Middle-Earth Internet:

Tolkien’s Palantíri and Problems of Seeing

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# Introduction

J. R. R. Tolkien’s creative years, bracketed as they are by the two World Wars, are, to say the least, filled with all sorts of changes to the world. Few critics, though, have made the effort to position Tolkien as a twentieth-century author, preferring to dismiss him as anachronistic or as a writer of “mere fantasy.” Among those who recognize Tolkien’s relevance to twentieth-century literature (and indeed to culture at large, which isn’t always the same thing) is Tom Shippey, who notes that Tolkien is engaged in “a deeply serious response to […] the major issues of his century: the origin and nature of evil […]; human existence in Middle-earth, without the support of divine Revelation; cultural relativity; and the corruptions and continuities of language” (ix). Because Shippey and others have been engaged in what amounts to a critical war to have Tolkien considered as a “serious” writer, issues such as these must necessarily be addressed, and Shippey and others have done a thorough job.



Figure . J. R. R. Tolkien

Once those aspects of Tolkien’s work have been identified, though, Tolkien’s Middle-earth may be examined in more detail, in order to test whether the crucial conditions of internal consistency do indeed exist. That is, do the details of the stories bear out the idea that Tolkien is involved in a sustained critique at the levels of culture and religion and so forth? I am interested in one detail in particular (actually seven, but of the same general type) that may be overlooked for several reasons: first, it is relatively static and innocuous; second, it is an unusually technological device in a world of swords and other archaic gear of battle; and third, it is a means primarily of visual and not oral communication, which otherwise drives the stories of Middle-earth (for reasons that will be explained below). By means of the palantíri, Tolkien responds to and anticipates the revolutions in communications taking place throughout his own lifetime. His palantíri, which appear in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, have powerful applicability to developing communications technology; moreover, their use and misuse say much about Tolkien’s modern response to Romantic ideas of imagination, fantasy, and hope, and his own notions of fantasy as a literary mode.

# Background

Tolkien was born only 16 years after the first telephone call was made by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876, and wireless technology was still in its infancy when he decided to parlay his fascination with language into a job as a signal officer in World War I:

By the beginning of 1916 he had decided to specialise in signalling, for the prospect of dealing with words, messages, and codes was more appealing than the drudgery and responsibility of commanding a platoon. So he learnt Morse code, flag and disc signalling, the transmission of messages by heliograph and lamp, the use of signal-rockets and field-telephones, and even how to handle carrier pigeons (which were sometimes used on the battlefield). Eventually he was appointed battalion signalling officer. (Carpenter, J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography 86)



Figure . A field-telephone

Carpenter’s litany of devices used for signaling notably excludes radio, which was not widely used in World War I but was, nevertheless, becoming more available. Of the communications techniques he does list, only the field-telephone (see Figure 2) would allow anything like direct communication between sender and receiver—that is, a dialogue by means of technology that most closely reproduces actual conversation between parties. All of the other strategies for sending a message involve encoding and decoding, either simply by translating a spoken order into a written one or by representing a message by electronic noise or visual cues. Tolkien certainly would have found the whole process of representing language by different means fascinating, and his promotion to battalion signaling officer indicates a facility for such a task, no doubt nurtured by his work with “decoding” the puzzles of language he had constantly been working with since childhood. But aside from the novelty of learning the techniques of signaling and enjoying a new way of thinking about language, the reality in war is that messages need to be sent as quickly and as accurately as possible. Certainly Tolkien knew and appreciated this; so one would expect an officer in his position to be in favor of any technology that would enable communication to be more direct, as opposed to being sent through multiple layers of what amounts to translation, regardless of one’s personal fascination with word puzzles.

