establish a new world order based on “an attempt to find the pattern of history” (20), not unlike the socialist pigs of *Animal Farm*. Meile compares Sauron’s Black Speech, the only invented language as such within middle-earth, to 1984’s New Speak by looking at the structural transformation of Quenya (Elf Latin) into Black Speech, adopting to Middle-earth Orwell’s familiar thesis regarding the role of language in shaping the mind. Like Orwell, Tolkien’s anti-language serves as a controlling device to keep a large population in a state of squalid servitude, although Orwell’s repressed population earn our sympathy while Tolkien’s slave race, the Orcs, receives only loathing. Thus Tolkien’s villains, like Orwell’s, are decidedly modern in their aims: global conquest and mechanization under an authoritarian rule.

Yet this does not mean that Tolkien would throw out all of modernity, from the renaissance on, only to be rid of its aberrant forms; there is even some suggestion that Tolkien's Hobbits are the most modern race in Middle-earth. Although Saruman's rise and fall serves as a cautionary tale regarding a "vice of modernity, though we still have no name for it—a kind of restless ingenuity, skill without purpose, bulldozing for the sake of change" (Shippey 171), we should not conclude that the accrual of knowledge and self-reflection within modernity—of modern scholarship especially—goes hand in hand with clever scheming. The beneficial, or at least benign, aspects of modernity, according to McComas, turn up within the Shire, since "only in the Shire can one visit a museum" while the mytho-romantic war of wizards and demons that occupies the non-Shire chapters is fought "using weapons of the sort that are displayed in the Hobbit's museum"(10). Moreover, Shippey considers the anachronistically modern Englishness of the Hobbits to play a major role in eliciting from readers a secondary belief in Middle-earth (6). Thus, although Tolkien elevates rural life over industrialization, this gesture does not likewise privilege rustic ignorance over learning. Even Tolkien's Ents, the most obvious agents of the countryside's revenge upon the industrial city, only strike out at Saruman, the closest thing to a mad scientist in pre-scientific Middle-earth, while allying themselves with Saruman's counterpart, Gandalf. It is far from the case that all scientists, or wizards, are necessarily mad. In addition to maintaining the respectability of book-learning, Tolkien also presents positive views of technology and craftsmanship. Both the Hobbit skills of building (cp. digging) holes and moving silently, or the elvish arts (cp.

enchantments) that adorn Lothlórien, may be cited as examples of Tolkien's love of skilled craftsmanship—of *ars* or *techne*, the etymological root of technology.

A better example—for we have it in the positive and the negative, is the *techne* of the Dwarves. During their sojourn in Moria, Gandalf explains that the underground kingdom was carved to mine *mithril* silver:

The lodes lead away north towards Caradhras, and down to darkness. The Dwarves tell no tale; but even as *mithril* was the foundation of their wealth, so also was it their destruction: they delved to greedily and too deep, and disturbed that from which they fled, Durin's Bane. (309)

Readers seem invited to conclude that the *techne* of the Dwarves amounts to little more than ecological exploitation, for which they have been punished. Yet we catch a glimpse of another point of view as Gimli describes the Glittering Caves of Nogrothond. The dwarf rhapsodizes on what his kindred might be able to accomplish there, and Legolas replies that “one family of busy dwarves with hammer and chisel might mar more than they made.” Gimli defends himself:

No you do not understand...No dwarf would be unmoved by such loveliness. None of Durin's race would mine those caves...We would tend these glades of flowering stone, not quarry them. With cautious skill, tap by tap...so we could work, and as the years went by, we would open up new ways, and display far chambers that are still dark, glimpsed only as a void beyond fissures in the rock. (535)

Here we see not only an apology for the proper application of art and technology but also a rather optimistic view of what they may accomplish. The passage seems to recall the

kind of writing and scholarship in which Tolkien was often engaged, the slow methodical restoration of a word worn down by time or the niggling together of an epic fantasy.

Just as the Menippean form uses the audience's own intellectual astuteness to turn jokes at the expense of intellectual excesses, Tolkien uses the very values of modernism—correctness in the acquisition and application of knowledge—to attack the abuses of modernism in which false knowledge is put to a wrong purpose, whether these be industrial pollution or Orwellian social engineering. But this game relies on the author and audience knowing more or better than the object of their satire and raises questions of epistemology and representation: in order to poke fun at foolishness, one must posit an epistemology in which a correct position is obtainable and a linguistics in which it may be expressed. Yet the intellectual progress in both of these fields runs against this grain and towards postmodern anti-representationalism. Thus Tolkien's mediation of the good and evil within modernity indicates the need for a complementary mediation regarding the ways in which subjective language might hope to give utterance to objective truths.

Mediating Semiotics and Epistemology

It is clear from the beginning that in Middle-earth special forms of language—the words of elves and wizards—operate as if they share an intrinsic bond with the world or are released from the incommensurability of words and things. There are moments in which words transmit their meanings without the hearer being a speaker of the language: the most striking example comes when Frodo listens to the elvish songs in Rivendell. Later, in Appendix A, there is passing mention of “the gift of Elf-minstrels, who can make the things of which they sing appear before the eyes of those that listen” (1033).

Other words seem to offer control over reality: during the Moria episode, Gandalf sends the ponies off with words of Guard and Guiding (296) and later shuts a door against the Balrog with a “Word of Command” (319). It also seems clear that the phonetic characteristics of a language in Middle-earth convey some deeper essence than the mere meaning of their words, especially the verboten black speech, which alters the ambient weather when Gandalf recites the ring inscription during the Council of Elrond.

No surprise, then, in finding Tolkien criticism rife with commentary on the narrative, aesthetic, and philosophical functions of language. What is surprising, however, is the range of conclusions these commentators have reached. Working from an ontological position that includes the concept of a divine Logos, some hold that “the verbal re-creation of material reality proceeds through the same creative principles which first established that reality—whether that reality be Middle-earth or this earth” (Zimmer 66). In other words, one could say that God is the author of our world, or that Tolkien is the god of Middle-Earth. Less mystically, one can suppose that Tolkien strives to find or coin “words which resemble their referent and in this sense manifest that which they signify” (Zimmer 70). Even among decidedly secular or skeptical critics, one finds the claim that proper names have a one-to-one relationship with their referents (Shippey 57). Of course, the notion that the language which creates a fictional reality mimics the ways in which language relates to the real world may also cut along constructivist lines, figuring *The Lord of the Rings* as a “celebration of the actual linguistic processes through which we come to know ourselves and our world.” (McComas 9). Or it may be that Tolkien’s linguistic pyrotechnics “do not constitute meaningful signals (= signs), but

function merely as physical stimuli” (Zogorzelski 49). We are left with a resounding sense that language is important here, but with no clear consensus beyond that.

The best way to negotiate these claims is to pair counterexamples, and the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* offers such matching pairs bears witness to the mediation inscribed within it. Let us designate the impression that words may be entangled with the essential nature of their referents as the *mimetic* view. Medcalf argues against the substance of this impression, citing Tolkien’s concept to things apart for ourselves as a proper aspect of “primary reality” (42-3). Call this the *non-mimetic* view. As we shall see, qualified mimesis, or arbitrariness with occasionally meaningful correspondence, forms the dynamics of Tolkien’s linguistic philosophy. There are three main types of language use featured in existing commentaries: both Zimmer and Ungolink explicitly divide Tolkien’s linguistic aesthetics into two major devices, names and onomatopoeia. To these categories, which are by nature or by presentation spoken forms within the text, we may add written or alphabetic forms. Given that all three appear as operating either mimetically or non-mimetically in *The Lord of the Rings*, we have at least six types of example to seek out.

First, let us consider Tolkien’s premier (although not his only) alphabet, the Tengwar. This secondary semiotic system (for it represents the sounds which represent the things) typifies his mediation of mimesis and incommensurability. On the side of mimesis, “characters representing sounds of similar place or manner of articulation have features in common in their form...the relationship between sign and value is thus not as arbitrary” (Smith 1239). Tolkien noted that the only example of this in modern English is

the relationship between the voiced and voiceless plosives P and B. On the side of incommensurability or arbitrariness, however, the Tengwar's symbols have no set value and are adapted at need. Thus the beautiful elvish letters can be used to represent the vile sounding black speech on the ring inscription. The Tengwar represents the creation of a rational mind confronted with but not daunted by arbitrariness; rather the floating significance of the alphabet becomes its greatest strength, adaptability.

Next, let us consider examples of mimetic onomatopoeia: moments when beautiful language mimics a beautiful soul or evil thoughts find expression in ugly sounds. Bell has detailed the characterizing effects of sneaky Gollum's nasty lisp, brutal orc's curse-like gutturals, and noble Rohan's galloping rhythms, and so on (38). Ugolnik likewise finds that Tolkien relates goodness and beauty and gives a moral power to language so that beautiful language forwards good ideas and vice versa (23). He also finds that such phonetic qualities are often racially appropriate: harsh, guttural orc-speech sounds like it comes from a mouth with fangs (27). This racially delineated notion of speech, alongside the related notion that some races (orcs) are irredeemably evil, has gotten Tolkien into trouble from time to time. Even Auden, Tolkien's great apologist, was "not quite happy about these beings, for their existence seems to imply that it is possible for a species that can speak, and, therefore, make moral choices, to be evil by nature" ("Good and Evil" 139). Koravos, however, finds an implication that orcs have only fallen past the point of redemption under Sauron's mastery and assigns some nobility to the brutes in that they have never adopted the Black Speech (a point often missed), but rather speak their own, albeit harsh and guttural, language ("Common

Speech” 40). But whether or not the orcs are *essentially* evil, there is no doubt that Tolkien connects their foul speech with their denigrated status.

