



# The CHESTERTON REVIEW

*J.R.R. Tolkien*

*Mythos and Modernity in Middle-Earth*

# The Chesterton Review

*The Chesterton Review* is the journal of the G.K. Chesterton Institute, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange Ave., South Orange, NJ 07079-2687. It is also published quarterly (one double and two single issues) for T&T Clark, 59 George Street, Edinburgh EH2 2LQ, Scotland, and for the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), P.O. Box 4431, Wilmington, DE 19807.

Subscription rates are as follows: In the United States \$30.00 (American); in Canada \$38.00 (Canadian). For subscriptions in America write to: *The Chesterton Review*, c/o ISI, P.O. Box 4431, Wilmington, DE 19807. American subscribers can also order the *Review* with a Visa or MasterCard by calling 1-800-526-7022. Email inquiries can be directed to [isi@isi.org](mailto:isi@isi.org). For subscriptions in Canada write to: *The Chesterton Review*, Box 249, Battleford, SK S0M 0E0. Canadians can also order with Visa or MasterCard by calling 1-800-558-3133. E-mail enquiries to [chesterton@marianpress.sk.ca](mailto:chesterton@marianpress.sk.ca).

In Australia and New Zealand subscription rates are as follows: A\$38.00 (surface) and A\$55.00 (airmail) for subscribers in Australia and New Zealand, and payment should be sent to Mr. Hilary J. Hayes, "Long Swamp", R.M.B. 3115, Yackandandah, Victoria 3749, Australia.

Outside North and South America and Australia/New Zealand subscriptions should be sent to T&T Clark, Stanley House, 3 Fleets Lane, Poole, Dorset, BH15 3AJ, England: £26.95 (surface) and £33.95 (airmail).

Single issues of the *Review* are available for \$12.00 (ordinary issue) and \$20.00 (double issue) plus postage. All manuscripts and letters concerning *The Chesterton Review* should be sent to Rev. Ian Boyd, C.S.B., Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange Ave., South Orange, NJ 07079-2687. Phone (973) 275-2430 or (973) 279-2085, fax (973) 761-7798, Email [boydjian@shu.edu](mailto:boydjian@shu.edu).

*The Chesterton Review* is indexed in the *American Humanities Index* and in the *MLA International Bibliography*.

Items in News and Comments and photographs are reproduced with the permission of the copyright owners.

ISSN 0317-0500

Second Class Mail Registration No. 5278

©2002 The Chesterton Review

All Rights Reserved

**CONTENTS**

IAN BOYD, CSB . . . . .	Introduction	1
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	A Great Man and a Myth	3
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	Education by Fairy Tales	7
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	The Ballad of the White Horse	11
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	The Ethics of Fairy-Tales	7
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	A Letter to a Child	19
ANONYMOUS . . . . .	A Morning Prayer	22
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	The Court of Camelot	23
STRATFORD CALDECOTT . . . . .	The Horns of Hope: J.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits	29
OWEN DUDLEY EDWARDS . . . . .	Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel	57
C.S. LEWIS . . . . .	Tolkien's <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	73
CLIVE TOLLEY . . . . .	Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at Mythopoeia	79
VERLYN FLIEGER . . . . .	A Cautionary Tale	97
DWIGHT LONGENECKER . . . . .	The Little Way Through Middle Earth	105
LÉONIE CALDECOTT . . . . .	Film Review	113
PETER MILWARD, SJ . . . . .	Tolkien, the Ring and I	119
OWEN LEE, CSB . . . . .	Wagner and the Wonder of Art	125
OWEN LEE, CSB . . . . .	Wise Words for University Graduands	131
Reviews . . . . .		135
News and Comments . . . . .		173
Letters . . . . .		291



# Introduction

Ian Boyd, CSB

“You are inside a very great story.” So wrote J.R.R. Tolkien to his soldier son during World War II. In a volume of the *Review* devoted to Tolkien’s “great story” *The Lord of the Rings*, it is important to recall the connections between literature and life. Tolkien’s own experience as a soldier during the First World War provided him with the major theme for his epic romance, for the central warning of the book concerns every war and every struggle against evil. Tolkien understood that those who attempt to conquer evil with the power of the ring are themselves in danger of being transformed into new versions of the evil they have been combating. In one way or another, every contributor to this volume explores the implications of the same insight. In the Chesterton pieces with which the issue begins one also catches echoes of a similar idea. Like Tolkien, Chesterton believed that fantasy and fairy tales can be vehicles for discovering the deepest truths about life. In one of his own fictions, the heroine of the story looks back to a pageant which she and the other characters had once re-enacted as an entertainment. “The rhymes we spoke in mummery on that lawn,” she says, “were so much more like life than any life that you were living then. And how very like what we are living now!”

A word of explanation may be in order about the inclusion in this work of two pieces which at first might seem to have no direct link to *The Lord of the Rings*. At the beginning of last year’s Texaco Radio Broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Father Owen Lee, C.S.B. gave a talk on Wagner’s *Meistersinger*. Earlier, in the Spring, Father Lee gave an address to the graduates of the University of Toronto on the subject of wisdom literature and its importance for young people as a guide for living a good life. The texts of both these talks have been printed as the concluding pieces in the “Articles Section”, along with, in the “News and Comments,” an excerpt from Father Lee’s book on Wagner’s Ring Cycle. The Wagner pieces are included in order to provide a wider context for the material on Tolkien, but also to provide an answer to a description of Tolkien’s great work made by A.N. Wilson, who dismissed it as being no more than “Wagner for kiddies; Wagner without angst; Wagner without a brooding sense of spiritual tragedy.” The address to the university students is included because it is a reminder of a truth which Chesterton was fond of emphasizing, namely that the deepest wisdom is to be found in the products of the healthy imagination, in stories and in poetic utterances, rather than in the products of morbid minds and sick imaginations.

---

J.R.R. Tolkien at the conferment of an Honorary Doctorate of Letters by Oxford University in 1972.

There is another piece by Owen Lee which forms part of this very Introduction. This is a letter he wrote to the Toronto *Globe & Mail* some years ago in defence of the Catholic priesthood. It contains words of wisdom that are badly needed today at a time when the prophetic words found at the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings* would seem to have been sadly fulfilled. When Sam, the true hero of the story, sees what has become of the Shire, he is horrified: "This is worse than Mordor!" he exclaims, "Much worse in a way. It comes home to you, as they say; because it is home, and you remember it before it was all ruined." What Owen Lee has to say will give hope and reassurance to those who are in danger of forgetting the essential health of the Church and its priesthood. But here is the complete text of Father Lee's remarkable letter, dated November 16, 1994:

It is time to blow the whistle on M. His latest meretricious piece in *The Globe & Mail* is an interview with one ex-priest who, "eager to tell all now," rants on for several paragraphs about the priests he once knew being promiscuous liars and hypocrites. M. laps it all up ("dog collar" is his ungenerous term for priestly insignia), accepting his interviewee's rueful estimates as statistically sound, and ending his column with that feeblest and least charitable of all last resorts, a Polish joke.

I too am only one priest, though in forty-seven years of religious life I have met close to a thousand priests, and I have lived in a community with more than a hundred—in Canada, the United States, Italy, and Germany. I have not agreed with them all, and a few of them I could not like very much. But to my knowledge only one, possibly two, of those hundred priests had to face the problems [he] licks his lips over. Those unhappy men faced their problems honestly, and they have returned to honest work. That percentage, by the way, corresponds to the real statistics about priestly failure, which, while undeniably devastating in its effect, is proportionately far less common than is the same failure in the general population.

M.'s interviewee wants "an honest answer from every priest in Canada". Well, this priest is happy in his priesthood, more than willing to make the sacrifices it entails, in recent years increasingly moved by the joy it brings. This priest joined a teaching community because, in his high school, he had never seen a group of men so happy in their work, so dedicated to what he regarded as the important things in life—goodness, kindness, quiet faith, and a wide-ranging interest in knowledge of the arts and sciences. He has never regretted the decision he made. The Catholic priesthood is a beautiful life. That is his honest answer.

To which words Father Lee's Basilian *confrère* and fellow priest says a resounding "Amen". Here indeed is another of those great and good stories of which Tolkien spoke.

The pictures chosen to illustrate the volume are views of the English villages and country-side which Tolkien loved and which inspired his Distributist view of what constituted a good life. Most of the articles found in the issue were commissioned by Stratford Caldecott, who is currently preparing a book on the spirituality of *The Lord of the Rings*. To him I wish to express sincere thanks.

# A Great Man and a Myth

G.K. Chesterton

*This uncollected piece by Chesterton was first published in the April 25, 1903 issue of The Daily News.*

Some little time ago, when some of the practical lunatics who are the life of the world, were excavating Crete, they found in the island the undoubted traces of a huge labyrinth. It was the Maze of the Minotaur. There is something indescribably fascinating about the idea of such a discovery; it is turning the scientific tendency upside down and setting it not to find the fabulous character of histories, but to discover the truth of fairy tales. It is as if men had come suddenly (near St. John's Wood) on the roots of the Giant Beanstalk that reached up to the land of the giants. A wild sketch might be written about such a race of discovery; a new research that went on from triumph to triumph, finding the site of Eden and the flocks of Bo-Peep, the huge tables of Moses, lying like ruined walls in the desert, or the broom and basket of the old woman who swept the sky, flying between us and the moon, till charts of the heavens for the use of schools contained the Castle East of the Sun and West of the Moon, and children, with their governesses, fed mermaids and centaurs in the Zoological Gardens. It would be a fine thing to live in such a world and breathe the passionate air of that new and creative scepticism.

Materially speaking, let me assure my readers (since I fear I suffer sometimes from not making such solemn explanations), that I do not expect to find the flocks of Bo-Peep. The myths have returned, but in another and much more curious manner. They were originated (if they ever were originated, they have an unbegotten air), they were passed and repeated by rude and practical men in a coarse and bare life, men as harsh as rock and as careless as the wind, men hungry and cunning, men silent and bloody. One would imagine at the first blush that such men would be as a rule reliable on practical matters and unreliable on theoretic matters. A man with a stone axe and nothing else to speak of, slaying and wander-

ing for bare life, would (one would think) be the sort of man who would be a good authority on how blood flowed or how birds flew, but not a very impeccable authority on, let us say, the existence of a chain of causation, or the possibility of moral progress. Now the astounding thing is this, and I know no more how it is to be explained than I know no more how it is to be explained than I know the relations of time to eternity, or any other of the rather showy paradoxes of the Cosmos. But the astounding thing is that these rude men were exactly the opposite of what we ought reasonably to expect; they were asses in their record of practical matters; they were poets and prophets in their records of theoretic matters. They knew nothing whatever about how birds flew, though they killed them every day. War was piled upon war from the Stone Age to the awful Thirty Years, the world rocked and smoked like a shambles, and the blood was an ocean in the sight of God. And yet no one discovered how blood flowed until the appearance of a mild gentleman in the reign of Charles II.

And these rude and hungry savages, who were to all appearance so stupid that they could not notice how blood flowed or how birds flew, did produce a vast and superb popular literature, which is simply soaked with inexhaustible symbolism and inexhaustible philosophy. They were authorities on the chain of causation and the possibilities of moral progress. They could not produce a single sound generalisation on any of the things that they dealt with daily, heat, the stars, animals, geography, physical health. But they produced the great and eternal generalisations of morals and metaphysics, chaos, and creation, Eden, or the perfect state, Ragnarek, or the End of the Gods, the deluge, or the salvation of the few, St. George and the dragon and all the victories of valour over strength, the Sphinx whom to misinterpret is death, the apple which to eat is eternal life, the gold of the Nibelungs, which all men desire and which curses all men. These savages, who had not said the first word of daily life, had often said the last word of metaphysics. It is only one of the many knock-down blows that the incalculable soul of man gives to our reason, complexity. There have been human states of civilization, very polished, very orderly, very witty, very civilized, when such a return would have seemed blank nonsense. If you had told a deist of the eighteenth century that the brutal skull-splitting hero of an old Norwegian fairy-tale, the bloody and absurd Siegfried, "was not, taken alone, the perfect 'Mensch,'" but required a fabulous princess, the old sleeping beauty of the fairy-tales, to "become at last the true, the open-eyed, redemptrix," he would have been violently amused. It would have appeared to him like saying that "Little



## *A Great Man and a Myth*

Jack Horner” was an analysis of a purely ethical egoism, or that “Hey Diddle Diddle, the Cat and the Fiddle,” was a satiric description of the possible alliance between aesthetics and a fickle and bestial nature.

Wagner was so great a man that people fight and kill each other over which is his most important side, as they do over Socrates. Mrs. Cleather and Mr. Crump are prepared even to fling away, with a splendid wave of the hand, his immense musical reputation in Europe rather than that anyone should suppose that he was a musician and nothing else. They maintain, with great energy and considerable effect, that Wagner intended his music to be not merely taken along with, but perhaps even made subordinate to, his dramatic and literary importance. In all this, of course, I am a child in their hands. But it is the real essence of a great man that we all venerate him for inconsistent reasons.

I have before me an extremely interesting example which has set my thoughts running in this direction. It is a book on Wagner’s great dramatic trilogy, “The Ring of the Nibelungs,” by Mrs. Leighton Cleather and Mr. Basil Crump (Methuen). The book is thoroughly worth reading, and as I know that Mrs. Leighton Cleather and Mr. Crump are eminent Wagner scholars and authorities, I believe, with abandoned meekness, everything they tell me. But before the reader considers satisfactorily the suggestive theories and explanations contained in the work there is one preliminary effect which it produces. Here we have two able writers’ interpretation of a very great man’s interpretation of a very great legend. And this legend was invented, so far as one can see, by men who lived by barbaric plunder, pelted their fellow-guests with ox bones, carved their enemies into the blood eagle, and lived, in several respects, like howling beasts. And yet this is the kind of thing that can be found—and honestly and reasonably found—by a modern genius in their legend: “It shows Nature in her naked truth, with all her innate opposites, whose infinitely varied meetings include the shock of mutual repulsion . . . the whole course of the poem shows the necessity of recognising the change, the diversity, the multiplicity, the eternal newness of reality and life, and yielding place to it.” Or, again: “Nor is Siegfried, taken alone (the male alone) the perfect ‘Mensch’; he’s but the half; only with Brünnhild becomes he the redeemer. One cannot do all: it needs the plural: and the suffering, self-offering woman—becomes at last the true, the open-eyed redemptrix.” It is a fact of very real importance that modern men of the mental complexity of Wagner have this tendency to return to very primary stories to

express that well. So it is with Wagner. Knowing nothing about music, and nothing about German, it yet strikes me that Wagner was immensely great because he was the emblem of this mythological renaissance, this discovery of the metaphysical truth of primal things. Since the great romantic movement which he headed we have lost, or ought to have lost, the whole of that eighteenth-century notion that philosophy is a thing made by civilization, a thing of books, a thing of subtitles, a thing requiring an elaborate intellectual examination. I remember once reading a book which sought to establish a comparison between Buddhism and Christianity, and one of its parallels was the fact that God in both religions spoke from the sky, as if we should expect him to speak from the coal-hole in any religion. If we wish to know why God speaks from the sky in all religions the proper and effective method is not to compare Buddhism and Christianity, or this myth with that myth, or this explanation with that explanation; the proper and effective method is simply to look at the sky. When we look at the sky we see precisely what Adam saw, precisely what Siegfried saw, precisely what Shakespeare saw, precisely what Wagner saw, precisely what a mad Bedouin saw—we see something quite clear, quite simple, quite intelligible, quite personal and comforting to ourselves, but something which will never be expressed until the end of the world.



The Wye at Symonds Yat, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire

# Education by Fairy Tales

G.K. Chesterton

*This uncollected Chesterton piece was first published in the November 18, 1905 issue of The Illustrated London News.*

Some of the people who talk most about “change” and “progress” are the people who can least imagine, really, any alteration in the existing tests and methods of life. For instance, they make “reading and writing” a test for all ages and all civilisations. Reading and writing are in themselves simply accomplishments, very delightful and exciting accomplishments, like playing the mandolin or looping the loop. Some accomplishments are at one time generally fashionable, some at another. In our civilisation nearly everybody can read. In the Saracen civilisation nearly everybody could ride. But people persistently apply the three “R’s” to all human history. People say, in a shocked sort of voice, “Do you know that in the Middle Ages you could not find one gentleman in ten who could sign his name?” That is just as if a mediaeval gentleman cried out in horror, “Do you know that among the gentlemen of the reign of Edward VII, not one in ten knows how to fly a falcon?” Or, to speak more strictly, it would be like a mediaeval gentleman expressing astonishment that a modern gentleman could not blazon his coat-of-arms. The alphabet is one set of arbitrary symbols. The figures of heraldry are another set of arbitrary symbols. In the fourteenth century every gentleman knew one: in the twentieth century every gentleman knows the other. The first gentleman was just precisely as ignorant for not knowing that c-a-t spells “cat,” as the second gentleman is for not knowing that a St. Andrew’s Cross is called a cross saltire, or that vert on gules is bad heraldry.

We talk, with typical bigotry and narrowness, about *the* Alphabet. But there are in truth a great many alphabets besides the alphabet of letters. The letter alphabet was only slightly used in the Middle Ages: these other alphabets are only slightly used now. A certain number of soldiers learn to convey their meaning to each other by abruptly brandishing small

flags. Others talk to each other in an intimate and chatty way by flashes of sunlight on a mirror. These alphabets are now as peculiar and restricted an accomplishment as writing was in the Dark Ages. They may some day be as broad and universal a habit as writing is now. In some future age we may see a lady and gentleman, one on each side of the table, arguing in an animated way by waving little flags in each other's faces. We may see distinguished ladies at their bedroom windows, with their looking-glasses turned towards the street, shaking the looking-glasses violently in order to communicate with a friend a few miles off. This will be especially satisfying, for it will provide them with a use for their mirrors, articles which they find at present to be entirely without *raison d'être*.

How strange it is, then, that we should so constantly think of education as having something to do with such things as reading and writing! Why, real education consists of having nothing to do with such things as reading and writing. It consists, at the least, of being independent of them. Real education precisely consists in the fact that we see beyond the symbols and the mere machinery of the age in which we find ourselves: education precisely consists in the realisation of a permanent simplicity that abides behind all civilisations, the life that is more than meat, the body that is more than raiment. The only object of education is to make us ignore mere schemes of education. Without education we are in a horrible and deadly danger of taking educated people seriously. The latest fads of culture, the latest sophistries of anarchism will carry us away if we are uneducated: we shall not know how very old are all new ideas. We shall think that Christian Science is really the whole of Christianity and the whole of Science. We shall think that art colours are really the only colours in art. The uneducated man will always care too much for complications, novelties, the fashion, the latest thing. The uneducated man will always be an intellectual dandy. But the business of education is to tell us of all the varying complications, of all the bewildering beauty of the past. Education commands us to know them all that we may do without them all.