However, later in life, Tolkien indicates a severe dislike for this kind of technology. In a letter to his son Christopher, himself training for war in 1944, Tolkien makes reference to the use of radio or “wireless” technology. Addressing the dismal intellectual and moral conditions of military training, he acknowledges that his son is worse off because of the new technology: “Only in one way was I better off: wireless was not invented. I daresay it had some potential for good, but it has in fact in the main become a weapon for the fool, the savage, and the villain to afflict the minority with, and to destroy thought. Listening in has killed listening” (The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien 71-72). This is an interesting comment for several reasons. First, it is strange to select this as the one evil without which someone training for war would be better off. Radio today seems rather innocuous—hardly something to single out as a terrible evil. Secondly, again, a former signal officer would be expected to appreciate the good to which radio could be put on the battlefield. Instead, what we see is a rather passionate response to the potential harm rather than the potential benefits of this technology. But this is also characteristic of someone trained to interpret messages, in that complacency bred by familiarity could also lead to misinterpretation. That is, merely hearing a voice over the radio does not trigger the same response or attention to meaning as does seeing flashes of light or hearing electronic beeps that represent letters and words.

But Tolkien is clearly alluding to more than merely the battlefield applications of communications technology. Radio, he says, is being used to “destroy thought” by means of allowing us to “listen in.” Author E. B. White has a similar response to television several years later:

Television hangs on the questionable theory that whatever happens anywhere should be sensed everywhere. If everyone is going to be able to see everything, in the long run all sights may lose whatever rarity value they once possessed, and it may well turn out that people, being able to see and hear practically everything, will be specially interested in almost nothing. (Andrews)

White expresses a similar anxiety about the destruction of thought or of specialized interest. Both authors realize somewhat prophetically that access to unlimited amounts of information would cause an overload of one’s capacity to sustain interest, in both cases resulting in an apathy that relies upon the packaging of large amounts of information for individual consumption. Moreover, Tolkien’s response to radio certainly makes sense for someone trained in analysis of language, as merely listening to spoken words tends to make the listener a passive receptor rather than an evaluator of information—if one is being given all the facts, then what need is there for further research, thought, or analysis? Tolkien shared this kind of media misanthropy with C. S. Lewis, who also claimed not to give much attention to “news.” In his imaginative reconstruction of a “typical” day in the life of Tolkien, biographer Humphrey Carpenter envisions Tolkien’s response to news media: “During breakfast, Tolkien glances at the newspaper, but only in the most cursory fashion. He, like his friend C. S. Lewis, regards ‘news’ as on the whole trivial and fit to be ignored, and they both argue (to the annoyance of many of their friends) that the only ‘truth’ is to be found in literature. However, both men enjoy the crossword” (J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography 121). If true, then what is the difference between finding truth in news and finding it in literature? The former seems to contain mostly facts, whereas the latter emphasizes story or personal narrative (or some such style usually distinct from journalism). On the surface, journalism would appear to be the more “truthful” of the two by virtue of its representing the objective facts of an event, whereas literature is clearly a more subjective account.

# Truth in fictional narratives

The idea behind Tolkien and Lewis’ mistrust of news media as a source for truth is precisely that: by studying a multiplicity of subjective narratives, one might arrive at a better idea of truth than by relying upon accounts that are nominally objective by virtue of presenting facts. Facts, after all, are subject to each individual’s interpretation and application of them; “machines”—either mechanical or the “machinery” of news media, for example—are responsible for supplanting individual subjectivity in regards to the processing and understanding of truth. Again, Tolkien’s letters to Christopher are instructive on this point. In the midst of discussing Christopher’s RAF training, Tolkien muses on the evils of technology:

There is the great tragedy and despair of all machinery laid bare. Unlike art which is content to create a new secondary world in the mind, it attempts to actualize desire, and so to create power in this World; and that cannot really be done with any real satisfaction. Labour-saving machinery only creates endless and worse labour. And in addition to this fundamental disability of a creature, is added the Fall, which makes our devices not only fail of their desire but turn to new and horrible evil. (The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien 87-88)

Thus the tyranny of machinery that “destroys thought” is brought about by the attempt to “actualize desire.” For Tolkien, any perceived notion of truth or any attempt at manufacturing power, whether in the form of receiving information disguised as facts or in supposedly labor-saving mechanisms (of which, I believe, he might have included newspapers), will end ultimately in tyranny or failure. The Fall makes it requisite that truth may exist only in the secondary world, and then only by means of imagination. For this reason, only creative narratives and the analysis of such can approach anything like the representation of truth.