By way of counter-example, non-mimetic onomatopoeia, there are at least three instances in the story when the aesthetic quality of speech fails to reflect or reflects inversely the moral stature of its speaker. At least three characters in the story speak with grace or rhetorical skill but also with evil intentions: Wormtongue, Saruman, and the Mouth of Sauron. When Gandalf arrives to rouse Théoden and enlist Rohan in the war, Gríma strategically attempts to discredit him with the names Master Stormcrow and *Láthspell*, Ill-news (502). Gandalf rebukes the false councilor: “The wise speak only of what they know, Gríma son of Gálmód.... I have not passed through fire and death to bandy crooked words with a serving-man till the lightning falls” (503). There are two points to be made here. On a minor note, Gandalf trumps Gríma’s false-naming by calling him by his full, familial name. More importantly, Gandalf establishes a criteria for wisdom (speaking from what one knows) and projects himself as worthy to speak due to his greater share of experience, the trials that he has passed through. In the following chapters, inasmuch as Gríma’s linguistic power derives from his master Saruman, Gandalf warns that the corrupt wizard “has powers you do not guess. Beware his voice!” (563). When Saruman addresses the company, Tolkien introduces his words with a long digression as to their magical quality:

Suddenly another voice spoke, low and melodious, its very sound an enchantment. Those who listened unwarily to that voice could seldom report the words that they heard; and if they did, they wondered, for little power remained in them....But none were unmoved; none rejected its pleas

and commands without an effort of mind and will, so long as its master had control of it. (564)

Saruman's voice is *melodious* even though his intentions are evil, the enslavement rather than the persuasion of his listeners. He does not rely on logical rationality (his bare words lack power), but rather on presentation and artifice, and his words cannot be trusted to represent the truth. The third speaker, The Mouth of Sauron, appears late and briefly in the story to deliver terms and present false tokens of Frodo's death. He speaks fluent Westron (cf. orc speech, Black Speech), and although his speech is highly characterized with colloquial insolence, mockery and cruel sport, there is no dialect: he is a skilled speaker, even if his style is of a low variety. When Gandalf refuses to accept terms, the Mouth echoes the Wizard's reproach to Gríma: "Do not bandy words in your insolence with the Mouth of Sauron!" (872). Thus in every instance—note that all three involve a confrontation with Gandalf in which the hero wizard displays meta-rhetorical awareness of his opponent's skill—Tolkien incorporates the simple fact of false speech into a world in which true speech is possible; bandying crooked words does not preclude a normative use of language.

Pressing onward, we turn to examples of mimetic names. Some instances of this stand out for their drama, as when Aragorn evokes the authority by which he dares the rapids of Sarn Gebir with the most illustrious (eldest and most elvish) name he may claim, *Ellessar*, the Elfstone (384). Similarly, Gandalf defends the bridge of Khazad-dûm by naming himself as "wielder of the flame of Anor" against the "flame of Udûn" (322). More subtly, names may be changed as their referent alters over time: Entish names are

always growing, and Treebeard speculates that the Elves have shortened the name *Lothlórien* from *Laurelindórenan* because that land “is fading, not growing” (456). In either case, a particular name allows access to the essence of the thing to which it refers, whether it be an individual’s identity or the evolving nature of a place. In truth, this set of examples suffers from an embarrassment of riches: one could cite the names of every place and character in the entire work.

On the other hand (non-mimetic names), knowing the name of a thing in Middle-earth is no guarantee of mastery over it. A passage often cited as Tolkien’s attack upon modern science’s denial of traditional ways of knowing will illustrate:

Thereupon the herb-master entered. ‘Your lordship asked for *kingsfoil*, as the rustics name it,’ he said; ‘or *athelas* in the noble tongue, or to those who know somewhat of Valinorean...’

‘I do so,’ said Aragorn, ‘and I care not whether you say now *asëa aranian* or *kingsfoil*, so long as you have some.’

‘Your pardon lord!’ said the man. ‘I see you are a lore-master.... But alas! Sir, we do not keep this thing in the Houses of Healing, where only the gravely hurt or sick are tended. For it has not virtue we know of.... But old folk still use an infusion of the herb for headaches.’

‘Then in the name of the king, go and find some old man of less lore and more wisdom who keeps some in his house!’ cried Gandalf. (846-7)

It has been often observed that this short episode offers a satire on the folly of learning (a Menippean trait), and indeed my purpose for quoting it at length is to demonstrate the contempt heaped upon the self-important herb-master who knows many names but has no grasp of the reality they represent (one-to-one correspondence or no). It must be noted, however, that the characters who chastise him are both lore-masters in their own right;

Aragorn even out-does the herbalist at his own name-dropping game. The king and the wizard must have something that the foolish man does not possess: we will see in the next section that it is wisdom which comes through experience.

Throughout the story, both of Tolkien's lore-masters, Gandalf and Aragorn, demonstrate a master *of* language rather than a mastery *through* language, the latter being the province of the three false-speakers mentioned above. Words figure as an important tool in grasping reality (mimetic operation), but they do not guarantee that grasp (non-mimetic operation). They may generate wisdom and determine right action, as in "The Council of Elrond" and "The Last Debate" chapters—but words can also impede action, as with Gandalf's failure, explicitly as lore-master, to guess the password to Moria. Although much of the preceding discussion has followed the typical discourse of its kind in considering the relationship of *words* and *things*, the mediations within *The Lord of the Rings* proposes a third category, *wisdom*, independent from the other two (whereas words, ideas, and wisdom are often conflated contra things). Indeed, one of the final glimpses we have of the conversation of wizards and elves is conducted without words, as Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel, do not "move or speak with mouth, looking from mind to mind...as their thoughts went to and fro"(963). Thus the possibility of true knowledge is preserved alongside semiotic incommensurability by maintaining faith in the rational mind's capacity to compensate for the limitations of language.

Mediating Pride and Pluralism

Thus far we have seen that there is no ready-made genre into which we may place *The Lord of the Rings*, but granted that it is both fantastic in content and saturated with

scholarship and erudition, it seems to bear some resemblance to the Menippean satire, albeit without that form's typical mockery and deliberate silliness. Taking this as a cue to look for a comment on intellectualism or philosophy, we find that Tolkien once again defies conventional understandings, embracing the implicit project of modernity—the apprehension of absolute reality—while rejecting its concurrent materialism and mechanization. This modified—but by no means unique—viewpoint manifests itself through Tolkien's linguistic aesthetics and his exploration of language as a creative power and representational tool, until there emerges a theory of wisdom which relies on a mixture of lore and experience. Now let us consider the value of such mediations in the contemporary world.

The existing criticism makes clear the work's relevance to the World Wars, which featured both political alliances and the horrors of war on an unprecedented scale, as well as the Vietnam conflict, which cast doubt on the ability of military might to assure victory; but what of the work's renewed popularity concurrent with the advent of the War on Terror? We may understand this resurgence as once again a mediation between two apparently counter-indicated themes: the need or reflexive urge to justify war based on an ethnic or cultural superiority issuing from an essentialist ontology (us versus them), and the need for an inclusive peace based on an emerging cosmopolitan ethos (all of us together). In short, and in accord with Shippey's observation that myth functions as a synthesizer of old and new materials, *The Lord of the Rings* blends nationalism and globalism, raising up the better parts of each while suppressing or discounting their faults. The work's pro-Western essentialism has been well established, so we need only

consider it in synopsis before proceeding to the more subtle indications of an emerging global consciousness and conscience.

According to most commentators, Tolkien's work favors the West on several accounts, most related to Europe's Christian heritage. Birzier goes so far as to relate *The Lord of the Rings* to the sanctifying process that placed Easter on a pagan holiday and cleared druidic groves to found monasteries. For him, Tolkien is a kind of evangelist, spreading the hope of Catholic Christianity through his reworking of pagan myth. Regardless of this intention, the influence of his Christianity upon Middle-earth is beyond doubt, its most basic contribution being an essentialist notion of good and evil. Since the very notion of absolute good and evil may offer some comfort in a time when relativism seems to render only moral paralysis, Beatie directly figures Tolkien as a bastion of hope against moral relativism (59). Similarly, West presents Tolkien as a defender of Western civilization in that Middle-earth seems to represent a worldview which includes natural law, a fallen world, the desirability of freedom, and the possibility of the transcendent, all philosophic cornerstones derived from a Christian worldview. If this line of argument fails to account for secular or constructivist fans, consider that Sirridge labels Tolkien a moral cognitivist—one that holds moral truths to be knowable with certainty (82), apparently regardless of their ontology. The work's reassuring tone relies not on essentialism, but rather on hope for at least certainty, at least to a degree sufficient enough to enable action.

Most of these accounts, especially the more openly religious ones, suppose that Tolkien models his literary mediation on the Beowulf poet as characterized by Tolkien

himself (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”). Suppressing nearly all explicitly religious imagery, the older work was composed on the threshold of the Christian era, reaching back into the pagan past for material worth carrying forward into the non-pagan future. But Tolkien’s past was Modernity, not Paganism, and his future was not Christianity, but a world confronted with mechanized war and weapons of mass destruction. Tolkien certainly didn’t have the words *globalism* or *cosmopolitanism* as we have them, but even before the information age’s space-time compression, the world had already become a single place under the shadow of the atomic bomb. It had already become imperative that people learn how to live together on the same planet or risk annihilation. Thus *The Lord of the Rings* serves to mediate two priorities: the need to maintain cultural self-esteem (the success of which is witnessed above) and the need to esteem other cultures in order to avoid massively destructive conflict.

Given that the *Lord of the Rings* tells a story in which the divine forces of the West defeat the demonic forces of the South and East, it seems improbable that any ethos of cultural bridge building might manifest itself. However, such an ethos does exist in three particulars: first, the role of local actors, namely the isolationist Hobbits, on a global scale; second, the unifying effect of a shared threat—the menace of Mordor which unites long sundered peoples, both nations (Rohan and Gondor) and races (Elves and Dwarves); and finally, the notion of a wisdom that comes from a wide experience of many cultures.