I saw in the newspaper the other day a startling example of all this. It seems that the Duchess of Somerset has been going into some Board School somewhere where the children were taught fairy-tales, and then going into some Board of Guardians somewhere else and saying that fairy-tales were full of "nonsense," and that it would be much better to teach them about Julius Caesar "or other great men." Here we have a complete incapacity to distinguish between the normal and eternal and the

## *Education by Fairy Tales*

abnormal or accidental. Boards of Guardians are accidental and abnormal; they shall be consumed ultimately in the wrath of God. Board Schools are abnormal; we shall find, I hope, at last some sounder kind of democratic education. Duchesses are abnormal; they are a peculiar product of the combination of the old aristocrat and the new woman. But fairy-tales are as normal as milk or bread. Civilisation changes; but fairy-tales never change. Some of the details of the fairy-tale may seem odd to us; but its spirit is the spirit of folk-lore; and folk-lore is, in strict translation, the German for common-sense. Fiction and modern fantasy and all that wild world in which the Duchess of Somerset lives can be described in one phrase. Their philosophy means ordinary things as seen by extraordinary people. The fairy-tale means extraordinary things as seen by ordinary people. The fairy-tale is full of mental health. The fairy-tale can be more sane about a seven-headed dragon than the Duchess of Somerset can be about a Board School.

For all this fairy-tale business is simply the ancient and enduring system of human education. A seven-headed dragon is, perhaps, a very terrifying monster. But a child who has never heard about him is a much more terrifying monster than he is. The maddest griffin or chimera is not so wild a supposition as a school without fairy-tales. Through the briefly reported remarks of the Duchess of Somerset could easily be read the dark and extraordinary opinion, the opinion that a fairy-tale is something fantastic, something artificial, something of the nature of a joke. Of course, the very reverse is true. Fairy-tales are the oldest and gravest and most universal kind of human literature. It is the School Board that is fantastic. It is the Board of Guardians that is artificial. It is the Duchess of Somerset who is a joke. The whole human race that we see walking about anywhere is a race mentally fed on fairy-tales as certainly as it is a race physically fed on milk. If you abolish seven-headed dragons you would simply abolish babies. Some swollen-headed, dehumanised little tadpoles might remain behind, making a ludicrous pretence of infancy; but they would probably die young, especially if they were brought up on the life of Julius Caesar. Some parts of the life of Julius Caesar, if you told every word of it, would seem to be a little unfitted for infant edification; especially his early adventures. But if every word of his life were told, we might console ourselves with coming into possession of the one really important fact about him and every other man. If every word of his life were told, his life would begin with a vivid description of how much he enjoyed fairy-tales. Some of the fairy-tales he enjoyed to the end of his

life: for he was exceedingly superstitious, as are all men of great intellect who have not found a religion.

Here, then, we have a curious instance of a person mistaking a quite temporary social atmosphere for the eternal sanity. For, to begin with, even in the mere matter of physical fact the fairy-tales are much more of a picture of the permanent life of the great mass of mankind than most realistic fiction. Most realistic fiction deals with modern towns—that is, with one short transition period in the smallest corner of the smallest of the four continents. Fairy-tales deal with that life of field and hut and palace, those simple relations with the ox and with the king which actually are the experience of the greatest number of men for the greatest number of centuries. The real farmer in most real places really does send out his three sons to seek their fortune; he knows uncommonly well that they will not get it from him. The real king of the majority of earthly royal houses is really ready to offer to some wild adventurer “the half of his kingdom.” His kingdom is so uncommonly small to begin with that the division does not seem unnatural. Even in these physical matters the fairy-tale only seems incredible because we are in a somewhat exceptional position. It seems incredible to us because the big civilisation we have built is a specialist and singular and somewhat morbid thing. In short, it only seems incredible to us because we ourselves shall very soon be incredible.

In the same newspaper, or in some similar one, I came across another example of exactly the same lack of large education and a sense of the proportions of history. Another lady of similarly good position wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* suggesting that the children of Board Schools ought to be discouraged from dressing—or rather that their parents ought to be discouraged from dressing them—in fanciful finery and foppery, in laces or velvets or ribbons. She urged that the boys at Eton or Harrow are made to dress with sobriety in black and white and grey. But she did not realise that this is done merely because it happens at this moment to be the fashion of the aristocracy to dress with sobriety in black and white and grey. An Eton boy is dressed quietly not because it is manly, but because it is fashionable. And she did not seem to be aware that, hardly more than a century ago, the whole aristocracy did dress in laces and velvets and ribbons. The parents of poor children are again doing merely the normal human thing. They are dressing their children as gentlemen were dressed yesterday and may be dressed tomorrow.



# The Ballad of the White Horse: Book I “The Vision of the King”

G.K. Chesterton

*In a letter to his son Christopher (September 3, 1944), Tolkien writes that his daughter Priscilla has been reading The Ballad of the White Horse (first published in 1911), and that he has been attempting “to explain the obscurer parts to her.” Tolkien goes on to criticize Chesterton’s lack of scholarly knowledge (“G.K.C. knew nothing about the ‘North’, heathen or Christian.”), and he also says that he is now convinced that the poem “is not as good as I thought.” Joseph Pearce, a biographer of both Tolkien and Chesterton, draws attention to the implication of this comment, namely that Tolkien as a young man belonging to a devoutly Catholic family, would almost certainly have read Chesterton as a youth, and that, at one time at least, he had been someone who admired Chesterton’s epic poem. The Marian theme of The Ballad would certainly have appealed to him, and, as a writer who recorded his own conviction that history was the record of a long series of defeats, he would also have been in sympathy with the poem’s central theme: the need to continue a moral struggle in which one is constantly being defeated, but in which one is never definitively overcome.*

In the river island of Athelney,  
    With the river running past,  
In colours of such simple creed  
All things sprang at him, sun and weed,  
Till the grass grew to be grass indeed  
    And the tree was a tree at last.

Fearfully plain the flowers grew,  
    Like the child’s book to read,  
Or like a friend’s face seen in a glass;  
He looked; and there Our Lady was,  
She stood and stroked the tall live grass  
    As a man strokes his steed.

Her face was like an open word  
    When brave men speak and choose,  
The very colours of her coat  
    Were better than good news.

She spoke not, nor turned not,  
    Nor any sign she cast,  
Only she stood up straight and free,  
Between the flowers in Athelney,  
    And the river running past.

One dim ancestral jewel hung  
    On his ruined armour grey,  
He rent and cast it at her feet:  
Where, after centuries, with slow feet,  
Men came from hall and school and street  
    And found it where it lay.

“Mother of God,” the wanderer said,  
    “I am but a common king,  
Nor will I ask what saints may ask,  
    To see a secret thing.

“The gates of heaven are fearful gates  
    Worse than the gates of hell;  
Not I would break the splendours barred  
Or seek to know the thing they guard,  
    Which is too good to tell.

“But for this earth most pitiful,  
    This little land I know,  
If that which is for ever is,  
Or if our hearts shall break with bliss,  
    Seeing the stranger go?

“When our last bow is broken, Queen,  
    And our last javelin cast,  
Under some sad, green evening sky,  
Holding a ruined cross on high,  
Under warm westland grass to lie,  
    Shall we come home at last?”

And a voice came human but high up,  
    Like a cottage climbed among



*The Ballad of the White Horse*

The clouds; or a serf of hut and croft  
That sits by his hovel fire as oft,  
But hears on his old bare roof aloft  
A belfry burst in song.

“The gates of heaven are lightly locked,  
We do not guard our gain,  
The heaviest hind may easily  
come silently and suddenly  
Upon me in a lane.

“And any little maid that walks  
In good thoughts apart,  
May break the guard of the Three Kings  
And see the dear and dreadful things  
I hid within my heart.

“The meanest man in grey fields gone  
Behind the set of sun,  
Heareth between star and other star,  
Through the door of the darkness fallen ajar,  
The council, eldest of things that are,  
The talk of the Three in One.

“The gates of heaven are lightly locked,  
We do not guard our gold,  
Men may uproot where worlds begin,  
Or read the name of the nameless sin;  
But if he fail or if he win  
To no good man is told.

“The men of the East may spell the stars,  
And times and triumphs mark,  
But the men signed of the cross of Christ  
Go gaily in the dark.

“The men of the East may search the scrolls  
For sure fates and fame,  
But the men that drink the blood of God  
Go singing to their shame.

“The wise men know what wicked things  
Are written on the sky  
They trim sad lamps, they touch sad strings,

Hearing the heavy purple wings,  
Where the forgotten seraph kings  
Still plot how God shall die.

“The wise men know all evil things  
Under the twisted trees,  
Where the perverse in pleasure pine  
And men are weary of green wine  
And sick of crimson seas.

“But you and all the kind of Christ  
Are ignorant and brave,  
And you have wars you hardly win  
And souls you hardly save.

“I tell you naught for your comfort,  
Yea, naught for your desire,  
Save that the sky grows darker yet  
And the sea rises higher.

“Night shall be thrice night over you,  
And heaven an iron cope.  
Do you have joy without a cause,  
Yes, faith without a hope?”

Even as she spoke she was not,  
Nor any word said he,  
He only heard, still as he stood  
Under the old night’s nodding hood,  
The sea-folk breaking down the wood  
Like a high tide from sea.



Camborne Cliffs, Cornwall

# The Ethics of Fairy-Tales

G.K. Chesterton

*This uncollected Chesterton piece was first published in the February 15, 1908 issue of the Illustrated London News.*

Some solemn and superficial people (for nearly all very superficial people are solemn) have declared that the fairy-tales are immoral; they base this upon some accidental circumstances or regrettable incidents in the war between giants and boys, some cases in which the latter indulged in unsympathetic deceptions or even in practical jokes. The objection, however, is not only false, but very much the reverse of the facts. The fairy-tales are at root not only moral in the sense of being innocent, but moral in the sense of being didactic, moral in the sense of being moralising. It is all very well to talk of the freedom of fairyland, but there was precious little freedom in fairyland by the best official accounts. Mr. W.B. Yeats and other sensitive modern souls, feeling that modern life is about as black a slavery as ever oppressed mankind (they are right enough there), have specially described elfland as a place of utter ease and abandonment—a place where the soul can turn every way at will like the wind. Science denounces the idea of a capricious God; but Mr. Yeats's school suggests that in that world everyone is a capricious god. Mr. Yeats himself has said a hundred times in that sad and splendid literary style which makes him the first of all poets now writing in English (I will not say of all English poets, for Irishmen are familiar with the practice of physical assault), he has, I say, called up a hundred times the picture of the terrible freedom of the fairies, who typify the ultimate anarchy of art—

Ride on the crest of the dishevelled wave  
And dance upon the mountains like a flame.

But, after all (it is a shocking thing to say), I doubt whether Mr. Yeats really knows his way about fairyland. He is not simple enough; he is not stupid enough. Though I say it who should not, in good sound human

stupidity I would knock Mr. Yeats out any day. The fairies like me better than Mr. Yeats; they can take me in more. And I have my doubts whether this feeling of the free, wild spirits on the crest of hill or wave is really the central and simple spirit of folk-lore. I think the poets have made a mistake: because the world of the fairy-tales is a brighter and more varied world than ours, they have fancied it less moral; really it is brighter and more varied because it is more moral. Suppose a man could be born in a modern prison. It is impossible, of course, because nothing human can happen in a modern prison, though it could sometimes in an ancient dungeon. A modern prison is always inhuman, even when it is not inhumane. But suppose a man were born in a modern prison, and grew accustomed to the deadly silence and the disgusting indifference; and suppose he were then suddenly turned loose upon the life and laughter of Fleet Street. He would, of course, think that the literary men in Fleet Street were a free and happy race; yet how sadly, how ironically, is this the reverse of the case! And so again these toiling serfs in Fleet Street, when they catch a glimpse of the fairies, think the fairies are utterly free. But fairies are like journalists in this and many other respects. Fairies and journalists have an apparent gaiety and a delusive beauty. Fairies and journalists seem to be lovely and lawless; they seem to be both of them too exquisite to descend to the ugliness of everyday duty. But it is an illusion created by the sudden sweetness of their presence. Journalists live under law; and so in fact does fairyland.

If you really read the fairy-tales, you will observe that one idea runs from one end of them to the other—the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition. This idea, which is the core of ethics, is the core of the nursery-tales. The whole happiness of fairyland hangs upon a thread, upon one thread. Cinderella may have a dress woven on supernatural looms and blazing with unearthly brilliance; but she must be back when the clock strikes twelve. The king may invite fairies to the christening, but he must invite all the fairies, or frightful results will follow. Bluebeard's wife may open all doors but one. A promise is broken to a cat, and the whole world goes wrong. A promise is broken to a yellow dwarf, and the whole world goes wrong. A girl may be the bride of the God of Love himself if she never tries to see him; she sees him, and he vanishes away. A girl is given a box on condition she does not open it; she opens it, and all the evils of this world rush out at her. A man and woman are put in a garden on condition that they do not eat one fruit: they eat it, and lose their joy in all the fruits of the earth.

This great idea, then, is the backbone of all folk-lore—the idea that all happiness hangs on one thin veto; all positive joy depends on one negative.

## *The Ethics of Fairy-Tales*

Now, it is obvious that there are many philosophical and religious ideas akin to or symbolised by this; but it is not with them I wish to deal here. It is surely obvious that all ethics ought to be taught to this fairy-tale tune; that, if one does the thing forbidden, one imperils all the things provided. A man who breaks his promise to his wife ought to be reminded that, even if she is a cat, the case of the fairy-cat shows that such conduct may be incautious. A burglar just about to open someone else's safe should be playfully reminded that he is in the perilous posture of the beautiful Pandora: he is about to lift the forbidden lid and loosen evils unknown. The boy eating someone's apples in someone's apple-tree should be a reminder that he has come to a mystical moment of his life, when one apple may rob him of all others. This is the profound morality of fairy-tales; which, so far from being lawless, go to the root of all law. Instead of finding (like common books of ethics) a rationalistic basis for each Commandment, they find the great mystical basis for all Commandments. We are in this fairyland on sufferance; it is not for us to quarrel with the conditions under which we enjoy this wild vision of the world. The vetoes are indeed extraordinary, but then so are the concessions. The idea of property, the idea of someone else's apples, is a rum idea. It is strange and weird that I cannot with safety drink ten bottles of champagne; but then the champagne itself is strange and weird, if you come to that. If I have drunk of the fairies' drink it is but just I should drink by the fairies' rules. We may not see the direct logical connection between the three beautiful silver spoons and a large ugly policeman; but then who in fairy-tales ever could see the direct logical connection between three bears and a giant, or between a rose and a roaring beast? But this general aspect is not my concern; and I have left myself hardly any space to say what is my concern.

The aim with which I originally introduced this discussion on fairies was that of discussing the Blasphemy case. The connection between the two ideas will at once leap to the mind. It is time we cleared our ideas a little on the matter of law and of liberty in expression. I am myself in favour of complete liberty of religion (as ordinarily understood; strictly, it would cover human sacrifice), but do not let us deceive ourselves into the supposition that either I or anybody else believes in complete liberty of speech. That a man should be prosecuted for blasphemy in modern England strikes me as iniquitous. But that a man should be prosecuted for obscenity of language strikes me and all ordinary men as a right and natural protection. Why is this? It is not because there is anything more intellectually indefensible, in the abstract, about one than about the other. Blasphemy is as bad as indecency, in so far that it must mean the giving of a cruel shock to inoffensive souls, the inhumane present-

ment of a terrible idea in the ugliest and most abrupt way. Indecency may be as good as blasphemy in the sense that it may be given from good motives. A man may think religious humbug so solidly entrenched that nothing but intellectual dynamite will do any good. But a man may also think a bad sex-convention is in the same security and must be given the same shock. The real distinction is that England is divided on religion and irreligion in a real sense in which it is not divided on the need for verbal decency in mixed society. The law may protect religion: the people would protect decency. Religion may be the law of England: decency is the law of the English. As in the fairy-tales, all that we may say and do hangs on something we may not say and do. But do not let us forget that we have a veto, and that others had more liberty on that point. If you and I walked tomorrow into the Middle Ages, we should find ourselves (in some ways) less free to discuss unbelief, but much freer to discuss sex.

In the Middle Ages, people were not divided on religion and irreligion. There was only one way of belief, if a man was to be saved. If he did not choose to believe in that way, the Holy Office took him in hand and saved his soul for him, although in doing so it had to destroy his body by fire. But the Middle Ages were not so united as we are on the need for verbal decency in mixed society. Not that mediaeval men were more shameless: they were simply shameless in the absolute sense, and your truly shameless person is one for whom the idea of the word shame has no existence. Only your shameful modern person understands shame. He is a man who cannot call a spade a spade. He calls it, with a blush, an implement for tilling the soil, and so the spade becomes forever an unmentionable.



The Vale of Evesham, Worcestershire

# A Letter to a Child

G.K. Chesterton

*This Chesterton piece, a letter to one of his God-children, was first published in 1909 as the Introduction to Meadows at Play, a book of children's verse written by Margaret Arndt and published in London by Elkin Mathews and Marrot.*

My dear God-daughter,

Your mother who wrote these little nursery poems, wrote them for her own two little girls; and it is exactly for that reason that they may really be worth spreading among all the girls and boys in the world. It is generally a good rule that you never understand this great earth until you own a little bit of it; and you do not really know anything about any order of things from cats to angels until you have one of your own. But then, if you are a good child, you probably have a cat, and you certainly have an angel. I myself have quite recently bought a dog; and ever since then I have looked at all the dogs in all the streets and parlours, dogs that I would never have dreamed of looking at before. I did it partly, of course, because they were not so nice as mine. Just in the same way your mother wrote these songs partly because she loves all the children in the world, and partly because she loves you most of all of them.