The notion of perceiving truth by means of creative narratives is also all bound up with Tolkien’s modern revision of the Romantic tradition involving the distinction between fantasy (or fancy) and imagination. However, before discussing his negotiation of a new Romantic paradigm, it will be useful to ground his critique of communications technology in an example from his own work, from which a notion of a modern Romantic revision may be constructed. To begin, if Tolkien does indeed respond to the anxiety about communications expressed in his letters, then there ought to be something in his creative works applicable to (rather than allegorical of) primary-world devices like radio and television. There is only a hint of such a device in *The Silmarillion*, and *The Hobbit* contains no such mechanism. However, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the palantíri become central to the plot for their power to communicate images over great distances. Because Tolkien avowedly refused the suggestion of allegory in *The Lord of the Rings*—“There is no ‘symbolism’ or conscious allegory in my story”—it would be disingenuous to suggest possibilities for what the palantíri represent, per se. Instead, following Tolkien’s own suggestion—“That there is no allegory does not, of course, say there is no applicability. There always is” (The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien 262)—we may think of the stones as suggestion the idea of long-distance communication, with obvious applicability to modern communications devices.

The palantíri are made things. Along with the Silmarils, the Elf Fëanor fabricates them while still in Valinor, before the “fall” of the Elves: “other crystals he made also, wherein things far away could be seen small but clear, as with the eyes of the eagles of Manwë” (The Silmarillion 64) Of those things that Tolkien tells us Fëanor makes, the palantíri are the only “useful” device (excluding weapons of war), in the sense of complementing or enhancing some physical process; to use Tolkien’s term, they are an example of “labour-saving machinery.” The Silmarils, while potentially useful as a replacement for the Light of the Trees devoured by Ungoliant, quickly become emblems of desire and never themselves perform a useful function. The palantíri next show up, rather innocuously, as Elendil prepares to leave Númenor; among the other goods and heirlooms are mentioned “Seven Stones they had, the gift of the Eldar” (276). Thus far, Tolkien has not named the stones, and the Elves apparently do not think as much of them as they did the Silmarils—at least not enough to covet them, as evidenced by their having been given as a gift. Moreover, all seven of the stones are now in the hands of Men, the Elves having kept none of them for themselves.

Indeed, it is not surprising that so little is made of the palantíri before *The Lord of the Rings*, as it takes an evil mind to realize their full potential. Only when it is discovered that Sauron must have one do the stones suddenly become objects of great significance. When the existence of the stones is discovered, clear distinctions begin to be made between the ways in which both sides have been operating. The use to which the stones are put speaks to Tolkien’s revision of the Romantic concepts of fantasy and imagination. Specifically, the capacity for fantasy becomes crucial to the success of the Fellowship, whereas imagination is regarded as detrimental to the sustaining of hope.

# Romantic influences

That Tolkien is negotiating Romantic ideas in his works has been shown by a number of authors. Notably, Chris Seeman argues that he is involved with a revision of Romantic thought about fantasy and imagination in his “On Fairy Stories,” in which, Seeman says, Tolkien is concerned with establishing fantasy as a distinct form of literature: “Tolkien revises the Romantic tradition by asserting the validity of fantasy as a distinct mode of art. He differentiates fantasy from other art forms by restricting it to narrative, thereby highlighting its non-visual or non-representational character” (73). In other words, fantasy, according to Tolkien’s definition, is specifically not drama (or, we might add, movies), in which mechanism must be employed to render a suspension of belief, thus crippling the capacity to imagine true sub-creation in the secondary world—the audience is always aware they are watching men on a stage using tricks of machinery or props to represent the fantastic:

Drama has, of its very nature, already attempted a kind of bogus, or shall I say at least substitute, magic: the visible and audible presentation of imaginary men in a story. That is in itself an attempt to counterfeit the magician’s wand. To introduce, even with mechanical success, into this quasi-magical secondary world a further fantasy or magic is to demand, as it were, an inner or tertiary world. It is a world too much. (On Fairy-Stories 71)

Thus drama is disqualified from both fantasy and narrative by virtue of its being primarily a visual medium. This has obvious implications, then, for the introduction of a device the primary function of which is to represent images: the palantír. It becomes rather significant to note who has and does not have access to these seeing stones and the use to which they are put by those who do have access to them. The implications involve the legitimacy of one’s claim to be included in the “narrative” that is continually unfolding in Tolkien’s mythology.