Many have noted the story’s central irony—the fate of the world ends up in the hands of an isolationist, backwater, diminutive race—without fully appreciating the corresponding significance of the fact that the Hobbits rise to the challenge based largely

on a motivating love for the Shire as a special place of belonging. When Frodo first begins to comprehend that evil forces are en route to the Shire and that he must bear the Ring away (although he does not yet know the full scope of his quest), his remarks fall immediately to the Shire-folk.

I should like to save the Shire if I could – though there have been times when I thought the inhabitants too stupid and dull for words, and have felt that an earthquake of an invasion of dragons might be good for them. But I don't feel like that now. I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again. (61).

Frodo of course gets both parts of this wish, for the memory of the Shire does serve as a constant source of inspiration, and the Shire-folk do suffer a radical shift of geography as many of their landmark houses and trees are demolished during an invasion of not dragons, but industrializing men lead by the much diminished Saruman. “The Scouring of the Shire” chapter clearly satirizes the scheming, planning, bulldozing absurdities of the men, but it also takes aim at the simple hobbits who cower before them until their worldly cousins return to rally them together. The coming of age of four well-traveled hobbits, however, hardly make for a comprehensive invective against isolationism or a call for action beyond local borders.

A less obvious, but unmistakable, exploration of this theme comes in the contrast between two of the enchanted forests of Middle-earth, Fangorn and Lothlórien. Whereas hobbits will still visit the men in the town of Bree just across the river, the elves of Lothlórien are the ultimate isolationist, having cut off all contact with the outside world.

Haldir, the first elf who arrests the Ring fellowship in the Golden Wood, has difficulty speaking Westron, explaining that “we seldom use any tongue but our own; for we dwell now in the heart of the forest, and do not willingly have dealing with any other folk” (334). Even the arrival of the ring-bearer does not stir any of the elves to offer more than good wishes; this case is just the opposite of what happens when Merry and Pippen arrive in Fangorn.

Whereas the Lothlórien Elves choose to keep a slowly fading holiness in their own land—the last forest of Mellorn trees—Fangorn forest is so thoroughly motivated to take action beyond its own borders that the trees themselves—or at least the animate trees, the Hurons—lift up their roots and march. They first destroy Saruman’s fortress Isengard and then rout Saruman’s orcs fleeing from the battle of Helm’s Deep. The Hurons are not fully sentient, but Treebeard, an Ent or tree-shepherd, explains,

We never are roused unless it is clear to us that our trees and our lives are in great danger...it is the orc-work, the wanton hewing – *rárum* – without even the bad excuse of feeding the fires, that has so angered us; and the treachery of a neighbor, who should have helped us. Wizards ought to know better. (474)

Once again it is local concerns which provide the motive. Just as Frodo fled the Shire to lead the Black Riders away, the trees of Fangorn attack Saruman not to thwart his future actions but rather to revenge the numerous trees sacrificed to his mills and furnaces. Moreover, this revenge is motivated by a sense of double betrayal: Saruman has been both a foolish wizard and a bad neighbor. This implies that at least one hallmark of wisdom in Middle-earth is the ability to peacefully coexist with others.

Just as a large enough threat is sufficient to draw the hobbits out of the Shire or the trees out of the forest, so too a shared enemy serves to unite both race and nation in Middle-earth. Although humans seem to have little trust of the Elves or Dwarves, it is the relationship between the two mythological races which offers the best example of cross-cultural bridge building. The enmity between the two peoples is best represented by Gimli's reception in Lothlórien when Haldir treats the dwarf with explicit racial enmity. First he denies Gimli admission outright, since "they are not permitted in our land" (334), and latter demands that the dwarf be blindfolded. The scene almost descends into violence before Aragorn breaks in, offering the whole company to go blindfolded as well. Legolas, a non-Lothlórien elf and thus subject to this treatment, laments, "Alas for the folly of these dark days! Here all are enemies of the one Enemy, and yet I must walk blind, while the sun is merry in the woodland under leaves of gold!" (339). Once the company arrives at the heart of the forest, however, things begin to alter, even to the point where Gimli and Galadriel seem to renew diplomatic relations between the two races. The dwarf is so genuinely flattering that the elf queen proclaims, "let none say again that Dwarves are grasping and ungracious," and when she gives him a stand of her hair, he intends to set it "in imperishable crystal to be an heirloom of my house, and a pledge of good will between the Mountain and the Wood until the end of days" (367). The rapidity with which this transformation occurs does not damage its believability, since much weight is given to the sheer charisma and beauty of Galadriel and the appropriateness of Gimli's response to it. In contrast, the slow-building friendship between Gimli and Legolas seems more typical of cross-cultural bonding.

The movement of these two individuals, from prickly teamwork to fast friendship, replicates the general theme of unification through shared peril that characterizes large-scale allegiances throughout the work: they bond in combat. Before the battle of Helm's Deep, Legolas remarks, "but you are a dwarf, and dwarves are strange folk....But you comfort me, Gimli, and I am glad to have you standing nigh" (520). Although gruesome, the pair's competition regarding who can slay more enemies plays a major role both in developing their characters and in relieving dramatic tension: when their forces at Helm's Deep are profoundly outnumbered, Gimli understates their peril, "Ai-oi! Come, Legolas! There are enough for both of us" (523), and turns despair into laughter. Tolkien's long denouement largely passes over the pair, but in appendices we are told that they traveled together, visiting the each other's homelands and possibly departed from Middle-earth together. The bonds established in wartime, then, might persist into days of peace, and cultural exchange might replace mutual suspicion or disregard.

On a larger scale, the war with Mordor serves to renew the union between Rohan and Gondor, ancient allies lately estranged. Gandalf's arrival in the Gondorian capital Minas Tirith is welcomed with, "Maybe the Rohirrim will come soon to strengthen us" (735). In the next chapters, Tolkien switches the scene back to Rohan and gives us Théoden's reception of the symbolic Red Arrow and his reply, "But say to Denethor that even if Rohan itself felt no peril, still we would come to his aid" (782). The disinterestedness is purely a rhetorical posture: Mordor threatens Rohan as well as Gondor. As the scene shifts back to Minas Tirith, we may now read with irony that "others looked north and counted the leagues to Théoden in Rohan. 'Will he come? Will

he remember our old alliance?’” (799). This sequence serves to highlight the deciding factor in the conflict with Sauron: whether or not humankind can manage to ally together in time. It also sets the stage for perhaps the most poignant irony of the entire work: Denethor’s suicide at the moment of victory.

The steward of Gondor announces three times that “the West has failed,” and he completes his suicide just as the Rohirrim arrive on the battlefield, echoed on the opposite flank by the arrival of Aragorn and a preternatural army he has raised in the meantime. The inevitable defeat of Gondor is altered into a rout of the forces of Mordor; the West *has* managed to pull together, and even more so than merely to renew an old bilateral alliance, for command of the battle passes from Gandalf to Prince Imrahil, a vassal of Gondor whose participation was also a minor uncertainty, and the Rohirrim only arrive in time thanks to the aid of aboriginal wild men (who provide a short cut around Mordor’s barricades); moreover, the army of Rohan includes a platoon of rangers (Aragorn’s kinsmen) from the northern region which was once the kingdom of Arnor. Tolkien presents the answer to a world-wide threat as a world-wide alliance.

The fact that this alliance is made among kings, and results in the unification of the West under a single king, Aragorn, (Rohan’s independence being conditional on an oath of allegiance) seems to run against the contemporary push for independent democratic governments. But is Aragorn’s kingship thoroughly monarchical, or does his mythic status and the mythic nature of his story render a different meaning? The deaths, noble and ignoble, of Théoden (in victorious battle) and Denethor (in suicidal despair of defeat) seem to signal the end of a particular kind of kingship: the good and bad

Germanic king, according to Nietzsche (121). Although Aragorn likewise claims his authority by blood—as the heir of Isildur—Tolkien portrays his ascension to the throne in quasi-democratic tones:

Then Faramir stood up and spoke in a clear voice. ‘Men of Gondor, hear now the Steward of this Realm! Behold! one has come to claim the kingship at last. Here is Aragorn, son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dúnedain of Arnor... [presentation of many titles]...Isildur’s son, Elendil’s son of Númenor. Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?’

And all the host and all the people cried *yea* with one voice. (946)

Although the throne of Gondor may be claimed by title and blood kinship, it is up to the people to confirm the legitimacy of a particular claim. Thus Tolkien’s mediation of the pulls of national and postnationalism give rise to a synthetic entity, the democratically elected king. The fact that such a person or institution is mere fantasy does not negate its appeal; it does not represent a literal hope but rather a figurative negotiation.

Aragorn is inscribed with another mediation besides the one between blood inheritance and democratic election: he is also a cosmopolitan king, one who is mindful of the entire world and not just his own kingdom. The major indication of this comes with the name by which he is first introduced, *Strider*, one who strides, which is to say, travels. Appendix A to *The Lord of the Rings* tells the story of Aragorn and Arwen, in which we learn that Strider has indeed traveled far and wide in Middle-earth among many different peoples, partly in order to prove himself worthy to Arwen’s father Elrond, and partly to prepare for the battle against Sauron.

Then Aragorn took leave...he said farewell to his mother, and to the house of Elrond, and to Arwen, and he went out into the wild. For thirty years he labored in the cause against Sauron...he went in many guises, and won renown under many names. He rode in the host of the Rohirrim, and fought for the Lord of Gondor by land and by sea...and went alone far into the East and deep into the South, exploring the hearts of Men, both evil and good...

Thus he became at last the most hardy of living Men, skilled in their crafts and lore...and there was a light in his eyes...and yet hope dwelt ever in the depths of his heart.
(1035)

We thus have vision of one who has made a true grand tour, and has seen all of humanity in its many cultural variations, and has seen deeply enough to learn the “crafts and lore” of many different ethnic subsets, and who, despite having seen all the evil men are capable of, has hope in the ability of (all) men to triumph over evil. As to whether or not this experience will play any part in his kingship, there is the indication that his identity as a traveler contributes to his authority in as much as he derives from it the name under which he will rule. After the siege of Gondor has lifted, Imrahil protests that “maybe he will wear the crown in some other name” than Strider.