You know, of course, that your mother came from my country to yours before you were born. She came from England, where the soldiers and the pillar-boxes are both red; to Germany, where the soldiers and the pillar-boxes are both blue. There are other differences, perhaps, but this is the one that strikes the eye first. And indeed, my dear God-daughter, there are many people in the world who will try to teach you that those sort of differences are everything, and that two great nations are only to be known by how their pillar-boxes are painted or their soldiers' coats buttoned, and who will try and make them quarrel upon lesser counts than these. Some Englishmen will tell you that Germans are just going to blow

up England with gun-powder; and some Germans will tell you that Englishmen are just going to do the same thing with gas or dynamite, or something else that is unpleasant. Do not believe them; they are trying to make mischief out of small things, such as the pillar-boxes being red or blue. I want you to remember what is really great in your great country, and perhaps a little also what is great in mine. As for England, you must judge by your mother, and then you will not do us any wrong. But as for Germany, I would like you to remember your childhood, and to remember it all your life, whatever happens to Germany or England or all Christian lands. It is a good country for children, Barbara; there is no country that has so much understood that children live in Elf-land; that men and women before they grow up, have to be elves for a little while. Do you remember the little *Heinzelmännchen* with red caps that you and I used to draw for each other? Your mother found *them* at least in the German forests, though she knows a great deal about the fairies of England too. Even we in England understand that everything that is very good for children comes from Germany. Most of our toys come from Germany, for instance. And when we want a word for the jolly old gentleman who undoubtedly does come down the chimney on Christmas Eve (we must accept him as a fact, whatever his name is), we call him as you do, Santa Claus. We have a man of our own, called Father Christmas. I acted him once at a children's party. But he is much too fat to get down the chimney.

And now, Barbara, there is nothing to talk about except the songs themselves; and what is the good of talking about songs when one ought to be singing them? A great many of these little poems ought to have tunes to them. Perhaps (as you were born in Germany) you will become a monstrously great musician and set them yourself to music of the most excruciatingly subtle sort. If you don't, never mind. There is one of them that I am very fond of, which begins by saying,

Birthday Baby, one year old,  
Would you like a throne of gold?

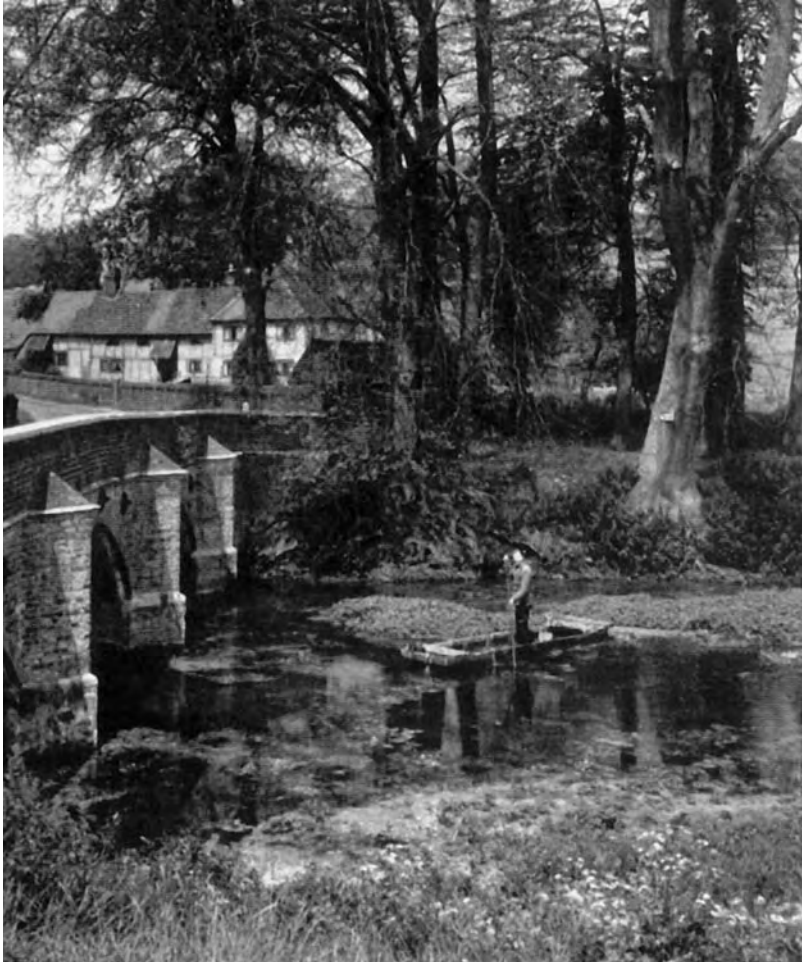
I think that it is so nice and sudden. You are not to suppose from this that your mother actually had a throne on the premises; your mother is a poet, and poets seldom have such things. But it is quite true that when little things like you and me are one year old we are so nice that people would give us anything. The great question is, Barbara, can we keep as nice as that? I have my doubts; but we might try. And what fun it would be if we



*A Letter to a Child*

could really keep it up; and when you are dying at ninety-seven and I at a hundred and twenty-seven there was still a golden throne going somewhere. I do not know, dear Barbara, but I am sure your mother knows all about it.

Your helpless God-father,  
Gilbert Chesterton



Water End, Hertfordshire

## A Morning Prayer

*Tolkien's devotion to Mary provides a major theme for The Lord of the Rings. It is significant, for example, that the Ring of Power is finally destroyed on March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation to Mary of the Incarnation of Christ. This anonymous poem was first published in 1972 by the Dominican Sisters of Summit:*

Mary the dawn, Christ the Perfect Day;  
Mary the gate, Christ the Heavenly Way!

Mary the root, Christ the Mystic Vine;  
Mary the grape, Christ the Sacred Wine!

Mary the wheat, Christ the Living Bread;  
Mary the stem, Christ the Rose blood-red!

Mary the font, Christ the Cleansing Flood;  
Mary the cup, Christ the Saving Blood!

Mary the temple, Christ the temple's Lord;  
Mary the shrine, Christ the God adored!

Mary the beacon, Christ the Haven's Rest;  
Mary the mirror, Christ the Vision Blest!

Mary the mother, Christ the mother's Son  
By all things blest while endless ages run. Amen.



Tapestry in Exeter College Chapel, Oxford

# The Court of Camelot

G.K. Chesterton

*This Chesterton piece, first published in The Illustrated London News (December 16, 1922), was re-published as part of The Glass Walking-Stick (London, 1955), a collection of essays edited by Dorothy Collins.*

Somebody recently asked me what I meant by a reference to the myth of Arthur; or, rather, a reference to the myth of the myth of Arthur. For in my opinion it is only a modern myth that he is only an ancient one. The chief difference between ancient and modern times seems to be that formerly legends grew very slowly and now they grow very fast. The old legends generally grew more slowly and always had a more historical basis; and it seems to me overwhelmingly probable that the story of King Arthur had a very solid historical basis. This must in a sense be mere guesswork, for I am not competent to judge of the details; but I think I am as competent as anyone else to judge of the theories, in a sense of seeing whether they hang together and are inherently probable and consistent. Now the theory that treats Arthur entirely as a fairy-tale seems to me more fantastic than any fairy-tale. It sometimes takes the form of saying that there was some prehistoric Celtic god or other who afterwards came to be described in more detail as a king in Camelot. I have never been very clear, by the way, about how this vague transition from divinity to humanity is supposed to present itself to human nature. A particular story of an incarnate god or a fallen angel one can imagine easily enough. But I am a little confused about how the mere act of the Pimlico populace continually calling upon heaven in their human difficulties, would of itself become a story that a Mr. Heaven had lived in a particular street in Pimlico. It seems rather more likely that a simple people would exaggerate a hero into a god, rather than deliberately diminish a god into a hero. But this is something of a side issue and I do not insist on it. Anyhow, they say there must have been a Celtic god and doubtless there was; doubtless there were many Celtic gods—too many Celtic gods for a fastidious monotheistic taste.



The Cornfield, a painting by John Constable

## *The Court of Camelot*

I might respectfully inquire what had become of all the others; and why they have not all turned into Christian kings with orders of chivalry? And then the critics complete the confusion by saying, as a sort of afterthought, that Arthur may also have been the name of a king, but implying that this can have nothing to do with the idea of King Arthur. Now all this seems to me mythical in the worst sense; that it is concentrated on myths and wholly careless of history. If we are studying a historical problem, it would be well to begin with the historical part of it; and if we want to know more, it is best to grasp what we know already. Now we do know as a historical fact that the beginning of the Dark Ages was a time when the northwest corner of the Roman Empire was ruined by barbarian invasions. We do know that those who successfully defended civilization everywhere became great legendary yet historic heroes and that in this respect the story of Arthur is just like the story of Alfred. There was certainly a legendary Alfred as well as a historical Alfred; and every common-sense comparison would lead one to think there was a historical Arthur as well as a legendary Arthur. But the question is one of proportion; and the saving of Christendom by the heroes of the Dark Ages does seem to me a sufficient cause for so huge a legend: the last trickle of tradition from some lost Welsh polytheism does not seem to me a sufficient cause. There are a dozen parallel cases of Christian heroes; there are not a dozen parallel cases of Welsh gods.

Then we come to the old suggestion that Arthur was not Arthur but another person of the same name. Here again people seem to forget that a legend requires a story as well as a name. A legend is *about* something; it is not started by a word but by some true or false event. The earliest historical references to Arthur are references to what he did. What he did was to defend Britain, as a Christian and civilized State, against the heathen invasion. The very first references to him deal with stories like that of the Battle of Mount Badon, in which Arthur drove the heathen before him and carried a holy image, some say on his shield and some on his shoulders. If I remember right, William of Malmesbury, soon after the Norman Conquest, refers to Arthur not as a wild Welsh demigod or even a doubtful Welsh saint, but as a solid historical character whose name needs to be cleared from the *later* accretions of Welsh fancy. Now there is no doubt at all that battles similar to the Battle of Mount Badon did in all sorts of countries stem or turn the tide of barbarism. There is no doubt whatever that when they did, they left an enormous impression on the imaginations of men, like a story of the Deluge or the Day of Judgement.

If the result was a myth, it was like some myth about a man who had saved the sun and stars.

But there is another historical truth that is here forgotten. Many doubts about the Court of Camelot are founded on the notion that anything so far back in time must itself have been barbaric. The truth is, that, if it was far enough back, it would almost certainly have been civilized. It would have been in the last phase of the old Roman civilization. The fallacy is like that of a man who should say at daybreak that if it was darker four hours before, it must have been darker still fourteen hours before. He would forget that fourteen hours might bring him back into the previous day. And the fascination of this study of the Dark Ages, is precisely that the darkness does hide a buried day; the last lost daylight of the great culture of antiquity.

Much of the dullness of modern history came from the idea of progress. For history must be progress reversed. If things have always automatically grown brighter and better, then to trace things backwards is to go further and further not only into darkness but into dullness. It is to go from gold to lead and from lead to mud; from beautiful novelties to dreary negations. But, as a fact, these beautiful novelties have never appeared except when this negative theory of the past was itself negated. They have come when people were quarrying in an older civilization, because it was more civilized than their own civilization. That is obviously what happened at the Renaissance, but it happened in many cases where it is less obvious. I believe that the peculiar magic and mastery still belonging to the Arthurian story is largely due to the long period during which men looked back to Roman Britain as something more rich and subtle and artistic than the barbarous centuries that succeeded it. They were not wrong in believing that Arthur and Lancelot were more courtly and cultured than Hengist and Horsa. If Arthur and Lancelot existed at all, they almost certainly were. The same has been true, of course, ever since people began to study the medieval civilization with any intelligence. Some sentimentalists in the eighteenth century may have begun by thinking ruined abbeys (especially by moonlight) merely interesting as rugged and barbaric, "with shapeless sculpture decked". But since we have begun to search out the scheme and science of medieval architecture, we have realized that it is the very reverse of barbaric, that it is especially organized and orderly. We have recognized that Gothic architecture was certainly not made by Goths; and that the shapeless sculpture was anything but shapeless, and had a very deliberate shape. But we do not remember

*The Court of Camelot*

that, as we have groped for an understanding of the medieval system, so the men of the Dark Ages may well have groped for an understanding of the old Roman system. And it is natural that the last monuments of it should have appeared enormous in the twilight; and one of these monuments was the memory of Arthur.



Typical English country scene





# **The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits**

Stratford Caldecott

STRATFORD CALDECOTT *is the Director of the Centre for Faith & Culture in Oxford. A member of the editorial boards of both The Chesterton Review and Communio, and the co-editor of the Centre's own journal Second Spring, he is currently writing a book about J.R.R. Tolkien to be published by Darton, Longman & Todd at the end of 2003. This paper was given in lecture form at Bath Spa University on 22nd February, under the auspices of the Catholic Chaplaincy of Sussex University.*

We are widely supposed to be living in a post-heroic age. Ever since the Second World War, and certainly since the 1960s, the fashion among our intelligentsia has been to expose (or even exaggerate) the all-too-human side of the great and the famous: aristocrats, politicians, artists, explorers, scientists. In popular films the protagonist is often physically superhuman but morally subhuman. The newspapers delight in the sordid peccadilloes of those whose popular cult they encourage by this exposure, as though conceding that the awareness of these moral failings simply makes it easier for us to identify with the object of our interest.

Of course, our yearning for a real hero never dies, and deep down everyone wants those they admire to combine earthly success with moral goodness. Nothing else could explain the resentment we direct towards those who disappoint us. *The Lord of the Rings* is heroic saga on a grand scale, belonging to an ancient tradition of magical romances and legend. It will be assumed in this paper that the reader will be familiar at least with the rough outlines of the story: the finding, in a distant past of this world, of the One Ring which the Dark Lord desires to rule the earth, and of

---

Cardingmill Valley, Shropshire

the decision by the Free Peoples of the West (Elves, Men, Dwarves and Hobbits) to destroy the Ring—rather than seek to use it—by sending it secretly, by the hand of the Hobbit Frodo, into the Land of Shadows and casting it again into the volcano where it was forged long before. The adventure is therefore a quest to save what may be saved in a world that is under attack by extreme evil. Tolkien's friend C.S. Lewis, the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, paid it this tribute: "The book is like lightning from a clear sky. To say that in it heroic romance, gorgeous, eloquent and unashamed, has suddenly returned at a period almost pathological in its anti-romanticism, is inadequate. . . . It marks not a return but an advance or revolution: the conquest of new territory. Nothing like it was ever done before."<sup>1</sup>

### **Tolkien's Modernity**

*The Lord of the Rings* was an advance because it was not merely heroic, nor merely romantic. Though permeated with a kind of nostalgia, it was not just a throwback to some previous age, like some late Victorian reconstruction of a lost tradition. In fact it was a thoroughly modern novel. Tom Shippey compares it to the work of William Golding, George Orwell and T.H. White, all of whom wrote fantasy as a way of struggling with an evil that had been exposed by the great twentieth-century wars.<sup>2</sup> Their writing was "modern" because it was deeply marked by this experience. Millions of human beings had died on the fields of France, in the death camps of Germany, in Dresden, in Hiroshima. A moral miasma settled over the spirits of the English, as the disillusionment and the compromises of the century took their toll.

*The Lord of the Rings* was written by a man who experienced the Battle of the Somme with the Lancashire Fusiliers (the regiment that won the highest number of Victoria Crosses). It was there that he began to develop elements of the mythology that would form the background to the novel: "in grimy canteens, at lectures in cold fogs, in huts full of blasphemy and smut, or by candle light in bell-tents, even some down in dugouts under shell fire. It did not make for efficiency and present-mindedness, of course, and I was not a good officer. . . ."<sup>3</sup> He did it, he says in the same letter, to prevent his feelings from "festering". Tolkien was invalidated out of the Somme with trench fever, but he had come to know and respect the real heroes of the first modern war: ordinary Tommies who fought in the mud with all the indomitable humour and dogged courage of Hobbits. The book itself was written largely during the Second World

*The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

War, a war in which his son Christopher fought in the Air Force against a real-life evil of monstrous proportions. *The Lord of the Rings* was therefore an exploration of heroism, and in particular the heroism of the English, amidst the drama of loss and death that laid the foundations of the modern world. “My ‘Sam Gamgee’ is indeed a reflection of the English soldier,” he wrote, “of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself.”<sup>4</sup>

What the book celebrates—and mourns—is a world and a tradition that appears to be passing away in a great War, or series of Wars. These Wars are fought in a good cause, against an enemy that cannot be allowed to win. Yet the real danger is not that the free world might be defeated; it is that we might be corrupted, brutalized and degraded by the conflict itself, and in particular by the means we employ to secure victory. Tolkien always denied that Mordor was intended as a representation of Nazi Germany, or Soviet Russia, but was quite aware of its “applicability” to the death camps and the gulags, to Fascism and Communism—as well as to other, more subtle or fragmentary manifestations of the same spirit, including Americo-cosmopolitanism, globalization and our obsession with technological progress.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the point is partly that in that earlier Age of the world, the Allies against Sauron resisted the temptation to use the Ring against its maker, and as a result the War of the Ring was the prelude to a new Golden Age in Middle Earth, a civilization of love, justice and peace. And yet even in the War of the Ring (as the opening of the film version reminds us), much that was beautiful departed from the world, and is now forgotten. Our mistake in the great Wars of our own time has been to accept the false idea that the end justifies the means, and that “if a thing can be done, it must be done”.<sup>6</sup> “For,” as he wrote to his son in 1944, “we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring. And we shall (it seems) succeed. But the penalty is, as you will know, to breed new Saurons, and slowly turn Men and Elves into Orcs. Not that in real life things are as clear cut as in a story, and we started with a great many Orcs on our side. . . .”<sup>7</sup>

Tolkien’s importance as a post-War writer who used fantasy to explore profound moral and spiritual themes was not recognized when *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in the 1950s. In fact it was derided as “juvenile trash” by an influential coterie of literary critics and academics on both sides of the Atlantic, such as Edwin Muir, Edmund

Wilson and Germaine Greer—Greer indeed calling it a “flight from reality”. Even half a century later, after several readers’ polls had voted *The Lord of the Rings* the “Best Book of the Century”, the *Guardian* estimated it “by any reckoning one of the worst books ever written”, and the *Times Literary Supplement* termed the outcome of the polls “horrifying”.<sup>8</sup> The reason often given for despising the novel was that “good” and “bad” were so clearly delineated that the plot was simplistic and childish. But, as we have just seen, Tolkien was well aware of the complexity and muddle of real life—and yet held his writing to be “realistic”, indeed truer to the inner life than most of the “grown up” novels the critics had in mind.