This notion of drama as separate from narrative relies upon the distinction of imagination from fantasy, as already has been suggested. Specifically, Tolkien is employing Romantic ideas about seeing in a particularly modern context that involves technology; what he imagines is distinctly at odds with certain Romantic notions. For instance, the Romantics tended to take a decidedly optimistic view of seeing, and especially of seeing nature, for they believed (to oversimplify) that nature itself is emblematic of the self. Thus can Wordsworth gaze upon a landscape and feel himself disembodied, becoming a participant in a community of solitary viewers: “[…] Almost suspended, we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul: / While with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things” (The Prelude 45-49). Seeing into the life of things is seeing into the life of other people, whose essential natures—like the viewer’s—are represented in the landscape of nature being seen. This sentiment is echoed in the American version of Romanticism, Transcendentalism:

In the woods we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.[[1]](#endnote-1) (Emerson 10)

The self is contained in nature; since nature is the same for each subjective viewer, the essential self is the same for each individual. It becomes clear, however, that Emerson’s experiment only works if each viewer does indeed report having seen the same thing. If one’s concept of the self in nature differs from another’s, then, Emerson might say, return to the woods and try again. And herein lies the problem for Tolkien, as well as for other modern writers: what if the images really do depend upon one’s subjective point of view? Or, even more insidious, what if the images themselves are at the mercy of some other power? To take the idea even further, a society that relies upon mechanistic tools, rather than Emersonian walks in the woods, for their images will be at the mercy of those who control the mechanism. In Tolkien’s lifetime, television began to display such a capacity for the manipulation of images. The same year he finished writing *The Hobbit*, 1936, the first television broadcast was being shown from the Berlin Olympics, and Hitler was able to broadcast himself to nations in advance of his armies.

Granted, even some Romantic visions of seeing nature allowed for the possibility of seeing too deeply into things best left alone, or at least of encountering unexpected strangeness when attempting to transcend the boundary between humanity and the natural world. Indeed, Wordsworth’s poetic autobiography includes a scene where seeing “into the life of things” leads to a kind of transgression, much like waking a Balrog by delving too deeply into secret places. Wordsworth describes a scene in which he takes a boat—“an elfin pinnace,” no less—across a lake, leaving the safety of the shore, and encounters something unexpected lurking among the crags:

[…] the grim shape

Towered up between me and the stars, and still,

For so it seemed, with purpose of its own

And measured motion like a living thing,

Strode after me. […]

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

[…] No familiar shapes

Remained, no pleasant images of trees,

Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;

But huge and mighty forms, that do not live

Like living men, moved slowly through the mind

By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

Certainly the Ring displays the power to elicit this kind of nightmare transcendence, enticing its bearer with hope of power yet ultimately revealing its direct relation with the unblinking Eye of Sauron. Here the Romantic hope for empathetic union through transcendence in nature is taken to its most nightmarish extreme, for what if, in the process of pushing through the boundary separating the subjective viewer from (supposedly) objective nature, it is discovered that a more insidious subjectivity lurks behind it? This is something like what Frodo experiences at the crucial moment when he must decide whether to remain with the Fellowship or to bear the ring on his own. Putting on the Ring at Amon Hen, the “Seat of Seeing,” he is indeed treated to an Emersonian transparency, visualizing the conflict within himself as two powers striving for mastery: “the Ring was upon him. […] There was no sound, only bright living images. The world seemed to have shrunk and fallen silent. […] Two powers strove in him. […] Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so” (The Lord of the Rings 416-17). The Voice, in this case, is Gandalf, either reconstructed from memory or calling from somewhere beyond Middle-earth, and the Eye, of course, is Sauron. And herein, again, lies the difference Tolkien is constructing between drama, or the presentation of images, and narrative. On the one hand is Gandalf, a disembodied voice, and on the other is Sauron, essentially a disembodied eye or, perhaps, a body that is all eye. Frodo’s choice is between image and narrative, the Eye or the Voice.