And Aragorn...said, ‘Verily, for in the high tongue of old I am *Elessar*, the Elfstone, and *Envinyatar*, the Renewer: But Strider shall be the name of my house, if that be ever established. In the high tongue it will not sound so ill, and *Telcontar* I will be and all the heirs of my body.’ (845)

Thus the name of the King is Aragorn Telconter, literally *far-stepper*, a fair transliteration of *strider*. Given the importance consistently ascribed to other names in Middle-earth, there is no reason to think that Aragorn’s choice represents mere sentimentality. His identity as a traveler or man of the world—in other words, a cosmopolitan—must have

direct bearing on his identity as king if it is the name of his royal house. Given that the King's name can be a metonymic figure for the King's authority, there is some indication that Aragorn's worthiness to rule relates directly to his broad cultural experience.

Although Tolkien does not explicitly connect Aragorn's experience of other cultures with the policies he enacts as king, we do receive a vision of mercy which would be out of place if Aragorn lacked sympathy for his adversaries. We are prepared for this point of view when Sam first observes a battle between human soldiers (as opposed to humans and orcs). Coming across a fallen man,

He was glad he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace. (646)

This is in marked contrast to the Gondorian soldiers' comments about "cursed Southrons" in the preceding passage. Sam's point of view would come perhaps more naturally to one who has been among the Southrons, as Aragorn has been. There is a hint of this when the new King begins attending to his political and ceremonial duties:

And embassies came from many lands and peoples, from the East and the South, and from the borders of Mirkwood [in the North], and from Dunland in the west. And the King pardoned the Easterlings that had given themselves up, and sent them away free, and he made peace with the peoples of Harad [Southrons]; and the slaves of Mordor he released and gave to them all the lands about Lake Núrnen to be their own. (947)

Thus he makes peace with the nations of men that sided with Sauron (although we are never told why they did so), even giving them arable lands. This action echoes earlier chastisement by Gandalf in speaking with Denethor: “you think...of Gondor only. Yet there are other men and other lives...And for me, I pity even his [Sauron’s] slaves” (795). There is an emergent cosmopolitan ethos here, clearly necessitated by a world in which all nations must learn to get along together if for no other reason than that the scale of their conflicts has grown so large as to make possible a truly final war. The ability to unite peaceably for the benefit of all must not be based upon subjugation or empire, but upon forgiveness and democracy.

I am not prepared to claim that this is Tolkien’s final mediation, but it does rely upon and fulfill all the others presented above. In every instance Tolkien uses an antithesis to traditional hope or surety to both reinforce that hope and to purify it. He uses satire to reinforce the desirability of romance by mocking those who consider themselves too civilized for elves and magic. He uses modernism’s rationality to reject irrational modernization. He uses linguistic skill to reject the notion that language is no more than a skillful game without normative values. He uses a deep sense of place and identity, both in composing his myths from Nordic and Anglo-Saxon material and in ascribing highly personal motivations to his characters, in order to reject national isolationism and ethnic discrimination. All of these rely upon the wisdom of the mind performing the mediation: the satire relies on intellectual daring, the rationality on the recognition of foolishness, the language games on rhetorical sophistication, the pluralism on the separate comprehension of each disparate element. The two secondary heroes of

Tolkien's epic embody this wisdom, both the homeless Wizard, master and servant of no one, and the enthroned King, ruler and servant of the people. Both act for the good of all, and the hope of such action helps explain the ongoing appeal of their myth.

Moreover, Tolkien's central hero, the diminutive Frodo, also embodies hope for the global world. Though without great lore or experience, the hobbit is able to carry out his quest to thwart the totalitarian aspirations of the Dark Lord; he does so through self-sacrificing love of his own land along with his race's characteristic resilience and pragmatic optimism, both embodied in the affection and aid of Sam. Thus readers are offered the hope that even the least globally-minded among us, those who have the greatest stake in embedded cultural identities, might have not only a role to play but a vital contribution to make on the world stage.

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COMIC BOOK COSMOPOLIS: GLOBALIZATION AND THE SUPERHERO

Superheroes lead a kind of double life both in American culture at large and within the academic community. Millions of dollars pour into movies adapted from comic books—Christopher Reeve and Adam West have gained iconic status playing Superman and Batman in film and television—and many superheroes and villains are household names despite deriving ostensibly from a niche genre for adolescent white males. The separation of content from original form—superheroes adapted to non-comics media—has led to a wide acceptance of comics material without a concurrent acceptance of comic books. Although the American mainstream has embraced superheroes through movies and television if not as part of massive merchandising campaigns (toys, lunchboxes, clothing, etc.), regular comic-book readers retain a social stigma similar to other fan-based subcultures (e.g. Trekkies). Similarly, in academia, nothing will light up a conversation like an expressed interest in comics and graphic novels. In the general retreat from traditionalist canonical exclusivity, there is a wide consensus that comics are “fascinating” and seem “fun” to work with, yet actual attempts to develop a critical lexicon and methodology for comics remain confined to a small academic niche.

This kind of push and pull stems ultimately from the double edge of all unrealistic discourse, whether it be humor, satire, or fantasy. By unrealistic I do not mean “not in

earnest,” or “not in touch” but rather those discourses which employ laughter and fantasy in their rhetorical method; flights of imagination, the kind that create superheroes, are one such frivolity. Cutting in one direction, such departures from reality offer fertile ground for critical play. For example, the generic conventions of costumed adventurers with marvelous powers seem designed to raise questions of individuals’ identities and roles within the world. (Given that the conventional comic audience is adolescent, the concordant themes of self fashioning and growth into power should come as no surprise). Yet, cutting the other way, departure from reality too often burns the bridge back to that reality. Comic creators may have something supremely applicable and relevant to say to their audience—something quite serious at times—yet the fantastic mode which allows them to explore these themes also sequesters them within their own made-up world. Ultimately, they’re just comic books.

What follows is an attempt to pursue a critical hunch even when it leads into such unlikely territory. The first two sections of this essay explore the ways in which two particular traits predispose superhero comics to directly engage issues of the contemporary world: first, they are serialized or multi-author texts such that characters and milieu persist and morph over long periods of time; second, they are, as stated above, utter fantasy and as such especially suited to the aesthetic representation of postmodernity. From this premise, the essay’s final two sections examine the ways in which contemporary comics have rewritten the traditional supervillain and superhero to address issues such as the advent of a world risk society and space-time compression as well as globalization, postnationalism, and the resulting debate over what has been

termed *cosmopolitanism*, an ethical framework adopted to issues of living and acting within a global community or network of communities.

The superheroes under consideration here are among the most iconic: DC's trinity of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman; Marvel's every-teen hero, Spiderman; even the nationalist icon Captain America appears operable in a postnational context. Within this essay, these fantasies stand alongside such down-to-earth sociologists and philosophers as Ulrich Beck, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Rorty. Hopefully the contrast will not be too extreme. Although I will try to maintain an explicit awareness of comics' essential unrealistic modality, my purpose here—demonstrating that this frivolity pairs with and does not exclude more weighty content—will tend, necessarily, to err on the side of taking things too seriously.

Plasticity and Relevance

First, I would like to consider a common aspect of popular storytelling—the serially extended narrative or serially recurring milieu. Often this has been seen as a disease of popular fiction—the fans want more and the inferior material will not stand second or third readings, so a nearly indistinguishable sequence of books is turned out of the publishing houses with barely enough originality to warrant changing the titles. In movies the complaint is familiar that the sequel is never as good as the original. There is, however, a virtue in recurrence: the opportunity for rewriting. Incremental variations in a hero's character or a villain's motive or modus operandi allows creators of popular stories to maintain a currency which static fictions lack. A realist novel of the industrial

age offers a deeper exploration of the culture and society it represents, but it will always be fixed in that time and place. A serial fiction need only alter its scene or revise its characters and it becomes instantly current again.

This is of course both an opportunity and a challenge. The spy thriller, for instance, must cut a thin line between the real and the fantastic. Thomas Price, in considering the evolving image of Soviet Russia in the James Bond saga, observes that “however conceived, these stories have to be believable—not in the sense that they are accurate, or even possible, but in the manner they reflect a popular mood or image held widely within society”(20). According to Price, the Bond series’ “Russians” have shifted from enemy to disgruntled partner, parallel to the predominate Western view of the Soviets at a given time. By altering financial backers, the international criminal conspiracy Spectre has stood in for any anti-Western threat, whether Soviet, Chinese, or rogue other. Counterintuitively, fictional threats have served better to represent non-fictional risks (of a suddenly “hot” war) than any attempt at verisimilitude; along a different line, trying to represent the actuality of geopolitics in every new Bond novel would have eaten up a huge percentage of each volume, leaving precious little room for the (in)famous gadgets and girls. The Bond series has been able to maintain this plasticity because its authorship has not remained with its creator, Ian Fleming, but has rather been passed on, through publishers and produces, to several authors, each of whom have contributed subtle rewriting and updating to the series.

In novels, the original form of the Bond saga, this is an exception; in comic books has been the rule. Superman and Batman are properties of DC comics, and the publisher

may staff out “authorship” to any writer or artist, attribution to Joel Siegel and Joe Shuster or Bob Kane as creators notwithstanding. Superheroes originally created in the 1930s and 40s have been able to “survive” all these years because their story continues even today as new comics and movies are added to the canon. Whereas other texts represent a fixed point in history—the brief period of their inspiration, composition, execution, and initial reception—serialized texts carry out all four operations, often simultaneously and over a long period of time. Their persistent characters and milieu, which continue to evolve around a central core identity, uniquely equip these stories to represent evolving cultural debates or discourses.