“Yes, I think the orcs as real a creation as anything in ‘realistic’ fiction . . . only in real life they are on both sides, of course. For ‘romance’ has grown out of ‘allegory’, and its wars are still derived from the ‘inner war’ of allegory in which good is on one side and various modes of badness on the other. In real (exterior) life men are on both sides: which means a motley alliance of orcs, beasts, demons, plain naturally honest men, and angels. But it does make some difference who are your captains and whether they are orc-like per se! And what it is all about (or thought to be). It is even in this world possible to be (more or less) in the wrong or in the right.”<sup>9</sup> Back in 1936, the subtitle of Tolkien’s academic paper on *Beowulf*, “The Monsters and the Critics” had half jokingly implied that the literary critics of the Old English poem which Tolkien loved were adversaries of the hero, perhaps even akin to monsters themselves. And so, when the *Lord of the Rings* did appear in print, Tolkien knew pretty much what to expect. “I have exposed my heart to be shot at,” he wrote,<sup>10</sup> and shot at it certainly was. Every writer exposes himself in his work, but some more than others, and poets most especially, whose craft takes them deep within their own interior world. Tolkien was a poet; indeed he preferred to write in verse than in prose.<sup>11</sup> The journey of the Ringbearer was the author’s private journey, and Middle Earth his interior landscape.

In other words, the book asks something different of us than most of what we class as modern literature. That does not make it more difficult to read, or even necessarily more profound. It does not even make it better than most other modern novels. It simply makes it different. The criteria by which we should judge it are different. There is nothing simplistic about love, courage, justice, mercy, kindness, integrity and the other virtues, which are incarnated in the story through characters such as Aragorn and Frodo. These are real patterns of the moral life, exposure to

### *The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

which in this form can have a purifying effect on the receptive reader. In the words of another fantasy writer,<sup>12</sup> mythology provides not so much an “escape” from reality as an intensification of it. So it is that many readers can return to *The Lord of the Rings* again and again for refreshment of soul—perhaps even for the kind of healing that the author must have experienced in the writing.

#### **Tolkien’s Catholicism**

Writers such as Verlyn Flieger and Joseph Pearce have drawn attention to the spiritual quality of Tolkien’s writing, and to the consistency of its implicit religious content. It should be remembered that Tolkien was a Roman Catholic. This adds an important dimension to his work, and it may help to explain further why some modernist critics instinctively dislike it, for Catholicism is deeply opposed to the anti-religious spirit of modernism. Tolkien was, of course, very careful (as he says in a famous letter to his Jesuit friend Robert Murray) not to put in, or to cut out, “practically all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world”—which is, after all, a world set thousands of years before the birth of Christ. But in the same letter he admits that the book is, despite this, “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.”<sup>13</sup>

What he means by this last remark may partly be captured by the American writer Flannery O’Connor, when she wrote of the “Catholic” novel that it is not necessarily about a Christianized or Catholicized world, but is simply “one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by.”<sup>14</sup> Flannery O’Connor had no desire to write sagas, but what she says about her own artistry applies as well to Tolkien as to herself. Indeed one non-Christian reader wrote to him that he had created a world “in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp”.<sup>15</sup> It is the moral clarity of *The Lord of the Rings* which enables it to have this effect, like a glimpse of sunlight through grey clouds, or the touch of a clean breeze on the mountainside after long years lived in the city.

The book has many heroes, not merely one. Tolkien interweaves the destinies of the nine Companions of the Ring in something of the way different lives are woven together in the real world, to form a complex tapestry rather than a simple motif. Frodo, of course, is the main protagonist and “Ring-bearer”, the one to whom the White Council entrusts the

mission to destroy the Ring. The man Strider is at first merely a mysterious outsider, a guide and companion for the Hobbits, but emerges as hero by winning the throne of the two kingdoms of Middle Earth along with the hand of his Elven princess. The wizard Gandalf is leader of the nine Companions of the Ring and coordinator of the campaign against the Dark Lord throughout Middle Earth.

But heroism in each of these characters takes an unmistakably Christian form. Each offers his life for others, each passes through darkness and even a kind of death, to a kind of resurrection. Gandalf defends the Companions against the demonic Balrog on the narrow bridge of Moria, and falls with his enemy into the fiery pit. Victorious in death, he is eventually “sent back” by the spiritual Powers, no longer Gandalf the Grey, but endowed with greater authority and power as Gandalf the White. Strider/Aragorn also “harrows hell” by daring the Paths of the Dead under the haunted mountain, and summons the spirits of the dead oath-breakers to his side at the black stone of Erech. Finally, Frodo passes through Shelob’s impenetrable darkness under Minas Morgul, through an unconsciousness that Sam cannot distinguish from death, into the Land of Shadow itself. But in his case, identification with the suffering Christ continues even after the victory achieved by so many sacrifices. His wounds, through which he becomes increasingly “full of light”, can never entirely be healed in Middle Earth. From the Grey Havens he passes into the West, his departure with the great Elves and Gandalf marking the end of the Third Age of the world.

While *The Lord of the Rings* is enjoyed by readers of many faiths and none, the imaginative “atmosphere” of the book is Christian, because it is from this one specific faith that the author derives his understanding of the world. It is as a Catholic that he writes that his own “small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity”—so evident in every page of the book, and a large reason for its wide appeal—is founded entirely on the Blessed Virgin Mary, and on the faith that came through his mother and nourished him as a child.<sup>16</sup> Catholics call Mary *Stella Maris*, “the Star of the Sea”, for reasons that they themselves may find it hard to explain, but the image lies deep within Tolkien’s imagination, echoed in the figure of Varda or Elbereth, the Queen of the Stars venerated by the Elves, and also in Galadriel, who becomes for Frodo a kind of earthly image of Elbereth, and for Tolkien a representative of the Virgin Mary.<sup>17</sup>

*The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

Here is Sam's description of her to Faramir, in which Catholics will recognize their image of the girl from Nazareth, crowned with flowers and stars: "Beautiful she is, sir! Lovely! Sometimes like a great tree in flower, sometimes like a white daffadowndilly, small and slender like. Hard as di'monds, soft as moonlight. Warm as sunlight, cold as frost in the stars. Proud and far-off as a snow-mountain, and as merry as any lass I ever saw with daisies in her hair in springtime."

The implicit Catholicism of the book does not seem to alienate the many readers who enjoy it while holding that religion in disdain. "Pagans"—meaning the growing number in Britain who are seeking to resurrect the ancient pre-Christian religion of these islands—see in the book something of a manifesto, or a treasury of ancient wisdom. In it the elements, animals and plants of nature are not only vividly and lovingly portrayed, but shown as animated and "enchanted" in a way that seems at odds with the normal attitudes associated with Christianity.<sup>18</sup> In fact, given the strength and orthodoxy of Tolkien's faith, evident from his Letters, the book could also be read as a demonstration of how much in "paganism" is, or could be, compatible with Christianity—though not with a Christianity from which (in deference to post-Cartesian scientism) all cosmology has been extirpated. If some pagans have taken *The Lord of the Rings* for a "pagan" work, it is not because Tolkien rejects Christianity, but because he views Christ as the fulfillment of pagan wisdom.<sup>19</sup>

For while Middle Earth is set in a "secondary world" of the imagination, it was a world constructed along lines consistent with Tolkien's beliefs and intuitions about the real cosmos and its history. In one of the posthumous works edited by his son Christopher, *Morgoth's Ring*, there is a fascinating dialogue between Finrod, the wisest of the Noldorian Elves, and a woman from one of the first families of Men. They speak of the differences between Men and Elves, and particularly of the difference in the nature of their deaths. For death, the fear of death and the mystery of it, is one of the major themes of Tolkien's writing<sup>20</sup>—one which has also been ignored by the critics, and deserves more attention than I can give it here. But the Elf and the Woman also speak of the Fall of Men in a time almost forgotten, and of the "Old Hope" (known to some Men though not at that point to the Elves), amounting to a prophecy of the Incarnation, that one day Eru, the Creator, will enter into his own creation, marred as it is by Morgoth, and heal it from within.<sup>21</sup> Throughout this important dialogue we see the efforts that Tolkien made to render his mythical history at least consistent with Christian belief.

An important clue to the importance for Tolkien of the religious vision that he saw as underpinning *The Lord of the Rings* is the date on which the Ring was destroyed: 25th March. This is mentioned in passing by Gandalf in a conversation with Sam, and its importance is reinforced by its being also the birth-date of Sam and Rosie's first child, "a date that Sam noted".<sup>22</sup> In the "Catholic" world, 25th March is the Feast of the Annunciation; which is to say the moment of the Incarnation, when Eru indeed did at last take flesh in Mary's womb. It was also accounted by many early Christian writers the date of the Crucifixion,<sup>23</sup> and for many centuries it was this that was New Year's Day in England, just as it would be in Gondor during the reign of King Elessar, after the fall of Barad-D<sup>o</sup>r. The Fellowship of the Ring had set out from Rivendell on another familiar date in the Christian calendar, 25th December, which the Hobbits call Yule. These carefully arranged dates are a signal that the author saw the Quest of the Fellowship as akin to the story of the Redemption—as perhaps all tales of salvation from evil are echoes or anticipations of that one great "fairy-tale" which is not fiction but fact, for "God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. . . . The Gospels contain a fairy-story," he writes, "or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. . . . But this story is supreme; and it is true."<sup>24</sup> We create stories because we are made in the image of a Creator, and our stories look towards his: the story of a world and its salvation.

### **The Ring of Power**

Which brings us back to the Ring itself. Why was it so appropriately destroyed or "unmade" on 25th March? It is called the Ring of Power, and it is designed to rule the other rings that were made and through them the world. Yet it makes the wearer invisible to normal sight. What is the connection that Tolkien is hinting at here between the lust for power and the ability to become invisible? The person who places himself within the golden circle of the Ring seeks not to be seen, and thereby to have power over others.<sup>25</sup> Through the magic power of the Ring we escape the limitations of matter to enter the world of spiritual forces, but in the very act of doing so we become horribly visible to the forces of evil. In fact the Ring is partly a symbol of the sin of pride. It draws us towards the Dark Lord by tempting us to become like him. Its circular shape is an image of the will closed in upon itself. Its empty centre suggests the void into which we thrust ourselves by using the Ring. Becoming invisible also means be-

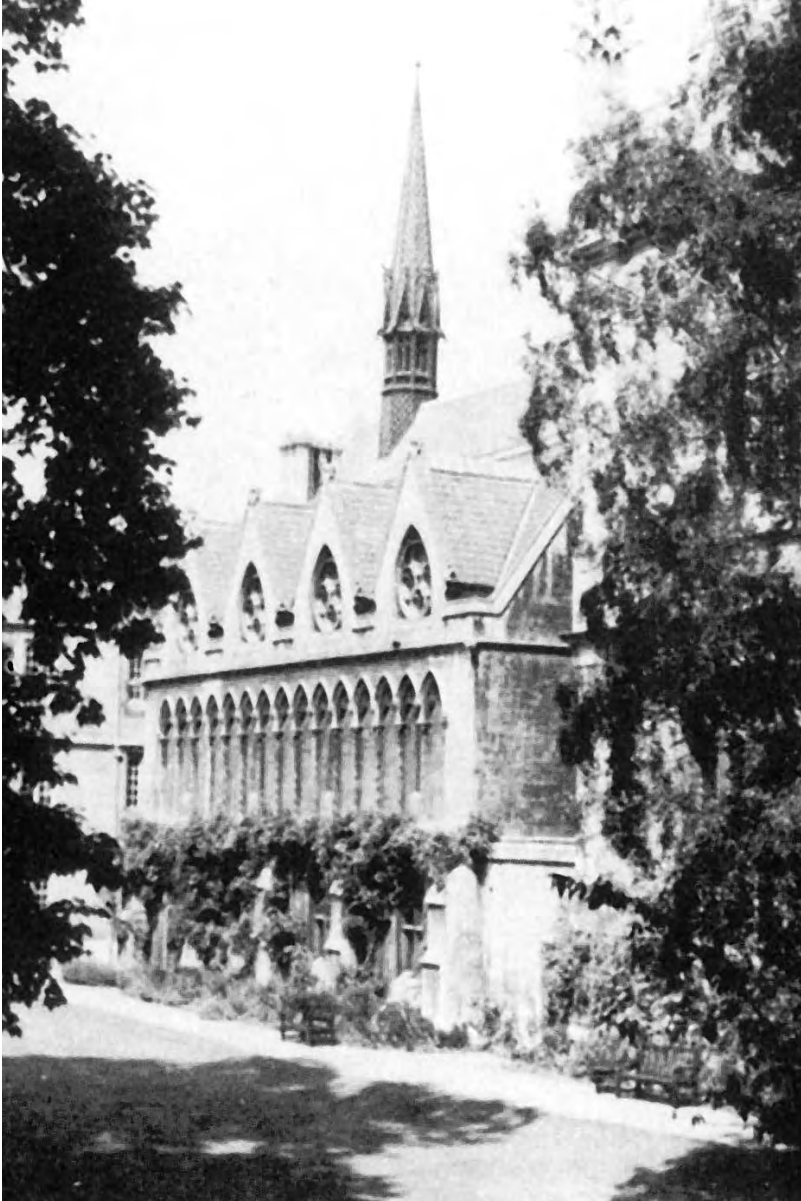


*The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

coming untouchable by light; and since it is only light that allows us to be seen by others, wearing the Ring also cuts us off from human contact and relationship: it takes us, ultimately, into a world where we are alone with the Eye. In that world of evil there is no room for two wills: the wearer is either absorbed and destroyed, or he defeats Sauron and becomes another Dark Lord himself.<sup>26</sup>

That is why the Ring is the foundation of the Dark Tower and the whole empire of evil. It represents the essence of sin, going right back to the sin of Adam, which (as we read in the Book of Genesis) led him to try to become invisible by hiding from God in the forest of Eden. The reason the Ring's destruction is linked in Tolkien's chronology to the Annunciation is simply that Mary's "yes" to God's will, when it was expressed to her by the Angel, is the exact reversal of the creature's will to usurp power for itself. This was the moment in which Christ was conceived, and so it is the moment when the true King enters the world. If we see it also as the date of the crucifixion, then it becomes even more appropriate, for this was the day of the Devil's overthrow, when Death was cast down from his throne by the sacrifice of Christ.

If the Ring represents Sin, then we would expect that its destruction would be impossible without the help of divine grace, and that is indeed what we find in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's Christian genius therefore reveals itself in a final twist of the plot. On the very brink of success, his free will having taken him as far as it can, Frodo renounces the Quest and claims the Ring for his own. His ability to cast it away has been eroded by the task of bearing it to Mount Doom. His very assertion of ownership over the Ring signifies the loss of his self-possession, and the words he uses betray this: he says, "I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine." Note that he does not say, "I choose . . . I do", but rather "I do not choose. . . I will not do". Frodo is, of course, saved by an apparent accident, for Gollum bites the Ring from his finger and falls into the Fire. This is in fact the consequence of Frodo's earlier (and freer) decision to spare Gollum's life. "But at this point," Tolkien writes in the Letters, the 'salvation' of the world and Frodo's own 'salvation' is achieved by his previous pity and forgiveness of injury."<sup>27</sup> Thus in the end it is not Frodo who saves Middle Earth at all, nor Gollum. It can only be God himself, working through the love and freedom of his creatures. The scene is a triumph of Providence over Fate, but also a triumph of Mercy, in which free will, supported by grace, is



Exeter College, Oxford: the library and chapel from the Fellows' Garden

### *The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

fully vindicated. Frodo was honoured, nevertheless, “because he had accepted the burden voluntarily, and had then done all that was within his utmost physical and mental strength to do. He (and the Cause) were saved —by Mercy: by the supreme value and efficacy of Pity and forgiveness of injury.”<sup>28</sup>

Tolkien’s religious faith opened his eyes to the fact that evil is something spiritual as well as psychological, something cosmic as well as sociological. This is partly why he wrote in the genre of the mythic and the poetic. He believed that what he and the other Inklings called “mythopoeic” writing was more adequate than other forms of prose to express these truths. And he believed literally in a spiritual battle with evil, of which needed to become more conscious if we are to play our part in it. One of the Inklings, George Sayer, recalls a time when he introduced Tolkien to a new kind of recording device in order to cheer him up, when he was depressed because his publishers were not interested in *The Lord of the Rings*. Before doing anything else, Tolkien recorded the Lord’s Prayer in the ancient Gothic language, in order to “cast out the devil that was sure to be in it since it was a machine”.<sup>29</sup> I do not mean to trivialize this insight. It is important to note that, for a spiritual warrior like Tolkien, every significant human act should begin with prayer. Furthermore, while not all machines are evil, he believed that certain spiritual forces are evil and may find some forms of technology particularly apt for their purposes. The Ring represents not technology per se, but the kind of technology which instrumentalizes nature and other people, behind the invention and use of which lies a will to power, to domination.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Heroism of Hobbits**

For all its great beauty and nobility, *The Lord of the Rings* might have remained on the margins of our culture, like the works of other fantasy writers like Lord Dunsany or E.R. Eddison, if it were not for one thing, which C.S. Lewis describes as a “shift in tone”, a subtle change in the style of the language sufficient to carry the reader almost without realizing it from the everyday world of the Shire into the universe of high romance and chivalry. This crucial stylistic innovation is already present in *The Hobbit* of 1937. Now his publishers wanted a sequel. For years—ever since 1914 in fact—he had been constructing or “discovering” the mythology of Middle Earth. But what his publishers wanted was “more Hobbits”, and this meant that he had to start not with the more “epic”

characters like Aragorn and Arwen, but with the little people: Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin. What we end up with in the new book is not a chronicle of mythological wars, as he had originally intended when he offered for publication a version of *The Silmarillion*, but a journey “there and back again” from the mundane to the epic, the everyday to the heroic and back to the mundane. It is a literary bridge that carries traffic in both directions. It transposes the Hobbits into an epic universe, and through them it brings the epic qualities of nobility and courage into the world of the Shire.

The book begins and ends in the world of ordinary people, like you and me. This was the world of Tolkien’s happiest childhood memories, memories of the Warwickshire village of Sarehole near Birmingham around 1898, in the brief four years before the family moved into the city.<sup>31</sup> This was the England of the sheltered, golden years before the First World War. Somewhat like G.K. Chesterton, who was even luckier because his whole childhood in a slightly earlier period was a happy one, Tolkien was nourished throughout his life by those powerful memories of innocent joy, which taught him the longing for Paradise. That world was shattered and corrupted by the two great Wars of the twentieth century. All sense or imagination of security was stripped from those who grew up in that period: “Now we find ourselves nakedly confronting the will of God, as concerns ourselves and our position in time.”<sup>32</sup> But the longing for this half-glimpsed and long-lost Paradise echoes through the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*. *The Appendices* and *The Silmarillion* describe a series of earthly paradises destroyed in the long succession of years: Almaren, Menegroth, Doriath, Nargothrond, Gondolin, N’menor. “Actually I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic,” Tolkien himself wrote, “so that I do not expect ‘history’ to be anything but a ‘long defeat’—though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory.”<sup>33</sup> For in the end there is hope, like the hope given by the Virgin Mary to King Alfred in Chesterton’s *Battle of the White Horse*, even if it seems “that the sky grows darker yet/ And the sea rises higher.”