# The palantíri and the Ring

The palantíri work similar to the Ring, and yet they are obviously quite different. First of all, the intended purpose of the palantíri is to allow seeing across large distances, whereas the One Ring is intended to rule over the lesser rings. However, this kind of “seeing” along with the ability to make its wearer invisible are the only true “powers” we see the Ring exhibiting, since it is never used “to rule them all.” Moreover, the primary use to which the Ring is put—to make its wearer invisible—can be considered a manipulation of the visual, or of image, thus placing it in the realm of a “dramatic device” as opposed to a narrative one. The Ring and the palantíri are tools of imagination, whereas the Voice is a tool of fantasy: “The mental power of image-making is one thing, or aspect; and it should appropriately be called Imagination. […] The achievement of the expression, which gives (or seems to give) ‘the inner consistency of reality,’ is indeed another thing, or aspect, needing another name.” The name he uses is “Fantasy”. The palantíri, more so than the Ring, are consciously designed to be tool of imagination, or of “forming mental images of things not actually present” (On Fairy-Stories 68) but nevertheless images of things that actually are. Fantasy, on the other hand, reserves the power of sub-creation, of “imagining” things in secondary world that are not in the primary world.



The palantíri were originally designed, says Tolkien, to be tools for seeing across long distances, as their name (literally “those that watch from afar”) suggests. However, Sauron has bent them, like he has other living and non-living things, to be tools of his will:

By themselves the Stones could only see […] But when another mind occupied a Stone in accord, thought could be ‘transferred’ (received as ‘speech’), and visions of the things in the mind of the surveyor of one Stone could be seen by the other Surveyor. […] It was only Sauron who used a Stone for the transference of his superior will, dominating the weaker surveyor and forcing him to reveal hidden thought and to submit to his commands. (The Palantíri 412)

This is similar to the fate that Tolkien envisioned (above) for radio and other technology, namely the corruption of otherwise useful technology for the subjugation of lesser wills. But the capacity for the palantíri to transfer thought and will is clearly not a function of radio or television. These are rather tools primarily of suggestion, although suggestion may, of course, be a powerful influence over the will. Tolkien’s language, however, reveals a more insidious, active role for the stones, using language such as “transference,” “dominating,” “forcing,” and “submit.” Indeed, this sounds more like a function of technology Tolkien could not have known of while writing his stories but clearly may have “imagined,” as other fantasy and science-fiction writers of the time were doing, namely the Internet. Specifically, what Sauron has done with the palantíri sounds very much like sending a computer virus, a much more subtle method of influencing the “will” of the receiver than overt suggestion.

It is significant in terms of Tolkien’s views of both technology and fantasy that the Fellowship does not use the palantír they receive at Isengard in order to assist their quest. The incident in which Pippin looks briefly into the stone serves to highlight the danger of the device originally intended for the benign task of seeing things that are far away. There is the suggestion that Pippin, like Saruman, could be “infected” with the “virus” of Sauron: “If he had questioned you, then and there,” Gandalf says, “almost certainly you would have told all that you know, to the ruin of us all” (The Lord of the Rings 199). But Pippin’s exposure is brief, and the example of Saruman is known only by conjecture, as we never have direct evidence of the stone’s influence over him—although it is clear that it has affected him. In contrast, Denethor eventually admits to having consulted his own palantír, with catastrophic consequences. Again, however, the stone has not been made to show Denethor anything that does not exist; rather, the images he sees are of things in the primary world, but the presentation of specific images is controlled by Sauron. Because he sees images he does not fully understand, Denethor is convinced of the eventual failure of the struggle against Sauron: “Pride and despair!” he cries to Gandalf.

Didst thou think that the eyes of the White Tower were blind? Nay, I have seen more than thou knowest, Grey Fool. For thy hope is but ignorance. Go then and labour in healing! Go forth and fight! Vanity. For a little space you may triumph on the field, for a day. But against the Power that now arises there is no victory. (The Lord of the Rings Part III 129)

There is no way Denethor can know this, since the stone cannot foresee future events. Rather, his conclusion is the result of his own misinterpretation of the images he sees. His folly lies in his viewing the palantír in seclusion, removed from counsel (such as that of Gandalf) and drawing conclusions in isolation. In effect, he has too much information without the means to properly filter and understand what he is seeing.