Incremental variation in favorite characters has become so central to appreciating comic books that the comics themselves are classified according to three clear periods in their overall tone and production values: the Golden Age (1937-c.1957), the Silver Age (c.1957-1987) and the Modern Age(1987-present). These terms were coined largely by the commercial apparatus operating during the collector/investor phenomena of the 1990s and are problematically laced with nostalgia. Certainly one would hope that no one with a background in literary studies would make the mistake of coining a “Modern” age, and this term presents a stumbling block for those familiar with literary modernism but who have not read modern comics. In short, Modern Age comics represent the advent of revisionary superhero narratives and correspond, aesthetically, to *postmodernism* in other media. A full explication would be digressive here (see Geoff Klock’s *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* for an exhaustive reading), but the principle can be quickly illustrated. The Modern Age is generally said to begin with the publication of Alan

Moore's *Watchmen*, Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns (DKR)*, and the establishment of the Vertigo imprint at DC comics. Moore's text literally undercuts modern notions of rationality by having superheroes who represent various scientific disciplines (Fishbaugh 189) fail to save New York from a disaster; Miller's reinvention of Batman presents a dystopian future in which superheroes have mostly disappeared and Superman has become the ultimate weapon in the US arsenal, a rewriting of Superman's inscribed "American way" ideology; one of Vertigo's early successes, *Animal Man*, features the hero's confrontation with his writer after discovering that he is living in a comic-book plane of existence. After such groundbreaking work, superhero narratives have been continuously challenging their own conventions and the ossified layers of disparate continuities that had built up around the major characters as a result of multi-author revision. These layers can be legion: Ian Gordon identifies a new version of Superman for nearly every decade of his existence (181-186). A more familiar example would be the contrast between the blue/purple Batman of television fame and the gothic black and grey costuming later seen on film. A self-reflexive drive for revision and innovation comes from the audience's growing familiarity with these stratifications.

Historical surveys tracing individual characters and themes across these three periods often reveal shifts in ideology relevant to the contemporaneous world or the culture at large. For example, DC comics superhero team, the Justice League of America, originally took pride in its national moniker but then began struggling to shed possible identification with ugly American imperialism. In 1940 (Golden Age), the *Justice Society of America* fought for the Allies in World War II. In 1960 (Silver Age),

the new team—not a direct revision but nonetheless a direct descendent—was created, the *Justice League of America*. Both versions drew their initial spark from an alien invasion of earth that the individual heroes could not defeat alone. The *J.L.A.* had its headquarters alternatively in an underground cave or an orbiting satellite; the *Super Friends*, a decidedly campy animated cartoon, met in a municipal building, the Hall of Justice; the early 80s saw the headquarters located in Michigan during what fans sometimes refer to as Justice League Detroit. By this time the legacy of Vietnam and a general disillusionment with US foreign policy had the writers attempting to excise the problematically nationalist element from the group's name: thus, the advent of *Justice League America* on par with *Justice League Europe*, *Justice League International*, *Justice League Task Force*, and *Extreme Justice*. Later (2003), Cartoon Network began airing an animated adaptation simply titled *Justice League* or *Justice League Unlimited*. The Modern Age comic—which relaunched in 1997 with the conventional alien invasion—is simply titled *JLA* (cp. *J.L.A.*), and internal references are to the “JLA,” “the League” or “the Justice League.” The initial plot arc, discussed in more detail below, repositions the League outside any national jurisdiction by placing their headquarters on the moon, thus providing a literally global worldview. The complete movement, then, from 1940 to 1997, has been from an isolated group (a society) to a larger scale cooperative alliance (a league) and from a national basis of action (fighting the national enemies of America and her allies) to a global theater of responsibility (keeping watch against planet-level threats).

Thus we see that serialized texts naturally mimic cultural fluctuations and evolutions and that contemporary superheroes conform to this pattern by mapping a cultural evolution from nationalism to globalism. But there is a distinction to be made between the comics medium and superhero comics as a genre. Granting that the serialized medium provides the means for cultural mapping, one must ask what traits of the superhero fantasy cause it to be so directly engaged with the kinds of discourse indicated above—certainly there are other cultural vectors available to be mapped. The following section argues that it is precisely the fantastic modality of such stories that suites the postmodern or global condition so well.

Converging Discourses

The cover of the October 2004 issue of the *PMLA* (119.5) features several colorful panels from Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, a collection of comics and cartoons written in response to the destruction of the World Trade Center towers and the cultural aftermath. Marianne Hirsch opens her consideration of Spiegelman's work with the question, "what kind of visual-verbal literacy can respond to the needs of the present moment?" (1212), and this, in many ways, informs the spirit of this essay. Hirsch finds a special power in the comics medium that by "enabling reality and fantasy...demands an extraordinarily complex response" (1213). Her exploration of such complexity focuses on Spiegelman's depiction of a billboard for an espionage thriller obscuring the site of the terrorist attack, captioned "Oddly, in the aftermath of September 11th, some pundits insisted that irony was dead." Her reading, with which I agree, considers this panel to be an expression of the dangers of "media representations

[that] function like euphemism to obstruct seeing, saying, and understanding” (1214).

But there is a harsher criticism inscribed in the panel—that it is specifically fantasy, “some dopey new...movie about terrorism,” that harmfully obscures reality, not just any media representation.

This is the bitter edge of unrealistic forms, and any attempt to examine the weighty elements of such discourse must first overcome the assumption that a text’s relevance or applicability (bluntly, its value) is directly proportional to its verisimilitude. Obviously no one would espouse an obstruction of reality; the argument is over whether the presentation of reality is enabled or obstructed by non-mimetic forms. This naturally requires a preliminary consideration of just what the nature of contemporary reality might be like, and this is obviously too large a question for a complete answer here. However, I think a recent turn in sociology ought to be admissible as a reasonable starting point.

Within that field, Ulrich Beck has helped advance the notion of a “risk society,” which results from a reflexive turn in the course of industrial/technological progress such that we now have technologies so powerful that we must and yet cannot fully predict their consequences (“Cosmopolitan Perspective” 63). Or, to put it another way, our powers of prediction are just good enough to see, and we are just now seeing from past experience, that the things we do today may have vast, unintended, negative consequences—consequences on a previously impossible, global scale. “Risk society” results when today’s decisions become increasingly based not on (past) experience but rather on potential (future) consequences—their risks (*World Risk Society* 137).

Although such theory deals with risk as a category, whenever these theorists cite

particular risks, the list usually includes nuclear or chemical fallout either from industrial accident or weapon detonation; ecological collapse due to pollution or climate change; economic collapse due to systems failure or the recall of malfunctioning products; or unforeseen side effects of a new drug or genetically modified foodstuff. Although such considerations may seem morbid, Beck considers himself a “pessimistic optimist” and suggests that this new category—global risk—might “provide the basis for a new cosmopolitanism, by placing globality at the heart of political imagination, action, and organization” (9). Which is as much as to say that, if cosmopolitanism depends on finding points of shared interest, we are all increasingly sharing the same risks.

Although Beck and others routinely phrase the advent of risk society as a marker of the second age of modernity (the first age being marked by industrial society), Moraru argues that the paradigm shift here may be just as usefully, or even more usefully presented as the shift from modernity to postmodernity, or, aesthetically, from modernism to postmodernism (79). It follows that the most appropriate ways of representing contemporary reality, the global risk society, fall within the rubric of postmodernism. In Moraru’s words, “sociological reflexivity translated, in the age of world risk society, into globalized doubt, and intertextual reflexivity deployed in postmodern literature that thematizes the risks of the same society (Pynchon, DeLillo, etc.) are consubstantial” (81). Thus, ground is broken on a potential site of cosmopolitan (or, at least, global) literary theory: postmodern dramatization of the risk society.

Ursula K. Heise’s essay, “Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems: Risk and Narrative in the Contemporary Novel” offers such a reading. Her argument is double pronged,

seeking both to “sharpen and shift standard interpretations” and to explore the ramifications “that a consideration of risk and the kind of narrative articulation it requires” might have on the practices of literary critics (747). Her case study centers upon two easy targets for such an experiment: Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Richard Powers’ *Gain*. In carrying out her reading of these texts, she anticipates the objection that her project “amounts to reading *White Noise* as a realist novel, a documentary of the risk society,” thus failing to account for non-realist, satirical threads of hyperbole and absurdism (755) or the possibility that DeLillo “mocks contemporary risk perceptions rather than engaging them seriously” (756). She offers the following defense:

Even calling it a satire and identifying its realistic and hyperbolic elements relies on the assumption that we as readers know what the real world is like and how DeLillo’s narrative universe differs from it...but at another level, [the novel] puts into question the reader’s ability to distinguish the real from the fake and the hyperbolic. (756)

Furthermore,

It is possible to claim, in the context of a risk-theory approach to narrative, that the destabilization of distinctions between the real and the nonreal can itself serve specific realist objectives. (756)

I take “realist objectives” here to signify accurate depiction of the real world. Heise seems to suggest that, given the state of contemporary society, the most accurate (the most realistic) presentation of that society will include elements which at least border on surrealism and the fantastic.

This may be what William Coyle meant when he wrote that “the diminished prestige of realism” in the late twentieth century is due to “its seeming irrelevance in a fragmented culture haunted by threats of economic, ecological, nuclear, and other types of disaster” (1). The echo between this list and Beck’s catalogue of global risks is unmistakable. There is surely only a tissue-thin divide between these four lines of argument—Beck, Moraru, Heise, and Coyle—and all seem to converge on a position opposed to the idea of fantasy as either “escaping” or “obscuring” reality.

In this way the ground may be cleared for the appreciation of the ways in which even the most dire real-world discourse elements surface within fantastic texts, specifically superhero comics. But the identification of the risk society with globalism with postmodernity with fantasy does more than just allow for such an appreciation; it also indicates a way to proceed. Beck seems to suggest that risk society occurs sequentially: first comes global risk, which is then followed by awareness and response, cosmopolitanism. Thus we may look first to the globalization of the supervillain (as with the evolving image of Russia in the Bond series) before looking to the ways in which superheroes have responded to the revised threats.