I always find very moving the passage in *The Silmarillion* describing the tragic end of the battle of Unnumbered Tears, when the hero Hurin stands alone. “Then he cast aside his shield, and wielded an axe two-handed; and it is sung that the axe smoked in the black blood of the troll-guard of Gothmog until it withered, and each time that he slew Hurin

*The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

cried: ‘*Aurë entuluva!* Day shall come again!’ Seventy times he uttered that cry; but they took him at last alive, by the command of Morgoth, for the Orcs grappled him with their hands, which clung to him still though he hewed off their arms; and ever their numbers were renewed, until at last he fell buried beneath them.” In the end Tolkien’s “pessimism”, if you want to call it that, is perfectly balanced by his knowledge that at any minute “it is what we are and are doing, not what we plan to be and do that counts”<sup>34</sup>—which could be the motto of the hero in every Age of the world.”

These themes are brought together in one of the last chapters of the book, “The Scouring of the Shire”. The great battles are over, the Ring of Power destroyed, and the King restored to the ancient throne of Gondor. The Hobbits, transformed and ennobled by their participation in these events, return to the Shire and must now defeat the unexpected evil that they find there. “The Old Grange on the west side had been knocked down, and its place taken by rows of tarred sheds. All the chestnuts were gone. The banks and hedgerows were broken. Great wagons were standing in disorder in a field beaten bare of grass. Bagshot Row was a yawning sand and gravel quarry. Bag End up beyond could not be seen for a clutter of large huts.” The returning Hobbits find their beloved homeland despoiled, polluted and enslaved. The people of the Shire are now working for men who bully and exploit them, imprisoning any who break the numerous new rules and regulations. They are forced to live in poverty and fear, while the ruffians eat, drink and smoke the fruit of the land. Traditional hobbit-holes are being replaced with ugly brick houses. In other words, the Hobbits returned expecting to find again their secure, happy, rural community, and instead have come face to face with the industrial squalor of post-War England. It is the exiled Wizard Saruman who turns out to be responsible for all this, in a final act of revenge against the Hobbits who brought about the destruction of Orthanc. His headquarters in the Shire, and thus the centre of the evil infection, is Bag End itself, Frodo’s home, the centre of Tolkien’s interior world.

The success of the Hobbits in dealing with this final peril would not have been possible—would certainly not have been believable—if they had not experienced the epic adventure as a whole, and if we had not seen them transformed into heroes of song and legend; so that when they are plunged back into the banality of the Shire they are able to defeat the evil

that they find with the grace—the gifts—that they have received in their travels. Those Hobbits who have not been so initiated into heroism are helpless to oppose a force that enslaves by fear and the exploitation of self-interest. But the Travellers have passed through darkness, in the Barrows, in Moria, in battle and in Mordor itself. The half-darkness of everyday evil holds no terrors for them. They have been broken and re-forged through service to others: to Frodo, to Theoden, to Denethor, to the peoples of Middle Earth.

As the Hobbits arrive in the Shire they meet one of Saruman's men, and Frodo tells him that "The King's messengers will ride up the Greenway now, not bullies from Isengard." The man replies:

"Swagger it, swagger it, my little cock-a-whoop. But that won't stop us living in this fat little country where you have lazed long enough. And"—he snapped his fingers in Frodo's face—"King's messengers! That for them! When I see one, I'll take notice, perhaps."

"This was too much for Pippin. His thoughts went back to the Field of Cormallen, and here was a squint-eyed rascal calling the Ring-bearer 'little cock-a-whoop'. He cast back his cloak, flashed out his sword, and the silver and sable of Gondor gleamed on him as he rode forward.

"'I am a messenger of the King,' he said. You are speaking to the King's friend, and one of the most renowned in all the lands of the West. You are a ruffian and a fool. Down on your knees in the road and ask pardon, or I will set this troll's bane in you!"

We too, if we have imaginatively accompanied the Hobbits on this journey from the mundane to the epic and back again, are now in a sense "initiated" into the realities that exist behind the veils of everyday life, and Tolkien hints that a similar heroism is called for in us, as we see the England of our own day labouring under the disguised slavery of consumerism and overrun by half-orcs who despise our traditional way of life. This is the heroism which expresses itself not by the sword (although strong action may indeed be called for), but by placing ourselves at the service of the Light in whatever way is demanded of us in our own circumstances. "I do so dearly believe," Tolkien wrote, "that no half-heartedness and no worldly fear must turn us aside from following the light unflinchingly."<sup>35</sup>

## **The Horns of Hope**

Tolkien's work therefore contains a call to heroism, which is addressed to its modern readers. In 1971 he reflected on the book that he himself now viewed as a mystery: "Looking back on the wholly unexpected things that have followed its publication—beginning at once with the appearance of Vol. I—I feel as if an ever darkening sky over our present world had been suddenly pierced, the clouds rolled back, and an almost forgotten sunlight had poured down again. As if indeed the Horns of Hope had been heard again, as Pippin heard them suddenly at the absolute nadir of the fortunes of the West. But How? And Why?"<sup>36</sup> He did not understand fully how, but he knew (as he says in the same Letter) that he had been used by Another as an instrument—albeit a willing instrument—to sound the Horns of Hope in the modern world.<sup>37</sup>

Tom Shippey draws attention to the horn of Eorl the Young, made by the Dwarves, taken from the hoard of the Dragon Scatha, which is given to Merry by the King of Rohan. It is with this, he points out, that Merry awakens the Hobbits of the Shire from their despair, which is ever the chief weapon of evil. He sees in the ancient, magical horn of Rohan a symbol of *The Lord of the Rings* itself.<sup>38</sup> "Awoken" by the "music" of Tolkien's poetic vision, we too can throw off the cloud that oppresses our spirits. Those young people who have been to see *The Fellowship of the Ring* five or ten times, weeping at the death of Gandalf and Boromir time after time, are responding to something real and important. That something is why we are here, why we are born. We are indeed, like Frodo and Sam, part of a story that goes on and on, in which forces are at work beyond our knowledge, the outcome of which depends upon our own free will as well as the action of powers beyond our ken. As Sam says:

"The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and

not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same—like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?"<sup>39</sup>

It is part of the author's mastery that he can make the characters become conscious of playing a part in the tale without losing their credibility as characters. It is a tale that goes back to the great Song of Creation that is described in the beginning of *The Silmarillion*. It rolls on through great ages until the making of the Sun and Moon, and on through the battles of the gods which shaped Middle Earth, the sinking of the island kingdom of N'menor, the escape of Elendil's tall ships and the founding of Gondor, down to the finding of the Enemy's Ring by Bilbo. The great stories never end, Tolkien tells us, and we, the readers of *The Lord of the Rings*, are the latest characters to play a part in it.

Sam had "fallen into" a tale which shows us great virtue and great deeds, and what they look like when they are translated to the level of everyday life. And the form they take is often very ordinary: fidelity, keeping trust with each other, building families, enjoying (and defending) the simple things that nourish the human spirit. In a world where the basis of all "the simple things" is under attack, small deeds in its defense may be greater than they appear. The world around us may need to be re-made, our social structures re-thought, our communities re-founded, our children re-educated. But at the most basic level, even the humblest of us need to repent of our complicity in the reign of the ruffians, and the erosion of our freedoms. Without that repentance, that awakening of the moral imagination, heroism becomes an impossibility.<sup>40</sup>

Sam first enters the tale by his ears, as Gandalf hoists him through the window at Bag End and "punishes" him for eavesdropping on the story of the Ring by sending him to Mordor with Frodo. Like Sam, we too enter the story by listening, fascinated, to the Tale of the Ring. We find, like him, that once we are inside such a tale, it is difficult to escape, for our lives have been changed. We know the peril that threatens us, a darkness which encompasses the light. We are called to some form of service, that the light may not perish from the earth. It is our knowledge of a light and a beauty worth defending that inspires heroism—even the heroism of Hobbits, who are inspired to risk their lives by their love of the homely



*The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

beauty of the Shire. And it is the glimpse of a light and beauty that in a sense does not need defending which consoles the hero in his quest, and brings him peace of heart in the midst of his struggle. Deep within Mordor, looking up at the sky, “Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.”<sup>41</sup>

Tolkien spoke of a “turn”, a consolation of the spirit, that we receive from the best fairy-tales. It is not that all things end happily, or that we manufacture for ourselves an escape from the real, as the cynical critic of these stories would say. There is a sense in which the virtue of heroism is its own reward, and the star that we glimpse above the clouds promises a mysterious victory even in death. “It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind,” Tolkien wrote, “that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the ‘turn’ comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality.

“Even modern fairy-stories can produce this effect sometimes,” he goes on; and because I think he is pronouncing a verdict upon his own work, I will end with this gentle understatement of his great achievement. “It is not an easy thing to do; it depends on the whole story which is the setting of the turn, and yet it reflects a glory backwards. A tale that in any measure succeeds in this point has not wholly failed, whatever flaws it may possess, and whatever mixture or confusion of purpose.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, “Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*”, in *Of This and Other Worlds* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1982). The US title of this book is *On Stories—And Other Essays on Literature* (New York: HBJ, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> T.A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. xxx.

<sup>3</sup> Letter 66 (1944). All letters are cited here from the edition edited by Humphrey Carpenter: *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1977), p. 89. See also Letter 184 to Sam Gamgee.

<sup>5</sup> See Letters 53 (The bigger things get the smaller or duller or flatter the globe gets. It is getting to be all one blasted little provincial suburb”) and 75, and Letter 203 on “allegory” and “applicability”.

<sup>6</sup> Letter 186.

<sup>7</sup> Letter 66.

<sup>8</sup> The critical reaction is reviewed in T.A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), in Joseph Pearce's tribute, *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), and in Jane Chance, *The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power* (University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Letter 71 (1944).

<sup>10</sup> Letter 142, and in Letter 109 he writes to his publisher: "It is written in my life's blood, such as that is, thick or thin; and I can no other."

<sup>11</sup> Letter 165.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Garner, cited in Patrick Curry's *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien—Myth and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Floris, 1997) with a comment regretting Garner's reserve about Tolkien's "mythology".

<sup>13</sup> Both citations are from Letter 142, dated 1953.

<sup>14</sup> F. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1962), pp. 173-5. My emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Letter 328.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. my "Hidden Presence of Tolkien's Catholicism in *The Lord of the Rings*", *Touchstone* 15:1.

<sup>17</sup> For Tolkien's own confirmation of these connections, see Letters 213 and 320.

<sup>18</sup> See particularly Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth* (op. cit.), chapter 4.

<sup>19</sup> Even the Catholic Church did not always "fell the sacred groves": preternatural forces were often simply put in their place, as subordinate to Christ, by the establishment of new shrines, new saints, new feast days. Tolkien saw no conflict between his pantheon of angelic beings and nature spirits and the Church's cosmology. Besides, he makes it very clear that the spirits of nature are not good simply because they are spirits—or because they are natural: think of Old Man Willow, the malevolent crows, and the creature in the lake beside the gate of Moria. C.S. Lewis did something similar with the dryads and stars in *Narnia*.

<sup>20</sup> On the importance of the theme of death see Letters 186 and 208.

<sup>21</sup> "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth", in J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring, History of Middle Earth*, Vol. 10, ed Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1993). This text with its important commentary were intended by Tolkien as an Appendix to *The Silmarillion*.

<sup>22</sup> Like us, the Hobbits had twelve months in the year, and our March is the equivalent of their "Afterlithe", as described in Appendix C and D of *The Lord of the Rings*.

<sup>23</sup> See John Seward, *The Mysteries of March* (London: Collins, 1990). Cf. T.A. Shippey (op. cit.), p. 208.

<sup>24</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" in *Poems and Stories* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), pp. 179-80.

<sup>25</sup> In this respect it is reminiscent of the Ring of Invisibility in Plato's *Republic*, Book 2. Interestingly, in the present context, Plato contrasts the "unjust man" who uses the Ring to steal from others with a "just man" who is not corrupted by the power it gives, and who ends up being crucified.

<sup>26</sup> For Tolkien's own speculations about what might have happened if Frodo had challenged Sauron with the Ring, and how Elrond and Galadriel might have been corrupted by it, see the last part of Letter 246.

## *The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

<sup>27</sup> Letter 181. Tolkien also wrote interestingly on Frodo's moral "failure"/success in Letters 191 and 192.

<sup>28</sup> Letter 191. See also Letter 192: "The Other Power then took over: the Writer of the Story (and I do not mean myself), 'that one ever-present Person who is never absent and never named' (as one critic has said)."

<sup>29</sup> George Sayer, "Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien", in *Tolkien: A Celebration*, edited by Joseph Pearce (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> In Letter 75 he writes: "There is the 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. So we come inevitably from Daedalus and Icarus to the Giant Bomber. It is not an advance in wisdom!" And in Letter 211: "If I were to 'philosophize' this myth, or at least the Ring of Sauron, I should say it was a mythical way of representing the truth that potency (or rather potentiality) if it is to be exercised, and produce results, has to be externalized and so as it were passes, to a greater or less degree, out of one's direct control."

<sup>31</sup> The "Shire" seems to have been a mixture of Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Oxfordshire. However, Tolkien always claimed that he never knew what led him to write "In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit" on the blank page of a student's essay-book sometime in the 1920s (see Letters 163, 319). Could the name "Sarehole" in the back of his mind have had anything to do with it?

<sup>32</sup> Letter 306.

<sup>33</sup> Letter 195, written in 1956.

<sup>34</sup> Letter 40, written to his son Michael in 1940 as he went off to war.

<sup>35</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (op. cit.), p. 73. He happens to be speaking there of his wife's reception into the Catholic Church, but the same sentiment is applicable in other spheres, especially for Tolkien, who lived his life, and followed the Light, on many different levels at the same time.

<sup>36</sup> Letter 328.

<sup>37</sup> "An alarming conclusion for an old philologist to draw concerning his private amusement. But not one that should puff any one up who considers the imperfections of 'chosen instruments', and indeed what sometimes seems their lamentable unfitness for the purpose" (Letter 328).

<sup>38</sup> Op. cit., p. 220.

<sup>39</sup> This passage comes from the chapter called "The Stairs of Cirith Ungol" in *The Lord of the Rings*.

<sup>40</sup> Patrick Curry translates the "scouring of the Shire" into contemporary terms in *Defending Middle Earth* (Floris, 1997), a book that I appreciate more as time goes by. He explores Tolkien's "radical nostalgia" as the basis for an ethic of "human conviviality, respect for life and ultimate humility" (p. 154), a call to rise up and defend nature, culture and Spirit against the dominance of the Machine.

<sup>41</sup> From the chapter called "The Land of Shadow".

<sup>42</sup> "On Fairy-Stories" (op. cit.), p. 176.



Radcliffe Camera, Oxford.

Tolkien decided that this building, which is part of the Bodleian Library, looks like Sauron's temple to Morgoth on Númenor. In the Notion Club Papers (published in *The Downfall of Sauron: The History of Middle Earth*, Volume 9), the characters confuse the two buildings.

## Appendices

### 1. *Guide to The Silmarillion*

*Tolkien's Lord of the Rings sprouted from the fertile soil of his "Silmarillion"—as the great legendarium as a whole tends to be called. Though he was never able to complete the project before his death in 1973, for it had grown in haphazard and "organic" fashion over 60 years of revision, most of the work has now been collated, edited and published by his son, Christopher, in The Silmarillion and a series of twelve volumes called The History of Middle Earth (published by HarperCollins in the UK, and Houghton Mifflin in the States). The Silmarillion describes events stretching back at least 37,000 years before those narrated in The Lord of the Rings, which themselves take place around 4000 or 5000 BC, at the end of what Tolkien calls the "Third Age" since the creation of the Sun (we ourselves live in the sixth or seventh such Age, according to Tolkien's Letter 211). The History of Middle Earth contains unfinished tales and successive drafts and revisions both of The Lord of the Rings and of the greater story that lay behind it. Together with The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, these books form the most important resources we have for an understanding of what Tolkien was trying to achieve and the scope of his imaginative vision.*

*The growth of the legendarium was closely related to his professional work, the academic study of language: though this was hardly apparent to most of his colleagues at the time (the Inklings excepted), to whom it appeared an extravagant waste of time and energy. He loved language so much that he invented several of his own. In fact, he was fond of saying that he constructed the fictional world of "Middle-Earth" partly in order to provide a meaningful context for the speaking and writing of Elvish. The construction involved intuitively tracing and attempting to reconstruct the history and mythology that lay behind the languages of Northern Europe (Finnish and Welsh being his favourites), but also the folklore, place names, nursery rhymes and fairy-tales.*

*Though undoubtedly influenced by his experience of the War, the process of writing began earlier, probably in 1913, when he was struck by a single haunting verse in a poem called "Crist" by the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon writer Cynewulf (given here in translation):*

*Hail Eärendil, brightest of Angels,  
Over Middle-Earth sent unto men.*

*"I felt a curious thrill," he wrote, "as if something had stirred in me, half wakened from sleep. There was something very remote and strange and beautiful behind those words, if I could grasp it, far beyond the ancient English."*

*Tolkien's lifelong struggle to grasp that something "remote and strange*

and beautiful” led him behind the words themselves, “inside” language” (as C.S. Lewis wrote in his obituary of Tolkien), perhaps even beyond the “veil” of normal reality (as Tolkien once admitted to a fellow philologist).<sup>1</sup> Yet to some extent he remained confused about how much he was inventing and how much discovering in this inner world of the imagination, for in Volume 10 of *The History of Middle-Earth* we find him attempting to re-write the very foundations of the myth in 1958, having decided that it was after all “astronomically absurd” for the Elves to appear before the creation of the Sun and Moon. The new conception (published with his son’s commentary in the section of the book called “Myths Transformed”) would, however, have necessitated such radical changes to all the rest of his writings that he abandoned it. One hopes that he realized, eventually, not only that the task was too great, but that the reconciliation of his mythological cosmology with that of modern science is in any case completely unnecessary.

Tolkien’s grand narrative in its most definitive version opens with the Creation. The immediately subsequent ages are hard to relate to historical time, which begins only when the world reaches approximately its present form, after the creation of the Sun and Moon. Thereafter mythological time begins to merge with historical time, although the transition is not complete until the end of the Second Age, when Valinor is removed from our world “into the realm of hidden things”. Thenceforth those that sailed in search of it find that the world has become round, so that they return at last to the place from which they set out. “All roads are now bent”—except to the ships of the Elves.