In contrast, the fellowship is continually guided by a noticeable and deliberate lack of information. It is significant that the kind of adventures which, by their nature, involve uncertainty and unforeseen difficulties are anathema to the nature of Hobbits, who “liked to have books filled with things that they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions” (Prologue 17). Thus the adventure Frodo and company find themselves a part of is contrary to their natures and experience, and this eventually works toward their advantage. The idea of hope is constantly discussed throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, in terms of whether or not there is hope of succeeding against Sauron against all odds. For Tolkien, hope is contained in novelty, the unforeseen introduction of what appears to be chance; knowing too much, especially of future events, would negate novelty and undermine hope: “Now at this last we must take a hard road,” Elrond says, “a road unforeseen. There lies our hope, if hope it be” (The Lord of the Rings Part I 280). Later, after Boromir is killed and Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli have lost track of the Hobbits (and the Ring), Legolas continues to insist on the presence of hope despite evidence to the contrary: “Yet do not cast all hope away. Tomorrow is unknown. Rede oft is found at the rising of the Sun” (The Lord of the Rings Part II 31). This is more than mere saccharine optimism, however; in fact, his language goes to the central themes of fantasy and sub-creation. It is interesting that Tolkien here inserts the archaic Anglo-Saxon word “rede,” the meanings of which suggest the significance of nurturing fantasy over imagination; “rede” can be defined both in the sense of “counsel, help, a plan” and in the sense of “a story, a narrative.”. The idea behind these definitions is that story or narrative is essential to devising a plan for how to act, as in the case of the largely clueless fellowship. That is, the fellowship’s course is guided not by intelligence and reconnaissance, but rather largely by the survival of story, legend, and ancient lore, often not directly relevant to current circumstances. The narratives preserved by Gandalf, for example, stand in contrast to the information gathered by Denethor alone in his tower. The latter depends upon analysis and applicability for understanding how to act in a given situation, providing largely examples for kinds of behavior as well as precedents for the intervention of novelty in the service of hope; the former presents merely raw information, which has no value outside of the context of history and narrative.

Tolkien’s distinction between fantasy and imagination becomes relevant here, as fantasy alone is capable of instilling the idea of hope. This is what distinguishes fantasy from imagination, which only calls to mind that which is. In a sense, then, I believe this is part of what Tolkien means when he says that fantasy is “not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent” (On Fairy-Stories 69). Fantasy, as it is realized in Middle-earth, relies upon the acceptance of a continuing narrative that may be incomprehensible when seen in pieces, as the pixels on a television screen are mere spots of color when seen up close. Only the acceptance of one’s status as a character in an ongoing story with no foreseeable end allows Frodo and Sam, for instance, to continue their quest. Indeed, had Sam known more than he needed at a crucial moment, he might have become as ineffective as Denethor and thus domed the quest: “If Sam could have seen him [Shagrat] and known the grief that his escape would bring, he might have quailed” (The Lord of the Rings Part III 184). Instead, Sam acts out of ignorance and thus is able to remain effective, allowing for the possibility of novelty to assist his own actions. As in physics, little can be done without the inertia of movement, and object at rest (like Denethor) tend to remain at rest.

# Conclusion

Tolkien’s use of the palantíri as devices that transmit images has obvious relevance to the twentieth century, in which television quickly became a dominant technology. Moreover, he foresees that, despite its obvious dangers, technology that allows this kind of transmission will become more and more desirable. Pippin, despite his nearly fatal experience with the palantír, nevertheless foreshadows a time when there may be a kind of palantír in every hobbit hole: “I wish we could have a Stone that we could see all our friends in,” he says, on his way back to the Shire, “and that we could speak to them from far away!” (The Lord of the Rings Part III 260). Barely half a century after Tolkien wrote this, the use of just such technology had become routine. His point, however, is not to inhibit the spread of technology. As he himself points out a number of times in his letters, the fact of living in a fallen world precludes the idea of ever returning to a pre-technological perfection. Hobbits and men will have “forbidden” technology eventually, no matter how many times the Shire is scoured; but as long as fantasy is nurtured as a literary form, the possibility exists for hope amid the continuing spread of evil. Tolkien’s careful revision of Romantic idealism in light of modern technology is meant, among other things, to preserve the distinctions between fantasy and imagination, thus allowing for the possibility of seeing beyond the primary world.

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# Endnotes

1. Emerson expresses another view of the eye in his 1841 essay “Circles.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)