Rewriting the Supervillain

Contemporary revision of the supervillain may be viewed as a shift in self identification from evil criminal to adversarial peer. In the Golden and Silver Ages, supervillains tended to fall into three categories, the gangster, the world conqueror, and the mad scientist. Crimes were often an issue of money—bank robbery and ransom—and a colossal death ray was as likely to be used to blackmail governments as for military

dominance. These villains were self consciously rogue elements, operating beyond the scope of recognized nations and ideologies despite the acknowledged madness of their ambitions; contemporary supervillains are more likely to arise from and operate within established systems and to see themselves in a heroic light. The conventional profit-motivated gangster has been rewritten as an ideologically motivated terrorist; the world conqueror is more content to retain authoritarian control over an isolated nation state; the mad scientist's iconoclasm pales next to the possibility of systemic failure within the military industrial complex. Thus we have a certain redemption and internalization of the supervillain, from a selfish and ruthless individual, ultimately irredeemable, into an ideologically motivated, if nonetheless ruthless and despicable opponent. Villains today are the heroes of their own stories, even when their motives border on the demonic by our own lights. Or, they come in the form of threats from within our own systems, bearing little quantitative difference from proper functioning. Too often such failures occur when the system operates just as it was designed to do: both success and failure are extensions of ourselves. There is no longer an outside beyond the bounds of legitimate human society—the underworld of criminals, the island fortress of the mad doctor—there are only other places in world with other people in them.

Taking these revisions in turn, let us first consider the new rhetoric of villain-as-terrorist, which itself comes in two varieties. The first of these is the revision of a previously non-ideological or profit-motivated criminal, and part of the pressure towards this revision comes from the self-reflexive playfulness that underpins most comic book rewritings. One of the more ridiculous conventions of criminal supervillains has been

their enormous reliance on technological gadgetry. Marvel's miniseries *Secret War* has highlighted the irrationality of this convention: if the villains can afford such fantastic machines, why do they need to rob banks? *Secret War* opens with the arrest and interrogation of a techno-themed villain; the resulting investigation leads Nick Fury (a rather sinister and cynical rendering of the Bond-type spy) to discover that nearly all the technology-heavy bad guys have been operating as terrorists funded by the middle-eastern country of Latveria. Thus the villain's core identity—profit motivation—is retained as a mercenary within a sphere where ideological enemies qualify as the greater threat. But this revision also alters the source of villainous behavior from the criminal underworld to a sovereign nation. Whereas criminals are in no way equal to citizens, even state sponsors of terrorism retain categorical equity, as independent states, with other nations.

This new kind of threat provokes a somewhat unorthodox response from the Marvel superhero community. When the pentagon refuses to operate on his intelligence, Fury assembles several of Marvel's A-list superheroes—including Spiderman, Captain America, and



Figure 1: *Secret War* #2

Daredevil, all strongly associated with New York and whose continuities have all been affected by the September 11th attacks (Fig. 1). Notice that the revision here is double pronged: Peter Parker (Spiderman) specifically asks if they will simply “break into the castle and...beat everybody up,” in conventional superhero mode. Fury, now revealing the characterization of his name, answers no: the heroes are to embark on a secret mission to overthrow the Latverian government before the tech-villains can execute a “single coordinated act.” Thus the traditional superheroes, the ones most affected by the Al Queda attack on America, are motivated by (F)fury to strike back beyond the confines of their traditional methods. This notion of a preemptive strike upon a foreign government suspect of sponsoring terrorism has obvious parallels to the US invasion of Iraq; the fact that the comic book’s cast includes Captain America, the foremost national superhero, and Spiderman, the little guy/ everyman who rambles about power and responsibility, only serves to underline the point of the rewriting: conventional superheroics are becoming antiquated and perhaps need to be hardened into less idealistic methods. The notion that preemptive invasion and regime change might be a viable new heuristic, however, quickly burns out as *Secret War* becomes a cautionary tale. The strike on Latveria provokes a major retaliatory attack on New York; the series is ongoing at this time. This essay’s final section considers an alternative to this neo-conservative revision.

The second major type of supervillain-to-terrorist shift occurs within villains already inscribed with an ideological agenda. A prime example is one of Marvel’s signature bad guys, Magneto. Originally a self-identifying evil mastermind—having founded a “Brotherhood of Evil Mutants” that served as archenemy to the heroic X-men—Magneto was quickly revised to be a kind of Malcom X (militant separatist)



Figure 2: *New X-Men #147*

against X-men founder Charles Xavier’s Martin Luther King (non-violent civil rights activist). His plots to exterminate humanity have been long recast as a fear of persecution by humanity, and he has been rewritten as a childhood survivor of a Nazi concentration

camp. But Magneto's most recent appearance in *New X-men* has been anything but sympathetic. Thought to be dead, Magneto reveals himself with an attack on New York City and a plan to reverse the earth's magnetic poles, a plot revived from the earliest version of his character. The destruction of Manhattan is unblinkingly illustrated, including a rather shocking two-page splash (full-page, hyper-dramatic panel) of the "world's most charismatic mutant terrorist" reeking havoc on the streets (Fig. 2). Thus, a nemesis long since transformed into a tame political adversary is re-inscribed with villainy according a newly potent rhetoric. The fact that the middle-stage Magneto—the mutant separatist content to develop the sanctuary island nation of Genosha (phonetic echo of Geneva)—had become a clearly sympathetic character only makes his return to villainy all the more engaging. The implication here is that even the most insidious terrorist-villain may hold motivations that are not completely inexplicable. Suddenly the terrorist is not some alien other, but rather a one-time dialogue partner who has stopped talking and taken up arms. The kind of ideological sabotage this rhetoric can work on the superhero—the paradoxical appeal with an enemy's cause or rhetoric despite the repugnance of his or her methods—also operates within the revision of the world-conqueror into despot.

Whereas in the past supervillains might attempt world domination (often through subjugation of the UN), contemporary comic books have imagined a type of dictator possibly unique to the postnational world. Beck anticipates this kind of despot—or at least a Western liberal fear of this kind of despot—whom he describes as a kind authoritarian who,

...derives from their postmodern acceptance of relativism, in the sense of holding that their identity group cannot be judged from outside, and does have its own standards of truth, justice, and history which cannot be challenged from outside. Added to this postmodern breakdown of universalistic rationality is the rigidity and evangelism of fundamentalism. (Boyne 49)

It used to be that the bad guys wanted to rule the earth; now it seems just as likely that bad guys merely want to maintain their sovereign independence in order to perpetuate repressive totalitarian regimes and that they are able to abuse pluralist rhetoric as a shield.

In *JLA: Golden Perfect*, writer Joe Kelly directly engages this possibility. The story begins when the Themysciran embassy (Wonder Woman's island nation) in Delhi is attacked after sheltering a female refugee from the eastern kingdom of Jarhanpur. The woman had been fleeing with her son, who is taken back by force to serve as heir to Rama Khan, the ruler of that kingdom and a self-described man of "tolerance and understanding" (43). Diana upholds the asylum request as the Themysciran ambassador, and as the superhero Wonder Woman drives the JLA into what she perceives as a clear-cut conflict: the woman is fleeing from an oppressive totalitarian regime which holds her child hostage. The imperative towards asylum and rescue are, for Diana, beyond question. Upon arrival, however, the JLA finds Jarhanpur to be a near utopia, and Rama Khan to be a fairly gracious host despite Diana's hostility. He claims custody of the child as heir to the throne, and insists that the Jarhanpur's laws of succession are not open to outside critique. Diana, certain that no authoritarian regime could produce a pleasant way of life, maintains that the seeming paradise is a sham and presses a fight with Rama

Khan, whom she believes to be a totalitarian dictator hiding behind the rhetoric of tolerance.

Attempting to rescue the boy by force, the JLA discover that Khan has the ability to animate rocks and soil against them—he is literally “tied to,” “ruler of,” and “speaks for” the land. When fighting Wonder Woman he transforms into rock and soil (Fig. 3)



Figure 3: *JLA: Golden Perfect*

while shouting invectives against the Western imperialist superheroes who impose their cultural standards upon himself and his land, which have literally become one in the same. This kind of literalization of figurative speech—*land* as in soil and *land* as in sovereign culture—is a special virtue of the fantastic mode; the ability to juxtapose a rhetorical battle in word-balloons with physical combat in panel illustrations is a forte of the comic book medium. Wonder Woman’s response to Rama Khan’s attacks—both physical and rhetorical—follow a general trend to rewrite the superhero as negotiator or peacemaker and are considered below.

There is, however, a third category of revision to consider first: the depersonification of fears regarding technology, or, the shift from mad scientist to systemic failure. Such a “villain” figures into the final issue of *Global Frequency* when a global security contractor faces the impending launch of a nearly forgotten orbital weapons system aimed to depopulate the US by destroying several major cities. No terrorist has pushed the button; no one has hacked the system; no one has intended this to occur. However, once armed, the system’s failsafes are so airtight—functioning *as intended*—that the strike can only be averted by the unlikely destruction of the satellite itself. Ironically, the designer’s determination to make the device safe from failure, *failsafe*, makes it impossible to avert failure. Although this depersonalization of risk seems to run counter to the incorporations, above, of supervillains into the normal systems of human discourse, such a revision does move the source of the danger much closer to home. A mad scientist, by nature, operates beyond the realm of reason, but a systemic failure occurs despite the best intentions of rational individuals (i.e. ourselves), often due simply to the sheer size and complexity of the situation. An attack satellite menacing civilian populations here is simply an expanded version of shooting one’s self in the foot. Yet our technological abilities have grown so great that these kinds of self-inflicted wounds may now occur on a catastrophic scale. Thus the need for heroes who may be greater than the system, or at least superior to the system’s designers.

As a consequence of this rewriting of the supervillain within ordinary global contexts, the superhero must also be placed within the same context and must address the villain as an opposing peer rather than a criminal enemy. This revision is perhaps the

more fantastic of the two, since terrorists, despots and systemic failures have actual counterparts in reality, whereas the new brand of superheroes considered below remains something of a hopeful wish if not a utopian dream.