#### *Tolkien’s Creation Myth*

In constructing his account of the *Beginning of Days*, Tolkien drew upon many legends that were known to him, and upon the Jewish and Christian traditions that he believed to be true. He tried to write an account that would be complementary to, and not contradict, the Genesis story. This was to be written not from the human, but from the Elvish point of view, though transmitted down to the present—and perhaps filtered and distorted—by Hobbits and Men.

In both the Bible and *The Silmarillion*, the physical world is created by the word of God. In the Elvish account, however, there are three preceding stages, the first of which involves the creation of the Ainur (which in many mythologies are described as gods, and by Christians as angels). The second stage is the proposing of themes and the singing of a great music by Eru and the Ainur. It is at this point that one of the Ainur known as Melkor (equivalent to Lucifer) begins to rebel. The third stage is the manifestation of that Music in the form of a great Vision, which is presented by Eru in the sight of the Ainur. Only after this is the fourth stage reached, which is the establishment

## *The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

*of the world in physical actuality at the divine command “Eä! Let these things Be!”*

*With this word, Eru sends forth into the Void “the Flame Imperishable” to be the heart of the World, just as he has previously kindled the Ainur into reality with the same Secret Fire. This Flame represents for Tolkien life, love and creativity—it is an emanation from the creative energy of God’s own self. The Bible describes Wisdom in strikingly similar terms, for Wisdom precedes the creation of the world and is placed at its very heart: “a vapour of the power of God, and a certain pure emanation of the glory of almighty God: and therefore no defiled thing cometh into her. For she is the brightness of eternal light: and the unspotted mirror of God’s majesty, and the image of his goodness” (Wisdom 7:25-6).*

*Fire therefore has an essential ambiguity in Tolkien’s universe. While its earthly form is often associated with evil—for Melkor from the beginning sought the Flame of Il’vatar that he might make Beings of his own (Silmarillion, p. 16) —its higher form is entirely good, for Melkor is able only to imitate, to corrupt and to distort, never to create ex nihilo. In its higher forms, fire is associated with the Lamps, the Trees, the Stars and the Sun and Moon that serve to illuminate the darkness of Arda at various times. In its lower forms, though mostly good, it may be turned to evil, as in the balrogs or the dragons of Morgoth.*

### *Tolkien’s Pantheon*

*Aside from Melkor, who was the brother of Manwë in the thought of Eru until his fall, the major “gods” and “goddesses” are as follows:*

<i>Valar (“Masculine”)</i>	<i>Valier (“feminine”)</i>
<i>Manwë (air, sky)</i>	<i>Varda/Elbereth (stars)</i>
<i>Ulmo (water, sea)</i>	<i>[no consort]</i>
<i>Aulë (earth, craftsmanship)</i>	<i>Yavanna (trees, fruits)</i>
<i>Namo/Mandos (death)</i>	<i>Vairë (weaver of the webs of time)</i>
<i>Irmo/Lòrien (visions, dreams)</i>	<i>Nienna (lamentation, tears)</i>
<i>Este (healing) - brother of Irmo</i>	
<i>Tulkas (war, strength)</i>	<i>Nessa (dancing, running, deer)</i>
<i>Oromë (hunter, forester)</i>	<i>Vàna (flowers) - sister of Yavanna</i>

### *The Ages of Creation*

*Eru (God) makes the Ainur, the Holy Ones. They make a great Music together.*

*Melkor (Lucifer) rebels, seeking to subvert the musical design of Eru.*

*Eru Il’vatar embodies the Music in a vision of Arda (the world, the Earth).*

*Eru makes the world with his word: “Eä! Let these things Be!”*

*Some of the Ainur enter into Arda (the Earth) by choice and become the Valar (the Powers).*

*The Age of the Lamps*

*Tulkas expels Melkor from Arda. Two great Lamps are built in North and South.*

*Plants and animals begin to grow—this is the First Spring of Arda.*

*The Valar build the Isle of Almaren in a Great Lake at the heart of Middle Earth.*

*Melkor returns to Earth, raises the Iron Mountains and builds his fortress Utumno.*

*Gradually he poisons Arda. By the presence of death and decay his presence is discovered.*

*Striking first, he destroys the Lamps, and the world is marred. Almaren is destroyed.*

*The First Age of the Trees (Ages of Darkness in Middle Earth)*

*The Valar choose to dwell now in the West, in the continent of Aman.*

*They establish the land of Valimar behind the Mountains of Defence.*

*In the city of Valmar, Yavanna grows two Trees of Light to illuminate Valimar.*

*Melkor rules Middle Earth from Utumno in the far North.*

*He establishes his lieutenant Sauron in Angband.*

*The Valar fear to attack Middle-Earth in case they damage the Children.*

*The Second Age of the Trees (Age of the Stars)*

*For the sake of the Children to come, Varda kindles the brighter stars and constellations.*

*The Awakening of the Children, the Elves, the Quendi (“those that speak with voices”).*

*To protect them, the Valar destroy Utumno and take Melkor captive for a set time.*

*They bring many of the Elves to safety in Valinor, but some remain behind.*

*In Valinor, Fëanor son of Finwë makes the three great jewels called Silmarils.*

*Melkor, now released, with Ungoliant kills the Trees and steals the Silmarils.*

*Fëanor leads the Noldor in pursuit of Melkor, naming him “Morgoth” (the Enemy).*

*Kinslaying at Alqualondë: the first killing of Elf by Elf.*



## *The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

*The return of the Noldor to Middle Earth led by Fëanor, in pursuit of Morgoth.*

*Death of Fëanor at the hands of Gothmog, King of Balrogs.*

### *First Age of the Sun*

*The Valar create the Moon and Sun from the flower and fruit of the dying Trees.*

*The end of night and the first rising of the Sun brings a Second Spring to Arda.*

*Morgoth establishes himself in Angband (Thangorodrim). Wars in Beleriand.*

*Thingol and Melian establish the Guarded Kingdom of Doriath.*

*Inspired by Menegroth, Finrod establishes Nargothrond.*

*Turgon, Finrod's brother, establishes the Hidden City of Gondolin.*

*The Awakening and Fall of Men. Friendship of the Edain with the Eldar.*

*Beren and Lúthien (daughter of Thingol) recover a Silmaril from Morgoth.*

*In Gondolin, Turgon's daughter Idril marries the man Tuor, bears Earendil.*

*The final ruin of Beleriand: Doriath and Gondolin are betrayed.*

*Eärendil marries Elwing, grandchild of Beren/Lúthien and bearer of the Silmaril.*

*Their sons are Elrond and Elros, who choose to be counted Elvish and Human respectively.*

*The Voyage of Eärendil with the Silmaril into the Far West, on behalf of Elves and Men.*

*Eärendil appeals to the Valar, who invade Middle Earth.*

*Morgoth is finally overthrown and cast out from the world.*

### *Second Age*

*Númenor is established in the Western Sea for the Dunedain, ruled by Elros.*

*Gil-Galad, Elrond, Cirdan and Galadriel dwell in Middle Earth.*

*The main Elf kingdoms are now Mithlond and Lindon.*

*The Rings of Power are forged in Middle Earth.*

*Sauron, at first friendly, builds Barad-Dur and makes war on the Elves.*

*After 2000 years, the Númenoreans become immensely powerful, but corrupt.*

*They capture Sauron when he threatens their colonies in Middle Earth.*

*Persuaded by Sauron, Ar-PharazÛn the Golden assaults the Valar seeking immortality.*

*The Drowning of Númenor. Valinor removed from the visible world.*

*Elendil, descendant of Elros, escapes the ruin and come to Middle Earth. Foundation of Arnor and Gondor by Elendil and his sons Isildur and An-rion.*

*The Last Alliance of Elves and Men defeats Sauron and takes the Ring.*

### Third Age

*Isildur is betrayed by the Ring and killed. The Ring is lost.*

*Gondor and the Dúnedain slowly decline. Ringwraiths capture Minas Morgul.*

*The last king of Gondor is taken by the Wraiths. Gondor is ruled by Stewards.*

*Elrond and Galadriel maintain refuges in Rivendell and Lothlorien.*

*The five Istari (Wizards) arrive in Middle Earth for its defence.*

*Sauron appears again in Dol Guldur, and is driven out. He returns to Mordor.*

*The One Ring is found, but lies hidden in the Shire. The War of the Ring.*

*The One Ring and Sauron are destroyed, as told in The Lord of the Rings.*

*Elrond, Galadriel, Gandalf and Frodo depart for Valinor.*

*King Elessar restores the glory of Gondor at the dawn of the Fourth Age.*

## 2. Lines of Descent and Main Characters in the Mythology

*It may be advisable to keep these names on a slip of paper as you read The Silmarillion.*

*In the Age of the Stars, the first Kings of the Elves were Ingwë (of the Vanya), Elwë/Thingol and Olwë (of the Teleri) and Finwë (of the Noldor). Having been shown the bliss and safety that awaits them in Aman, they lead their peoples into the West. Elwë remains behind: he marries Melian (of the divine race of Maia) and settles in Middle Earth, where their daughter Lúthien is born.*

*The Noldor: In Aman, Finwë is slain when Morgoth steals the Silmarils. Finwë's sons are Fëanor (by Miriel), Fingolfin and Finarfin (by Indis). Fëanor in turn has seven sons, Fingolfin three (including Fingon and Turgon), and Finarfin five (including Finrod/Felagund and Galadriel). The Noldor return to Middle-Earth out of the West in pursuit of the Silmarils.*

*Men: Men first appear in the First Age of the Sun. The Edain or Elf-Friends have three Houses: Beor, Hador and Haleth. Beren, who later marries Lúthien the daughter of Thingol, with whom he recovers a Silmaril from Morgoth, comes of the House of Beor. Húrin and Huor, and their respective sons Túrin (a tragic hero modelled on the Finnish Kullervo) and Tuor (the human messenger of Ulmo), come from the inter-marriage of the Second and Third Houses of the Edain.*

## *The Horns of Hope: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits*

*The Half-Elven: The son of Beren and Lúthien is Dior, the first of the Half-Elven, the father of Elwing. Tuor marries Idril, the daughter of Turgon, King of Gondolin. Their child Eärendil marries Elwing, their sons being Elrond and Elros (the first King of Númenor). The two lines of descent from Eärendil are united again at the end of the Third Age by the marriage of Arwen the daughter of Elrond (her mother being the daughter of Galadriel) to Aragorn the descendent of Elros.*

### 3. A Guide to the Most Important Letters of Tolkien

[See *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981). This brief list is intended to draw attention to Letters that contain substantial material for the exploration of Tolkien's oeuvre, its ramifications and significance—including its religious or spiritual dimension.]

Letter 43 (see also 49). On women, marriage, chivalry and the eucharist.

Letter 131. A detailed summary of his life's work.

Letter 142. In which he speaks of the book's Catholic inspiration.

Letter 144, 153-6. The metaphysical background, and answers to difficult questions.

Letter 163. His account to W.H. Auden of how he came to write the books.

Letter 181, 186. About the *Quest* and Frodo's "failure"; the meaning of the book.

Letter 183. On morality and politics (see also Letter 186).

Letter 200. About the "gods".

Letters 207, 210. Often hilarious comments on the film "treatment" proposed by Hollywood.

Letter 211-12. On the mythology and its purpose.

Letter 214. More on the traditions and social arrangements of Hobbits.

Letter 246. More on Frodo's "failure" and fate.

Letter 297. On names in *The Lord of the Rings*, their origins and meaning.

Letter 310. On the meaning of life, written to a school girl.

<sup>1</sup> Simonne D'Ardenne, according to Verlyn Flieger in *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 9.





# Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel

Owen Dudley Edwards

OWEN DUDLEY EDWARDS *is the author of many books. He lectures in History at Edinburgh University and is a member of the Chesterton Review's Editorial Board, as well as a frequent contributor to the Review ever since its founding in 1974.*

“Well, this is the end, Sam Gamgee,” said a voice by his side. And there was Frodo, pale and worn, and yet himself again; and in his eyes there was peace now, neither strain of will, nor madness, nor any fear. His burden was taken away. There was the dear master of the sweet days in the Shire.

“Master!” cried Sam, and fell upon his knees. In all that ruin of the world for the moment he felt only joy, great joy. The burden was gone. His master had been saved; he was himself again, he was free. And then Sam caught sight of the maimed and bleeding hand.

“Your poor hand!” he said. “And I have nothing to bind it with, or comfort it. I would have spared him a whole hand of mine rather. But he’s gone now beyond recall, gone for ever.”

“Yes,” said Frodo. “But do you remember Gandalf’s words: *Even Gollum may have something yet to do?* But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end. So let us forgive him! For the Quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*  
Book Six, Chapter III, last lines.

Tolkien was a Roman Catholic, for reasons as dramatic as anything in his own fiction. His father had died in South Africa in 1896 when the boy was four: they had last met a year earlier, when with his mother and

---

Tolkien Family in Bloemfontein, South Africa in 1892. (*L. to r.*) Arthur Tolkien; a servant; Mabel Tolkien (seated); the houseboy; a nurse holding Ronald Tolkien, aged ten months.

brother young Tolkien had been sent back to England. In 1900 his mother entered the Roman Catholic church, to the fury of her and her late husband's relatives. They now refused her the financial support on which she had previously counted, they opposed her intention to have her sons brought up as Catholics and for want of medical attention she died four years later, leaving the boys under the guardianship of the Oratorian priest Father Francis Morgan, who used his own means to help provide for them. Tolkien nine years later wrote that she "was a martyr indeed, and it is not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts . . . giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith."<sup>1</sup> This meant that Tolkien's Catholicism was fused with his identity at the most basic points of self-awareness. Clichés about the influence of devout mothers do not begin to describe the force of an inheritance like this. Neither convert nor cradle Catholic can experience its likeness. Chesterton was fond of quoting Cobbett on England's loss of medieval Catholicism through the Reformation as resembling one's discovery of one's mother's corpse in a wood.<sup>2</sup> Tolkien saw his actual mother collapse into what proved a diabetic coma whence she died six days later: he needed no rural ride to discover her fate or its religious meaning. Whatever he did was going to be Catholic.

To this extent there is an analogy with Irish Catholic nationalism into which I was born. The fusion of religious and national identities for us meant that our birthright was both, and that one was inextricable from the other. Not only had Christ died for you: so had your country. Some Irish Catholics may have made little of that: but if you cared about it, it became the marrow of your bones. Tolkien, writing of his mother's martyrdom, would have felt much as Irish Catholics had, but in a much more active way. Many Irish Catholics knew that their ancestors—especially their maternal ancestors—had sacrificed themselves for the salvation of their descendants, but Tolkien had seen his mother dying for his soul with his own eyes. Not even a survivor of the Great Famine could claim more.

To think of Tolkien's labours as somehow removed from his church is thus as absurd as thinking of them as somehow removed from his life. It did not put his writings on sectarian parade, as we might think of Belloc. He did not need to present Catholic arms. His faith was him. Catholic fiction in general may seem the result of some process—doubt, reconversion, controversy, new audience, new location, temptation—but Tolkien did not write for a Catholic occasion. He may not have been particularly

*Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel*

conscious of writing as a Catholic at all, any more than I am conscious of writing in English—aware but not argumentative unless challenged by some other tongue. He insisted he was not writing allegories, and that he disliked them,<sup>3</sup> perhaps prompted by such famous anti-Catholic allegories as Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. On the other hand, he would not have objected to parables. Allegories are covert ways of talking of things we can know. Parables are open ways of talking of things we can not know.

Tolkien's romances have much to do with Death, and naturally enough they are concerned with expiation—with the Catholic search for a good death which in Tolkien means to make sure you have done what you can to right wrongs you have caused, or to do good at least sufficient to outweigh your harm. Thorin Oakenshield in *The Hobbit* and Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings* both die in such ways, and while dying manage to use their last words to such ends. Gollum of course also dies with such effects, though not intentionally: and to his case I shall return. But apart from the penitents, characters of unassailable virtue or innocence believe themselves to give their lives for others: Gandalf, Éowyn, Samwise, Pippin. Éowyn, a woman although in male disguise, is significantly described as entering on her ride to Gondor with "the face of one that goes, seeking death, having no hope":<sup>4</sup> such a face as the eight-year-old Tolkien may suddenly have seen upon the fainting form of his mother. Éowyn is sure of death only when she engages the Ring-wraith in defence of Theoden King; up to then, she and Theoden and Merry hurl themselves forward—like Faramir before them—in the expectation but not the certainty of death. Frodo has led the entire mission and inspired his colleagues despite a conviction it would end in death. In the event, it is only because of Sam, again and again, that he gets to the final point, and then his sudden capitulation to the Ring nearly dooms Sam and their far-flung allies. But once Gollum has saved them all, Frodo is sure of death. And he seems happier in that knowledge, since it carries so much good with it, than at any later point until taking his final departure at the Grey Havens. But none of these presumptions and acceptances of self-sacrifice may be construed as suicidal. Even Frodo, haunted by the disaster he came so close to bringing, follows Sam down the mountain instead of supinely awaiting destruction. Denethor alone commits suicide, and is emphatically condemned. Tolkien will not countenance self-destruction:

"Authority is not given to you, Steward of Gondor, to order the hour of your death," answered Gandalf. "And only the heathen

kings, under the domination of the Dark Power, did thus, slaying themselves in pride and despair, murdering their kin to ease their own death.”<sup>5</sup>

The argument that God is never brought into *The Lord of the Rings* is most obviously answered by saying that He is never out of it.

Gollum certainly does not commit suicide, but he raises another question, one crucial to Catholicism, free will *versus* predestination. Catholicism means freedom, but determinism constantly nibbles at the doctrinal base inside or outside Catholic frontiers (Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Jansen are the obvious high points.) Tolkien goes out of his way time and again to show how his characters’ conduct at vital moments is determined by themselves. Chance naturally plays a part, as it must do in any good story, and magic legitimately may. But Bilbo, for instance, proves himself a hero to the reader when he first hears the sound of Smaug when approaching him down the tunnel:

It was at this point that Bilbo stopped. Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait. At any rate, after a short halt go on he did. . . .<sup>6</sup>

This as writing for children is classic stuff, usually weakened in other hands by the demi-god like qualities of youthful protagonists. (Thus the usually repulsive Billy Bunter in his infrequent moments of physical courage outshines his reliable classmates who face no comparable qualms.)<sup>7</sup> But behind the standard device, whether not-really-a-coward, or for-once-not-a coward, lies the question of will. Bilbo chooses to go on. And later in *The Hobbit* Thorin chooses to repudiate his enmity against non-dwarves in general (“To me! To me! Elves and Men! To me! O my kinsfolk!”), and against Bilbo in particular (“I wish to part in friendship from you, and I would take back my words and deeds at the Gate”).<sup>8</sup> The reader has probably come to like Bilbo, and to respect Thorin—with no obligation to agree from time to time with either—but on past performance the reader has no right to assume the inevitability of such actions from them. Our pleasure at these decisions will have a touch of relief.

*The Lord of the Rings* offers much more multi-motivated decisions, as when Frodo first accepts the Ring-bearer’s quest (with no expectation of companions beyond the vague promise of aid from Gandalf):



*Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel*

“Well!” said Gandalf at last. “What are you thinking about? Have you decided what to do?”

“No!” answered Frodo, coming back to himself out of darkness, and finding to his surprise that it was not dark, and that out of the window he could see the sunlit garden. Or perhaps, yes....

“. . . I hope that you may find some other better keeper soon. But in the meanwhile it seems that I am a danger, a danger to all that live near me. I cannot keep the Ring and stay here. I ought to leave Bag End, leave the Shire, leave everything and go away.” He sighed.

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 or an invasion of dragons might be good for them. But I don’t feel 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.

“. . . this would mean exile, a flight from danger into danger, drawing it after me. And I suppose I must go alone, if I am to do that and save the Shire. But I feel very small, and very uprooted, and well—desperate. The Enemy is so strong and terrible.”

He did not tell Gandalf, but as he was speaking a great desire to follow Bilbo flamed up in his heart—to follow Bilbo, and even perhaps to find him again.<sup>9</sup>

It encapsulates vocation, and Frodo here seems to echo St. Francis and the idea of the friars. Alienation withers at the moment it takes its full effect; sacrifice *of* one’s world is eased into sacrifice *for* it; one leaves one’s place in the community to preserve it as a totality. It is a deeper, more mental and spiritual courage than Bilbo showed, as becomes sadly evident when Frodo does find him again. Frodo’s own qualities are most evident in the love he wins from Sam, Merry and Pippin (all of whom undertake the Quest purely for him), but his best love is given to Bilbo, even at the last grand irony:

“Now where were we? Yes, of course, giving presents. Which reminds me: what’s become of my ring, Frodo, that you took away?”

“I have lost it, Bilbo dear,” said Frodo. “I got rid of it, you know.”

“What a pity!” said Bilbo. “I should have liked to see it again. But no, how silly of me! That’s what you went for, wasn’t it: to get rid of it? But it is still all so confusing . . . .<sup>10</sup>

By that stage the proof of Frodo's patience and love are certainly needful, since he has greatly strained ours and—above all—Sam's by nearly failing to lose the Ring. Bilbo from the perspective of childhood—now second childhood—once more produces an almost slapstick version of the tragedy of Frodo's inability to separate himself from the Ring, and happily so.

One of the greatest strengths of both books is their sense of humour, flashing out time and again. That *The Lord of the Rings*, a masterpiece for all ages, is sequel to *The Hobbit*, a good book for children, is far from the problem that such usually sensible critics such as Paul Kocher make of it. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is such a masterpiece, grounded on a good book for children, *Tom Sawyer*. Both Twain and Tolkien end their second book on obvious gulfs between the perceptions of the protagonists of their two stories. Huck still admires Tom, as Frodo still admires Bilbo, but each now looks at their old hero from the other end of a journey which above all has entailed self-discovery. Huck has discovered love for Jim which makes him an apostate to Southern proslavery culture, and Tom would never understand that. Bilbo would not understand the depth of Frodo's tragedy, above all because Bilbo shares Tom Sawyer's zeal for making a good story out of his adventures. Bilbo's title for his account of the Ring-story reads like memoirs by Toad of Toad Hall. Frodo's breathes the dry professionalism of a historian (but, like Thucydides, a historian whose knowledge and wisdom are partly founded on his own misfortunes and mistakes).

Tolkien, as a Catholic who found himself writing novels, would have known of the masters of Catholic fiction in the England and France of his time.<sup>11</sup> Which of them he read, which of those he read he admired, are other questions. But he shared with them a fascination with the vulnerable and doomed hero, pre-eminent in François Mauriac's *Le Noeud de Vipères* (1932), Georges Bernano's *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* (1936), Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940), Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* (1934) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). The doom varies: the characters in question all die, but clearly save their souls (Waugh's Tony Last ends up in an earthly Limbo, firmly recommended to mercy). The sins vary also: avarice and misanthropy for Mauriac's lawyer, despair and scrupulosity for Bernano's priest, alcoholism and lust for Greene's lust in the case of Waugh's Marchmain, ancestral materialism in that of Last. Frodo shares many qualities with them, notably Pride

*Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel*

(in one form or another) although its expression in Frodo, Power-hunger, is only obliquely present in the rest, if at all. Frodo is a natural aristocrat quite different from Bilbo's bourgeois bohemianism (and much less self-conscious than aristocracy in Waugh). The nearest he gets to alcoholism is the hobbits' usual greed, although his is a mild case. His misanthropic tendency (or its hobbit equivalent) we have witnessed. He is understandably often close to despair. His avarice is largely confined to the Ring, although crucially and unpleasantly so—much more unpleasantly than what we see of its effects on Bilbo. But above all he knows that souls, many souls, depend on his mission and he is horribly aware that he will not be morally strong enough to fulfil it. He is in fact personally courageous, as are most of these heroes fashioned by that group of Catholic novelists; but he doubts himself more deeply than they do. Yet he is ready to sacrifice himself in body, and perhaps in soul—quite an evident commodity in *The Lord of the Rings*—and to do so for all of Middle-Earth as well as for his better-known if not always better-loved Shire. Here he resembles Bernano's and Greene's priests. Sam, Merry and Pippin are closer to Mauriac's and Waugh's walking wounded: their sacrifices are for loved ones.

Where Frodo differs from them all is in the supreme moment. The lesson in all cases is very nearly the same: that heroes nowadays (and, Tolkien would insist, always) are human, sinful, and frequently deplorable and as such may be of more use to their readers than are edifying but morally unassailable exemplars. Greene's Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) may be closer to Frodo, but while he commits suicide and thus capitulates he is entirely—or almost entirely—altruistic. Frodo's several surrenders to the Ring have no such excuse. His pity in fact will save him while Scobie's destroys him. He becomes a Mr. Hyde when threatened with the loss of the Ring in the later stages, and—where Mauriac's misanthrope could homogolate his sentiments—sees Mr. Hyde in those who threaten him. (He literally does see Sam, of all people, in Mr. Hyde form, though only in extreme moments.) Tolkien, in fact, goes farther than his fellow-Catholics, and yet stands on even more familiar ground than they posit. In 1956 he wrote:

. . . within the mode of the story the "catastrophe" exemplifies (an aspect of) the familiar words: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

“Lead us not into temptation &c” is the harder and the less often considered petition. . . . there are abnormal situations in which one may be placed. “Sacrificial” situations, . . . in which the “good” of the world depends on the behaviour of an individual in circumstances which demand of him suffering and endurance far beyond the normal—even . . . demand a strength of body and mind which he does not possess: he is in a sense doomed to failure, doomed to fall to temptation or be broken against his “will”: that is against any choice he could make or would make unfettered, not under the duress.

(Here Tolkien evidently thinks of the Catholic tradition that an oath extracted under duress is not binding.

Frodo was in such a position: an apparently complete trap: . . .

The Quest . . . was bound to end in disaster as the story of humble Frodo’s development to the “noble”, his sanctification. Fail it could and did as far as Frodo considered alone was concerned. He “apostatized” . . . I did not foresee that before the tale was published we should enter a dark age in which the technique of torture and disruption of personality would rival that of Mordor and the Ring and present us with the practical problem of honest men of good will broken down into apostates and traitors.

But at this point the “salvation” of the world and Frodo’s own “salvation” is achieved by his previous *pity* and forgiveness of injury. At any point any prudent person would have told Frodo that Gollum would certainly betray him, and could rob him in the end. To “pity” him, to forebear to kill him, was a piece of folly, or a mystical belief in the ultimate value-in-itself of pity and generosity even if disastrous in the world of time. He did rob him and injure him in the end—but by a “grace”, that last betrayal was at a precise juncture when the final evil deed was the most beneficial thing any one cd. have done for Frodo!<sup>12</sup>

Tolkien as a scholar of ancient mythology could summon up very ancient tradition: and here he was drawing on Irish voyage folklore, where Judas is allowed one day free from hell during the year in recompense for a good action during his life. *The Lord of the Rings* was in the making long before 1984, but it prematurely answered George Orwell’s nightmare novel by Frodo’s moral capital. By contrast, Winston Smith and his Julia had professed themselves ready, if need be, “to throw sulphuric acid in a child’s face”,<sup>13</sup> with which commitment Smith is later taunted under torture.

*Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel*

Yet Frodo starts out with homicidal instincts towards Gollum:

“. . . What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!”

“Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.”

“I am sorry,” said Frodo. “But I am frightened; and I do not feel any pity for Gollum.”

“You have not seen him,” Gandalf broke in.

“No, and I don’t want to,” said Frodo. “I can’t understand you. Do you mean to say that you, and the Elves, have let him live on after all those horrible deeds? Now at any rate he is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death.”

“Deserves it! I dare say he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to yet, for good or ill, before the end, and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least. In any case we did not kill him: he is very old and very wretched. . . .”

But as soon as Frodo actually meets Gollum—which he does by preventing him strangling Samwise—he insists on preserving his life, with memories of Gandalf’s doctrines—and the thought “For now that I see him, I do pity him.”

Unlike Frodo, Bilbo had not really a decent option to kill Gollum when they met. After *The Lord of the Rings* had been written, *The Hobbit* was revised (1951) and the Bilbo-Gollum meeting altered. The 1937 text throws us back on an obvious if insufficiently stressed further area of Tolkien’s expertise in mythology: the Greek. As “On Fairy-Stories” reveals, Tolkien was fond of the story of Perseus and the Gorgon Medusa. To find the Gorgons Perseus has to interrogate their sisters the Graiae by stealing the one eye they have between them and thus blackmailing them for directions; and in some accounts he does it by means of a helmet of invisibility. Plato’s *Republic* tells of Gyges the Lydian who obtains a ring of invisibility from the hand of a corpse. And the story of Oedipus involves a riddle-contest with the Sphinx. Hence presumably Gollum’s

riddle-contest with Bilbo is a necessary if unexpected stage on the journey to Smaug's treasure. Gollum is ready to eat Bilbo if he fails to answer a Gollum riddle, but is perfectly ready to give him his ring of invisibility, not knowing Bilbo has accidentally found it; and he is positively distressed when he cannot make good. Instead, he shows Bilbo the way out. It was only when Tolkien was casting around for a sequel that he realised what a splendid character he had in Gollum—arguably the most memorable in *The Hobbit*—and in drafting versions of the new work around a second treasure-hunt (for either Bilbo or his son or nephew Bingo Bag-gins) Tolkien remembered the Ring, and made the quest one of destroying, not discovering treasure. The more he thought about it, the more tragic the individual characters had to become. The Wodehousian Bingo was displaced for the potentially much more serious Frodo. Gollum became obsessed with his lost Ring, and his Quest to recover it was projected to intersect continually if belatedly with that of Frodo to destroy it. Tolkien, wallowing in his scholarly fiction, explained the discrepancy between the first and subsequent editions of *The Hobbit* as evidence of the Ring's lethal properties so that Bilbo's normal honesty was subverted in initial explanations of its origin. (Mark Twain got over any loss of synchronisation between *Tom Sawyer* and its sequel by having Huck Finn, as the latter's narrator, blame Mr. Twain for some "stretchers" in the earlier book: so that to establish the preferable veracity of the second text, Twain invited his readers to trust his creation more than him, Tolkien did the reverse. Twain was an obvious inspiration for any writer of fiction about children.)<sup>15</sup>

And the Ring grew in horrific potentialities. It is in fact the true "Lord" of the other Rings, and justifies the book's title as Sauron on his own could hardly do. Its corrupting influence on Frodo is the most obvious; but it briefly bombards Sam with power madness, its effect on Bilbo is limited if ugly, and it has reduced Gollum to what seems a ghastly case of drug addiction. This was to take Tolkien's fellow-Catholic Acton a stage further. It seems the spiritual equivalent of nuclear radiation. Power, said Acton, tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely: Tolkien's Ring toxicology virtually reduces it to a medical analysis. The hobbits (including their distant cousin Gollum) have practically become guinea-pigs for Gandalf's vivisection. Saruman's attempts to crash in on the traffic, Wormtongue's temporary success in power rerouting from Rohan, Denethor's ultimate self-destruction in power duel are all natural developments. So are the Pride, Anger, Avarice, Greed, Envy, Sloth and

*Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel*

perhaps Lust it prompts. The Ring in fact becomes Antichrist. The Company of the Ring determine on its destruction and set out on that Quest on 25 December 3018, Christmas Day. The Ring in Gollum's hand falls into the Cracks of Mount Doom on 25 March 3019. In the Roman Catholic calendar the latter is the feast of the Annunciation, a memorial of the day when Christ "was conceived by the Holy Spirit." "*Et Verbum Incarnatus est.*" The hobbits, in their triangle of forces (despite Sam being the only one of them intent on the Ring's destruction at the end) bring about the uncreation of anticreation.<sup>16</sup>

Thereby *The Lord of the Rings* became the book of its time, all the more when Britain's battle for survival, and the potential self-sacrifice of its soldiers such as Tolkien's sons, were the backdrop to its composition. It had every relevance in showing the dangers of absolute power in any hands, no matter how benevolent the intentions with which they grasped it. Its very reliance on lost centuries of English language and literature made its place as the greatest British novel of the Second World War all the surer. But it was a Britain from start to finish aware of its culture's derivations from Europe. Tolkien's Catholicism in itself would ensure that. His own belief in free will did not blind him to the role of Power—the Ring—as its own determinant. If Frodo's danger and ultimate capitulation were bad, Gollum (after his revised rebirth) had fallen from the first, murdering his friend to get the Ring. Its literary antecedent was Catholic, but Jansenist: Racine's *Iphigénie*. Tolkien in "On Fairy Stories" had shown his fascination with the original legend once it achieved literary form. In the play *Iphigénie*, about to escape the Greeks' attempt to sacrifice her, is betrayed to them by the mysterious Eriphyle whom she has befriended, but whose love for Achilles drives her implacably to destroy the girl he prefers to her, Iphigénie; then at the last moment Eriphyle is proved to be the appropriate sacrificial victim and takes her own life. Eriphyle anticipates Phédre as the treacherous obsessionist whose love will trample on gratitude, obligations, honour, truth, life, so long as she gets her way: yet both of them are prisoners in a supernatural design. Eriphyle's salvation of her intended victim seems the clear fore-runner of Gollum. Yet Tolkien refuses the certainty of damnation so evident in Racine, writing to Michael Straight:

Into the ultimate judgement on Gollum I would not care to enquire. That would be to investigate "Goddes privatee", as the Medievals said. Gollum was pitiable, but he ended in persistent wickedness, and the fact that this worked good was no credit to

him. His marvellous courage and endurance, as great as Frodo[’s] and Sam’s or greater, being devoted to evil was portentous, but not honourable. I am afraid, whatever our beliefs, we have to face the fact that there are persons who yield to temptation, reject their chances of nobility or salvation, and appear to be “damnable”. Their “damnability” is *not* measurable in the terms of the macrocosm (where it may work good). But we who are all “in the same boat” must not usurp the Judge. . . . By temporizing, not fixing the still not wholly corrupt Sméagol-will towards good in the debate in the slag hole, he weakened himself for the final choice when dawning love of Frodo was too easily withered by the jealousy of Sam before Shelob’s lair. After that he was lost.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike Racine, therefore, Tolkien would not make damnation inevitable.

<sup>1</sup> In the making of this essay for the *Chesterton Review* my thanks as ever go to Rev. Professor Ian Boyd, CSB, for his encouragement and for the challenge of a single sentence (on Frodo); to Stratford and Léonie Caldecott for their kindness; to my daughters Leila and Sara for incisive discussions of Tolkien; to Professor Alastair Fowler for conversation and reminiscence. Tolkien scholarship is enormous, wandering into many fields including much crudely derivative rip-off. His children have made outstanding contributions, John and Priscilla with a charming *Tolkien Family Album* (1992), Christopher with invaluable posthumous publications of his father most recently including earlier drafts of *The Lord of the Rings* edited as *The History of Middle-Earth* vols. VI-IX (*The Return of the Shadow*, *The Treason of Isengard*, *The War of the Ring*, *Sauron Defeated* (1988-92)) though the entire series (1983-96) repays consultation. Humphrey Carpenter’s authorized biography *J.R.R. Tolkien* (1977), his edition of the *Letters* (1981), and, marginally, his *The Inklings* (1978) enriched me greatly. *The Tolkien Reader* (1966) is packed with valuable data, including poems, “On Fairy-Stories” (which I have checked cursorily against its first published version in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (1947)), and “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” (very important for Tolkien’s critique of chivalric pride as recipe for disaster: his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ed. Christopher Tolkien (1975) gives further fodder to it, instructive for the later Frodo). Robert Giddings and Elizabeth Holland, *The Shores of Middle-Earth* (1981) throw light and darkness on Tolkien’s use of modern adventure writers, too limited in scope, too lurid in interpretation (e.g. Buchan *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is clearly a neglected source for hobbits and rings but it hardly requires linkage to Mithras because Hannay meets persons called Bullivant and Turnbull)—perhaps we should be thankful that they ignored another obviously neglected source in G.K.C., *The Flying Inn* (whose environmentalism, celebration of rural deference (Humphrey Pump leading to Sam Gamgee) in qualified revolt, power-seekers as traitors (Ivywood leading to Saruman) all invite (sensible) analysis). Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien* (2000) and *The Road to Middle-Earth* (1982) are packed with useful information. I have used the 1937, 1951 and 1966 editions of *The Hobbit* and rejoice in Douglas A. Anderson’s *The Annotated Hobbit* (1988) which is greatly superior to works of that kind. The Collins Modern Classics *Hobbit* (1998) is wretchedly proof-read, causing Gollum to promise to obey Bilbo should Bilbo fail a



## *Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel*

riddle when he should promise to eat him in that event, but I cite that text as in general use (when no other edition is required). Similarly I use the one-volume *Lord of the Rings* (1995) also in paperback. Paul Kocher, *Master of Middle-Earth* (1972) is a good study, suffering like other contemporary criticisms of Tolkien from snobbery about children's fiction. Robley Evans, *J.R.R. Tolkien* (1972) is a fascinating if forgotten study linking his message to those of Hesse, Vonnegut and Brautigan in a "Writers for the '70s" series. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell, *J.R.R. Tolkien—Essays in Memoriam* (1979) has a brilliant if sometimes instructively wrongheaded essay "The Lord of the Rings as Romance" by Derek Brewer, the Oxford medievalist and folklorist. Like Tolkien, it assumes Cervantes's ostensible anti-romanticism eliminates him from the Romantic canon, but the obligations of Frodo/Sam to Quixote/Sancho answer that point all too clearly. Carpenter, *Tolkien* 31 quotes JRRT on his mother's martyrdom.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Boyd, *The Novels of G.K. Chesterton* (1975), 212 n. 60 quoting Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (1944), 412, quoting his *William Cobbett* (1925), 176-77: "He was as one who had found in a dark wood the bones of his mother, and suddenly knew she had been murdered." For my difficulty in relocating this quotation, see the two ballades printed elsewhere in this issue [delete if omitted].