Rewriting the Superhero

As supervillains above have become either ideological individuals or non-individual malfunctions of massive systems, superheroes have been revised separately to counter each type of adversary, although there are connections between these revisions. When threats arise without intention (the systemic failure), the superhero serves as the

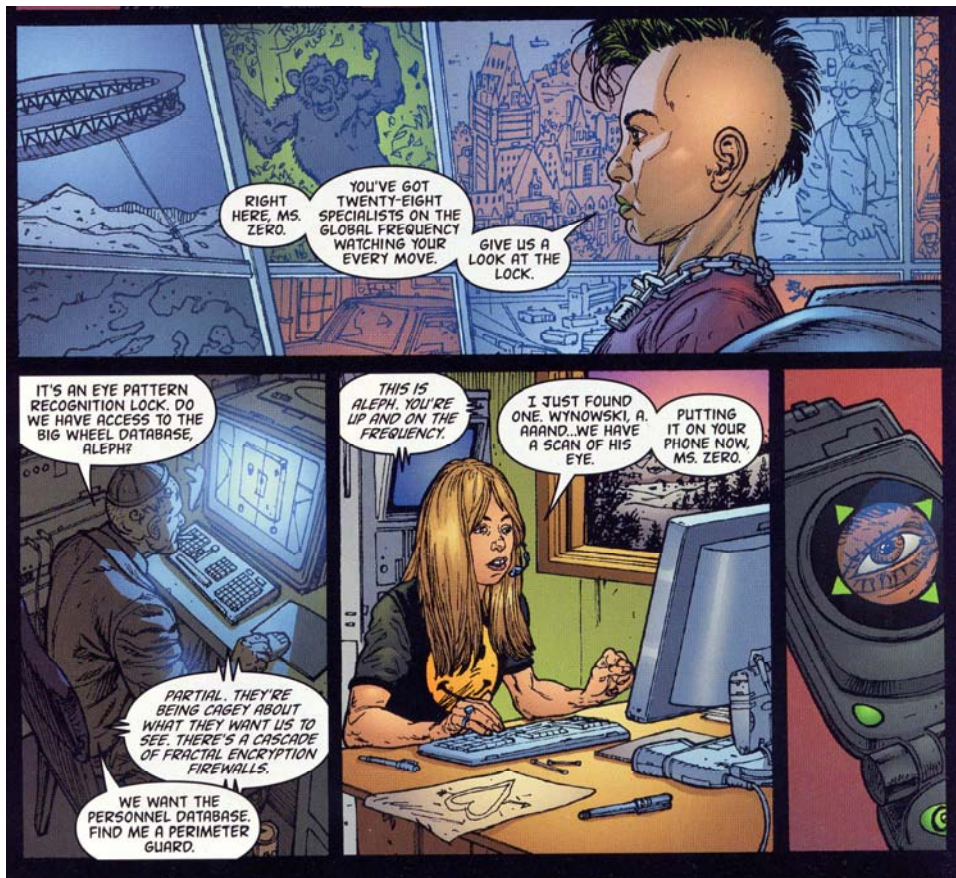


Figure 4: *Global Frequency #2*

vigilant guardian whose most important heroic trait is an expanded range of information, knowledge and potency such that systemic failure once beyond the scope of individual appraisal (no individual could prevent it) can be comprehended and counteracted. When the threat comes from an ideologue—given the fact that this individual enjoys some sovereignty or peer status and cannot be responded to necessarily as a criminal—superheroes have begun exhibiting an implicit code of behavior that seems to echo recent discussions regarding a renewal and redefinition of cosmopolitanism.

The first of these revisions calls upon the superhero to become master of the global information age, one step ahead of the unforeseen risk potential within ever more potent technology. Earlier Warren Ellis' *Global Frequency* served as an example of the role of depersonalized threats, but the series also premises itself upon the harnessing of the information age's space-time compression. The *Global Frequency* is a private security contractor made up of a thousand and one agents, individuals recruited for their expertise in a variety of fields and disciplines, coordinated through a central processing station via a handheld device resembling a kind of cell phone (Fig 4). This technology allows individuals from all points to act as a single team, regardless of the distance between them or their local circumstances. *Global Frequency* cannot be considered a superhero comic in the classic sense; although some of its heroes possess extra-human abilities (most notably, a robotic arm), most merely represent the pinnacle of a particular human ability, whether it be a physical skill (sharp shooting, kung fu, or free running) or an intellectual expertise. This shift from superpower to extraordinary facility matches the hero to the threat; if the danger comes from "ordinary" human systems, then it is up to

“ordinary” humans to regain control over those systems. As we will see below, this descent from Olympus finds expression in traditional superhero comics as well, most especially during the conventional storyline in which the hero loses his or her powers for a time.

Demystifications of the superhero generally tend to accompany fantastic representation of space-time compression. Both the JLA and the X-men have been seen to hold conferences in virtual telepathic space, and during one such session we are even given some treatment of the X-men’s latest costume change, away from the brightly colored outfits of the Golden and Silver Ages and towards something that might be a kind of fatigue or uniform (Fig. 5). Notice the emphasis on the heroes’ easy comfort—lounging on couches—within the virtual space, implying their competence in dealing with phenomena that compress or otherwise distort space-time. The self reflexive



Figure 5: *New X-Men* #114

dialogue—wondering why they ever dressed up *like superheroes*—flaunts an obvious attempt to move away from or reinvent generic conventions: superheroes as social activists or “teachers.” Another recent rewriting in the X-men continuity reflects this shift as well. Whereas the front operation of the team has historically been a school for gifted children, added to this we now have X-corp, a multinational mutant search and rescue agency and civil rights advocate. These superheroes have gone global not through moon bases and space stations, but rather through the channels of postnational economics.

It becomes clear that the superhero is undergoing global revision, but according to what rubric? What does it mean to be heroic in the global age? We have exempla of nationalist superheroes—both obvious icons like Captain America and more complex symbols such as Superman, the champion of truth, justice, and the American way—and we might reduce the ideology of such heroes to an ethic of patriotism. Yet globalized superheroes require a new ethic, one which has found expression in an increasingly multidisciplinary discourse, the resurrection of *cosmopolitanism*. This discourse tackles both the imperatives and the problematics of not only globalization, which is a social and economic phenomena driven by technology and trade agreements, but of the question of what it will mean to be a good person in a globalized society. We may extract a preliminary list of issues from this debate, although I am sure such a list will be quickly proven all too brief and inconclusive as the discourse continues to develop scope and nuance. At present it would seem that a cosmopolitan must negotiate several vectors, including a policy regarding intervention, mutual regard for local and global loyalties, the

use of negotiation, and the fostering of democratic forms of government. All four of these issues have been addressed, often heavy handedly, in the Modern Age *JLA*. The premier story arc, *New World Order*, directly poses the question of whether or not a superpower (literally a hero, figuratively a nation) should exert its power to bend the world towards the good. *Divided We Fall* explores the entanglement of local and global identities. *Golden Perfect*, mentioned above, presents Wonder Woman's transformation into a champion of peaceful negotiation and cultural bridge building. Finally, in partial revision of *New World Order*, *Rules of Engagement* features a debate over preliminary strikes, intervention, and the universal appeal of democracy.

New World Order, the initial four-issue storyline of the 1997 *JLA* relaunch, revises the conventional JLA origin story of alien invasion. In the first pages, as the American President insists that a superhero be present at an upcoming meeting with a foreign leader, "To show this guy we have super people coming out of our ears" (7), superheroes act as supra-nuclear weapons of the state (ala *Watchmen* and *DKR*). Upon arrival, invading Martians pose as superheroes from a lost world, eager to use their abilities to benefit mankind; they transform the Sahara desert into a garden (addressing world hunger) and enforce capital punishment upon supervillains, things which earth's native superheroes have never done. Of course, these acts of propaganda prefigure conquest, and earth's heroes, upon discovering the plot, regroup and save the day. But in the aftermath, on the now rapidly decaying site of the Sahara garden, Wonder Woman asks if superheroes "are doing too much or too little? When does intervention become domination?" Superman replies "Humankind has to be allowed to climb its own destiny.

We can't carry them there.” The ethical/moral use of superpower, then, is “to catch them if they fall.” With this mission statement, the renewed JLA erects a “Watchtower” on the moon, as a “first line of defense” against future invasion (92), but also as a vantage point from which to monitor the world below (93). Thus the story moves from an American locale on page one to a global perspective on page ninety-three.

Superman's solution to the intervention/domination problem partly echoes one aspect of the debate concerning the role of the United States as the world's only superpower after the collapse of the USSR. While some speculated on the enforcement of a *Pax Americana*, others suspected any action beyond US borders of neo-imperialism. Overarching this was the federalist suggestion that a global tier needed to be added to the nation-state system; opposition argued that such an institution would only face the too strong/too weak paradox on a larger scale. At any rate, some claimed, global peace remains unobtainable due to the inherent violence and aggression of the human species. In the fantasized version of this debate, Superman's solution of last-minute rescue—invoking superpower only in dire situations with no other solution—echoes the weak pacifism advocated (also in 1997) by Danilo Zolo. Zolo's solution involves appeal and submission to third party arbitration as an alternative to war, eliminating violence (a practical necessity) but not conflict (an impossibility) (152-159). The third party arbitrator would not try to enforce a solution at the first sign of conflict, but rather intervene only when invited or on the eve of bloodshed (or the first event which would make bloodshed inevitable). I will not butcher either text, Morrison's or Zolo's, in an attempt to argue that one directly informs the other—Superman as a “weak pacifist” or

arbitrator does not quite ring true. On the other hand, an abundance of historical surveys demonstrate that superheroes often parallel and engage more serious discourses:

O'Brien's investigation of the social contexts for the 1945-1962 transition from the Gold to Silver Age, the coming to terms with America's status as a nuclear superpower (95-97), is representative. If the palpable fear of nuclear war in the 1950s is not too sober a theme for contemporaneous comics, the comic book representation of more recent struggles to implement practical supranational institutions should be no less sustainable.

Globalism, however, operates on a local as well as a supranational scale, raising concerns about not only the conduct of national superpowers but also an individual's place within an often intangible or incomprehensible global community. Morrison's time on *JLA* saw very little reference to secret identities or the "hometown" convention of formulary superhero narratives—Superman in Smalltown/Metropolis, Batman in Gotham City, and so on. Mark Waid, Morrison's successor, reversed this with *Divided We Fall*, in which an alien technology divides the superheroes and their secret identities into separate individuals. As mentioned above in connection with *Global Frequency*, superheroes without superpowers is a conventional plot device. However, *Divided We Fall* rewrites the convention by splitting the characters into two individuals, a hero and a civilian. In this way the comic addresses not only the question of whether or not heroism depends on great power, but also the question of what great power might look like without an "ordinary" or local personality to ground it. A superhero acts on a global scale but also has his or her motivation within a local place, conventionally parental figures (the Kents or the Waynes) or fantasy cultures and institutions (Wonder Woman's

Amazons, the Green Lantern Corps). Does heroism arise from personal identity or a global theater of action? One of the instigators of the new cosmopolitan debate, Martha Nussbaum, suggests that cosmopolitans are those “whose allegiance is to the worldwide community of human beings”(4). Do these heroes protect their own, or do they take a global point of view?

Waid seems to suggest that this question is largely illusory, based on a false bifurcation of local and global selfhood. His newly fragmented JLA begins to undergo subtle alterations. Most notably, Superman alters his uniform to a Kryptonian style, while Batman becomes languid and “docile” in battle. The parts of their personality that made them heroic—the mid-western agricultural values or childhood urban trauma—were tied to their local, secret identities. As one character explains it,

Everyone figured that when you split Bruce Wayne and Batman, you get a fop and a lunatic. Which is true. But not like we thought. The murder of Bruce Wayne’s parents, that’s what created Batman. That’s the memory that drives him. But it belongs to [Bruce Wayne]. (170)

Thus, global action requires local identity and becomes at best directionless and at worst misguided without it. One reaction to cosmopolitan calls for global allegiance is that such exhortations “obscure, even deny, the givens in life: parents, ancestors, family, race...realities of life that constitute one’s natural identity” (Himmelfarb 77). But this, I think, is a reactionary critique. *Divided We Fall* represents not so much a reassertion of the priority of the local, but of the interconnectedness of global/local action and global/local values—a mixture imbedded in the costumed hero. This is the

cosmopolitanism that, in the words of Beck, “means having wings and roots at the same time” (Boyne 48). When the JLA’s hero personas falter in battle, it is up to the mundane personas to carry on the fight (Fig 6). But these individuals also cannot succeed, lacking any superpowers, “they haven’t a chance.” Ultimately it is only through a cooperative reunification of the two halves, the ability for global action and the locally rooted drive to act, that the bad guys are defeated.

A conventional mix of brawn and strategy is sufficient to resolve the storyline of *Divided We Fall*, but as hinted above, the resolution of Waid-successor Joe Kelly’s *Golden Perfect* broke new ground in terms of cosmopolitan heroism. Previously, we



Figure 6: *JLA: Divided We Fall*

discussed how Rama Khan represents a new kind of villain, the authoritarian despot who seeks to turn aside international civil or human rights interventions under the rhetoric of cultural pluralism and autonomy. The third and final issue of *Golden Perfect* finds Diana back in Jarhanpur, imploring Khan to help her restore balance to a world thrown

into chaos by the destruction of Diana's lasso of truth. In a satirical conflation of cultural truth and scientific truth, without the lasso, reality twists to suit any subjective truth, intermittently creating a flat earth, a Ptolemaic universe, and a new solution to two plus one (Fig. 7). This speaks to the fear that all truths, both moral and physical, must be objective or relative altogether. Richard Rorty observes this kind of conflation and rejection of relativities when he observes that many realist or objectivist accuse pragmatists of the relativism of holding that "every belief is as good as any other" (the absurdities illustrated in Golden Perfect) when in fact such a view holds only that "the term 'true' ...means the same thing in all cultures, just as equally flexible terms like 'here,' 'there,' 'good,' 'bad' ..." (23). One of the great fears embodied in a villain like Khan is the false choice he represents, the choice between pluralism and retention of one's own values, and this crux plays a major role both in the cosmopolitan debate and in subsequent *JLA* storylines as presented below.

Presently, we may be certain that Khan is a despot by our standards even if not by his own; moreover, acknowledging his standards need not rob us of ours.

Diana makes this mistake in her first encounter with the ruler of Jarhanpur, but in their second meeting expresses the lesson she has learned: a difference of opinion is no threat to the truth and a willingness to negotiate does



Figure 7: *JLA: Rules of Engagement*

not amount to ideological surrender. Confronted with Khan's unbending righteousness—"You truly believe that by veiling imperialism in words of peace, I will let you attack my nation? You are nothing in the eyes of this culture! You have no authority here!" (97)—Diana's solution is to apologize rather than fight: "This is a clash of ideals, but difficult as it may be, I must believe...that there is a better solution to the problem than the violence we've both been guilty of" (98). Diana signals the beginning of superheroes' confronting right and wrong in terms of cultural negotiations rather than the violent triumph of the righteous and marks an important revisionary move towards a cosmopolitan ideal of the heroic. There is an echo here of Zolo's weak pacifism in the attempt to remove violence from conflict; the new heroic measures victory not in terms of dominance but rather in terms of accord.

In *Rules of Engagement*, this ideal of negotiation is challenged in tandem with issues of intervention and universal democracy. The JLA travels to the distant planet of Kylaq (phonetic echoes of Iraq and Kuwait) in order to intervene, unbidden, in a local conflict—Kylaq, it seems, is being colonized by the "Peacemaker," a collective of planets that offers security at the price of sovereignty (and who will not let their offer be refused). Once they arrive, Diana in her new role as negotiator—rather than Superman, the team's conventional spokesman—offers a dialogue to the ruler of the encroaching regime. But just as Rama Khan accused her of forcing foreign values upon his closed society, the Peacemaker commander dismisses Diana as too self-interested to act as a genuine arbitrator and upbraids her for attempting to act beyond her jurisdiction. Here the heroes have come up against a primary paradox of cosmopolitanism, the call for

humanitarian intervention in the name of sympathy with a repressed people thwarted by respect for the autonomy of the culture or regime which subjugates them. In the real world, Archibugi suggests one way out of this double bind might come in the form of “a clear gradation of methods,” in other words an understanding that intervention need not be military (12) nor disrespectful to anyone other than the offending regime, viewing the repressed population as “hostages in a kidnapping” (13). Using a mix of defensive force and political maneuvering—specifically broadcasting the torture of a dissident to the population at large—the League ultimately triumphs by enabling the Kylaqi people to recognize and overthrow their own oppressors; they repel the Peacemaker invasion by force and undermine despotic elements within the Kylaqi government through “character assassination.”

This paradox, that cosmopolitans at once must respect other cultures but at the same time insist on pluralism and democracy over closed societies and totalitarianism, represents one of the most contentious issues within the debate over cosmopolitanism. This is despite the fact that the primary “goodness” of democracy has been so ardently articulated by both sides of the debate that one wonders how it could be a source of disagreement. On one side are those who read cosmopolitanism as incompatible with democracy, since democracy and human rights are locally Western constructs (Himmelfarb 75) that cannot, under this version of cosmopolitanism, be exported any more than Western dress or hairstyle. These critics reject cosmopolitanism as they would, I think, rightly reject any philosophy that would compromise democratic humanist values. On the other hand, there are those, such as Archibugi, who see cosmopolitanism

as a fruition of democratic values, and who call for the application of “the principles of democracy internationally” as the best way to deal with “such problems as the protection of the environment” (7); in other words, global risks. The crux, here, is the identity of democracy with the West and with America in particular. Yes, cosmopolitanism would deny any hegemonic attempt to force American democracy on the rest of the world; however, it seems increasingly certain that cosmopolitans ought to encourage the development of local democratic forms--Kuwaiti, Iraqi, or Kylaqi. In *Rules of Engagement*, the solution is not to enforce democracy upon another nation (alien planet), but rather to revitalize the local populace and its native form of democracy. This solution is similar to Diana’s bypassing of Rama Khan to appeal to the land “beneath” him.

Thus the cosmopolitan superhero rewrites the nationalist kind in two ways, both of which are in essential agreement with the anti-alterity of the new supervillain. The ideal of brawn is revised to intelligence and innovation: rather than needing only sheer might to counteract threats, the new superhero needs competence with global-age technologies, the resulting space-time compression, and the concurrent risks of such massive systems. The ideal of righteousness is revised to empathy: rather than simply enforce laws, the new superheroes seeks to negotiate solutions to conflict without compromising his or her own integrity. Such superheroes seem to agree that villains are not evil outsiders but rather misguided peers and potential dialogue partners, provided that sufficient contexts for such dialogue can be established. Although the fact that such ideas are espoused within a comic-book form severely undercuts their value as a how-to manual for living in the global age, it does no harm to their value as hopes and dreams.

But this very criticism over what, ultimately, we get out of such fantasies forgets the value of such texts as a place of serious play and conceptual exploration: the better question may be what we have put into them. Increasingly, superhero comics manifest the risks and fears of the global age; it is no surprise that they should formulate a heroism to answer them. Although one might find the aspirations of cosmopolitanism to be utopian, there may be something appropriate in posing unrealistic solutions to issues that increasingly transcend conventional notions of reality. Thus, however surprisingly, fantasy characters may echo the thoughts and suggestions of real-world thinkers grappling with real-world issues. Global superheroes remain a comic-book fantasy, but this begs the question of whether their utopian aspect derives from cosmopolitanism or the generic conventions of the superhero. Despite the fantastic mode of its expression here, hopes for an actual cosmopolitanism persist.

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