<sup>3</sup> "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence." (*Lord of the Rings*, xviii (foreword to second edition, i.e. 1966). I would argue C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) and *Perelandra* (1943), both of which Tolkien liked, are parables, whereas his Narnia series are obvious allegories. Aslan is an allegory for Jesus Christ (with consequent problems in the later books as my daughter Sara pointed out in *Chesterton Review* "C.S. Lewis" issue). Gandalf certainly is not, notwithstanding his resurrection (others have resurrected, e.g. Lazarus). Tolkien disapproved of the Narnia chronicles.

<sup>4</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 823. Yet Tolkien's wonderful comic sense, while subordinate, suffuses the moment. He was critical of the witches and their prophecies in *Macbeth* having been bitterly disappointed as a boy when Birnam Wood did not come to Dunsinane save as camouflage. This he remedied in the Ents' Sack of Isengard. Similarly the Nazgûl's "No living man may hinder me!" is answered by Éowyn's being a woman (and Merry's being a hobbit) much more logically than Macduff's insistence that Caesarian birth is not birth. Brewer "Romance" feels too few of the Ring-companions die (260-261), arguing for deaths of Sam in a Holmes-Moriarty wrestle with Gollum falling off the cliff (discarded as a possibility very early by JRRT), Merry when attacking the Nazgûl (but, he is needed as witness to the dying Theoden King, with Éowyn apparently dead), and Gimli at the gates of Mordor (presumably in error for Pippin who thinks with fine *panache* that he is dying, Gimli (sixty pages later) proving to have rescued him).

<sup>5</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 835.

<sup>6</sup> Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 260.

<sup>7</sup> *Magnet*, XLIX no. 1,465 (14 March 1936) is a good instance where Bunter rescues a Brazil Indian from an alligator: "Scared out of his fat wits, hardly daring to look at the danger before him, he knew, all the same, that he could not turn his back and leave a man to that awful death. Whatever happened, he could not.

"He could not—and he did not! Somehow, Billy Bunter screwed his courage up to the sticking-point—and it stuck!" (Tolkien was not the only mocker of *Macbeth*.)

Tolkien was snobbishly abused by the poet Edwin Muir (who should have known better) and others for his drawing on Frank Richards [Charles Hamilton] and his *Magnet* stories of the Greyfriars schoolboys. (Muir, "A Boy's World", *Observer*,

27 November 1955.) He had drawn on them initially for *The Hobbit* where in name and nature Bilbo Baggins certainly recalls Billy Bunter when first we meet him, as indeed does Gollum, especially in lying. In *The Lord of the Rings* Merry owes something to the boisterous and good-natured Bob Cherry, Aragorn to the charismatic but prickly and arrogant Harry Wharton, Boromir to the courageous but self-willed, somewhat bullying and rebellious Bunder (aka Herbert Vernon-Smith), whose bosom but much quieter and more altruistic friend, the sailor-boy Tom Redwing, has qualities in Faramir. Sam has the honest but tactless—and at crucial moments, untimely—insistence of Johnny Bull on speaking frankly (in fact his frankness about Gollum cuts off Gollum’s momentary regret for his intended betrayal of Frodo to Shelob (Tolkien to Eileen Elgar, September 1963, *Letters* 330)). Needless to say, these are but one of the many origins. Sam owes much to Xanthus in Aristophanes’s *The Frogs*, to Sancho Panza, to Ariel, to Dr. Johnson, to Dr. Watson, to Jeeves and to the devoted squire perhaps seen finest in Mark Twain’s Clarence in *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court*. But there are also Chaucerian and other medieval models both for him and for the other hobbits. Merry and Pippin are Chaucerian squires and somewhat recall the squires in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The White Company*, more spirited than devoted.

<sup>8</sup> Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 341, 346.

<sup>9</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 60-61.

<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 965.

<sup>11</sup> I have been profoundly influenced by the master-work *Maria Cross* (1953) by Donat O’Donnell (i.e. Conor Cruise O’Brien) where these authors—though not always these works—are discussed with almost incredible artistry and insight. This journal should note his conclusion to his preface, quoting Chesterton’s introduction to *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

The function of criticism, if it has a legitimate function at all, can only be one function—that of dealing with the subconscious part of the author’s mind which only the critic can express and not with the conscious part of the author’s mind which the author himself can express. Either criticism is no good at all (a very defensible position) or else criticism means saying about an author the very things that would have made him jump out of his boots.

<sup>12</sup> Tolkien to Michael Straight, January/February 1956, *Letters* 233-34.

<sup>13</sup> Orwell, 1984 ([1949], 1954), 140, 217. 1984, like *The Lord of the Rings*, turns on Power, its implications and temptations. Orwell was drawing on Jack London, *The Iron Heel*. Did Tolkien know of it? Its gigantic chronological range has more in common with Tolkien than Orwell, but Saruman seems more subtle than London’s and Orwell’s Power-celebrants, while Sauron, like Professor Moriarty, works on the formidable absentee principle.

<sup>14</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 601. *Republic* 359d-362c (the whole discussion of the just and the unjust person’s use of the rings is very suggestive, but the stark contrast between Plato’s relish for mythology and Herodotus’s austere discussion of the same Gyges (*Histories* I. 8-12) strongly indicate that the strictures against imaginative literature elsewhere in the *Republic* was a joke above or below the intellects of subsequent scholars). Gyges was also known as Guggu which may relate to Gollum. He was the first ruler to be called “tyrant”, and the first to use coins, neither of which are likely to have endeared him to Tolkien.

The intertextualisation of the *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is at its most moving in dealing with Bilbo’s and Pippin’s respective last sights of the Battle of the

## *Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel*

Five Armies, and the fight at the gates of Mordor:

“The Eagles!” cried Bilbo once more, but at that moment a stone hurtling from above smote heavily on his helm, and he fell with a crash and knew no more. (*Hobbit* 343)

Then Pippin stabbed upwards, and the written blade of Westermarsh pierced through the hide and went deep into the vitals of the troll, and his black blood came gushing out. He toppled forward and came crashing down like a falling rock, burying those beneath him. Blackness and stench and crushing pain came upon Pippin, and his mind fell away into a great darkness.

“So it ends as I guessed it would,” his thought said, even as it fluttered away; and it laughed a little within him ere it fled, almost gay it seemed to be casting off at last all doubt and care and fear. And then even as it winged away into forgetfulness it heard voices, and they seemed to be crying in some forgotten world far above: “The Eagles are coming! The Eagles are coming!”

For one moment more Pippin’s thought hovered. “Bilbo!” it said. “But no! That came in his tale, long long ago. This is my tale, and it is ended now. Good-bye!” And his thought fled far away and his eyes saw no more. (*Lord of the Rings*, 874)

<sup>16</sup> The *Hobbit* calendar involves months of equal length (it is unclear to me how, but Tolkien’s use of December and March 25 evidently does not relate to that). *Lord of the Rings*, 1066-69. “Antichrist” was a concept under reflection by Tolkien and his fellow-Inklings. Charles Williams wrote a poem with that title.

<sup>17</sup> Tolkien to Straight, ? January/February 1956, *Letters* 234-35. For Tolkien on Iphigeneia in Aulis, see “On Fairy-Stories”, note B.

<sup>18</sup> Tolkien to Miss J. Burn, 26 July 1956, *Letters* 252.

<sup>19</sup> Tyler, *The New Tolkien Companion* ([1976] 1979), 536-38.

<sup>20</sup> Frodo opened his eyes and drew a breath. It was easier to breathe up here above the reeks that coiled and drifted down below. “Thank you, Sam,” he said in a cracked whisper. “How far is there to go?”

“I don’t know,” said Sam, “because I don’t know where we are going.”

It is the cry of the private soldier in all ages.



Rock formations near Cheddar Gorge, Somerset



# Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

C.S. Lewis

*This piece is taken from the book of essays Of This and Other Worlds, edited with a Preface by Walter Hooper (London: Collins 1982). In its American edition, the book was entitled On Stories—And Other Essays on Literature (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) was a literary scholar and critic who is best known for his religious and fantasy writings. Most of his academic career was spent at Oxford University, where he was a close personal friend of J.R.R. Tolkien. It has been said of Lewis that he was the spiritual heir to Chesterton, whom he greatly admired, and that the two writers together dominated the world of English Christian writing in the twentieth century.*

This book is like lightning from a clear sky; as sharply different, as unpredictable in our age as *Songs of Innocence* were in theirs. To say that in it heroic romance, gorgeous, eloquent, and unashamed, has suddenly returned at a period almost pathological in its anti-romanticism is inadequate. To us, who live in that odd period, the return—and the sheer relief of it—is doubtless the important thing. But in the history of Romance itself—a history which stretches back to the *Odyssey* and beyond—it makes not a return but an advance or revolution: the conquest of new territory. Probably no book yet written in the world is quite such a radical instance of what its author has elsewhere called “sub-creation”. The direct debt (there are of course subtler kinds of debt) which every author must owe to the actual universe is here deliberately reduced to the minimum. Not content to create his own story, he creates, with an almost insolent prodigality, the whole world in which it is to move, with its own theology, myths, geography, history, palaeography, languages, and orders of beings—a world “full of strange creatures beyond count”.

Such a book has of course its predestined readers, even now more numerous and more critical than is always realised. To them a reviewer

---

Ronald Tolkien in 1911, aged nineteen.

need say little, except that here are beauties which pierce like swords or burn like cold iron; here is a book that will break your heart. They will know that this is good news, good beyond hope. To complete their happiness one need only add that it promises to be gloriously long: this volume is only the first of three. But it is too great a book to rule only its natural subjects. Something must be said to “those without”, to the unconverted. At the very least, possible misunderstandings may be got out of the way.

First, we must clearly understand that though *The Fellowship* in one way continues its author’s fairy tale, *The Hobbit*, it is in no sense an overgrown “juvenile”. The truth is the other way round. *The Hobbit* was merely a fragment torn from the author’s huge myth and adapted for children; inevitably losing something by the adaptation. *The Fellowship* gives us at last the lineaments of that myth “in their true dimensions like themselves”. Misunderstanding on this point might easily be encouraged by the first chapter, in which the author (taking a risk) writes almost in the manner of the earliest and far lighter book. With some who will find the main body of the book deeply moving, this chapter may not be a favourite.

Yet there were good reasons for such an opening; still more for the Prologue (wholly admirable, this) which precedes it. It is essential that we should first be well steeped in the “homeliness”, the frivolity, even (in its best sense) the vulgarity of the creatures called Hobbits; these unambitious folk, peaceable yet almost anarchical, with faces “good-natured rather than beautiful” and “mouths apt to laughter and eating”, who treat smoking as an art and like books which tell them what they already know. They are not an allegory of the English, but they are perhaps a myth that only an Englishman (or, should we add, a Dutchman?) could have created. Almost the central theme of the book is the contrast between the Hobbits (or “the Shire”) and the appalling destiny to which some of them are called, the terrifying discovery that the humdrum happiness of the Shire, which they had taken for granted as something normal, is in reality a sort of local and temporary accident, that its existence depends on being protected by powers which Hobbits dare not imagine, that any Hobbit may find himself forced out of the Shire and caught up into that high conflict. More strangely still, the event of that conflict between strongest things may come to depend on him, who is almost the weakest.

What shows that we are reading myth, not allegory, is that there are no pointers to a specifically theological, or political, or psychological application. A myth points, for each reader, to the realm he lives in most.

## Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

It is a master key; use it on what door you like. And there are other themes in *The Fellowship* equally serious.

That is why no catchwords about "escapism" or "nostalgia" and no distrust of "private worlds" are in court. This is no Angria, no dreaming; it is sane and vigilant invention, revealing at point after point the integration of the author's mind. What is the use of calling "private" a world we can all walk into and test and in which we find such a balance? As for escapism, what we chiefly escape is the illusions of our ordinary life. We certainly do not escape anguish. Despite many a snug fireside and many an hour of good cheer to gratify the Hobbit in each of us, anguish is, for me, almost the prevailing note. But not, as in the literature most typical of our age, the anguish of abnormal or contorted souls: rather that anguish of those who were happy before a certain darkness came up and will be happy if they live to see it gone.

Nostalgia does indeed come in; not ours nor the author's, but that of the characters. It is closely connected with one of Professor Tolkien's greatest achievements. One would have supposed that diuturnity was the quality least likely to be found in an invented world. And one has, in fact, an uneasy feeling that the worlds of the *Furioso* or *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* weren't there at all before the curtain rose. But in the Tolkiensian world you can hardly put your foot down anywhere from Esgaroth to Forlindon or between Ered Mithrin and Khand, without stirring the dust of history. Our own world, except at certain rare moments, hardly seems so heavy with its past. This is one element in the anguish which the characters bear. But with the anguish there comes also a strange exaltation. They are at once stricken and upheld by the memory of vanished civilisations and lost splendour. They have outlived the second and third Ages; the wine of life was drawn long since. As we read we find ourselves sharing their burden; when we have finished, we return to our own life not relaxed but fortified.

But there is more in the book still. Every now and then, risen from the sources we can only conjecture and almost alien (one would think) to the author's habitual imagination, figures meet us so brimming with life (not human life) that they make our sort of anguish and our sort of exaltation seem unimportant. Such is Tom Bombadil, such the unforgettable Ents. This is surely the utmost reach of invention, when an author produces what seems to be not even his own, much less anyone else's. Is mythopoeia, after all, not the most, but the least, subjective of activi-

ties? . . . When I reviewed the first volume of this work I hardly dared to hope it would have the success which I was sure it deserved. Happily I am proved wrong. There is, however, one piece of false criticism which had better be answered; the complaint that the characters are all either black or white. Since the climax of Volume I was mainly concerned with the struggle between good and evil in the mind of Boromir, it is not easy to see how anyone could have said this. I will hazard a guess. "How shall a man judge what to do in such times?" asks someone in Volume II. "As he has ever judged," comes the reply. "Good and ill have not changed . . . nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men."

This is the basis of the whole Tolkienian world. I think some readers, seeing (and disliking) this rigid demarcation between black and white people. Looking at the squares, they assume (in defiance of the facts) that all the pieces must be making bishops' moves which confine them to one colour. But even such readers will hardly brazen it out through the two last volumes. Motives, even in the right side, are mixed. Those who are now traitors usually began with comparatively innocent intentions. Heroic Rohan and imperial Gondor are partly diseased. Even the wretched Smeagol, till quite late in the story, has good impulses; and (by a tragic paradox) what finally pushes him over the brink is an unpremeditated speech by the most selfless character of all. . . .

Of picking out great moments (such as the cock-crow at the Siege of Gondor) there would be no end; I will mention two general (and totally different excellences. One, surprisingly, is realism. This war has the very quality of the war my generation knew. It is all here: the endless, unintelligible movement, the sinister quiet of the front when "everything is now ready", the flying civilians, the lively, vivid friendships, the background of something like despair and the merry foreground, and such heaven-sent windfalls as a *cache* of choice tobacco "salvaged" from a ruin. The author has told us elsewhere that his taste for fairy tale was awakened into maturity by active service; that, no doubt, is why we can say of his war scenes (quoting Gimli the Dwarf), "There is good rock here. This country has tough bones."

When Professor Tolkien began there was probably no nuclear fission and the contemporary incarnation of Mordor was a good deal nearer our shores. But the text itself teaches us that Sauron is eternal; the war of the Ring is only one of a thousand wars against him. Every time we shall be



## *Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*

wise to fear his ultimate victory, after which there will be “no more songs”. Again and again we shall have good evidence that “the wind is setting East, and the withering of all woods may be drawing near”. Every time we win we shall know that our victory is impermanent. If we insist on asking for the moral of the story, that is its moral: a recall from facile optimism and wailing pessimism alike, to that hard, yet not quite desperate, insight into Man’s unchanging predicament by which heroic ages have lived. It is here that the Norse affinity is strongest; hammer-strokes, but with compassion.

“But why,” (some ask) “why, if you have a serious comment to make on the real life of men, must you do it by talking about a phantasmagoric never-never land of your own?” Because, I take it, one of the main things the author wants to say is that the real life of men is of that mythical and heroic quality. One can see the principle at work in his characterisation. Much that in a realistic work would be done by “character delineation” is here done simply by making the character an elf, a dwarf, or a hobbit. The imagined beings have their insides on the outside; they are visible souls. And Man as a whole, Man pitted against the universe, have we seen him at all till we see that he is like a hero in a fairy tale? In the book Eomer rashly contrasts “the green earth” with “legends”. Aragorn replies that the green earth itself is “a mighty matter of legend”.

The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by “the veil of familiarity”. The child enjoys his cold meat (otherwise dull to him, by pretending it is buffalo, just killed with his own bow and arrow. And the child is wise. The real meat comes back to him more savoury for having been dipped in a story; you might say that only then is it the real meat. If you are tired of the real landscape, look at it in a mirror. By putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more themselves. This book applies the treatment not only to bread or apple but to good and evil, to our endless perils, our anguish, and our joys. By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly. I do not think he could have done it in any other way.





# Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at *Mythopoeia*

Clive Tolley

CLIVE TOLLEY *lives in Chester, England, where he works as a freelance copy-editor. He holds two Oxford degrees: an M.A. in classics and Old English, and a Doctor of Philosophy in Old Norse and Finnish mythology. He has also served as Warden of The Kilns (C.S. Lewis's home).*

Tolkien presents his personal convictions on the role of man the artist as the image of God the creator nowhere more powerfully or succinctly as in his poem *Mythopoeia*. At the same time it is impossible to ignore the fact that *Mythopoeia* has other models behind it than merely the conversation with C. S. Lewis on which it was based and which was influential in the latter's adoption of Christianity in 1931 (Carpenter 45). I intend to look at a few of these models here.

One of the first things to strike a reader of *Mythopoeia* is that it is written in heroic couplets—not a style that Tolkien particularly cultivated. The title of my paper will already have indicated who I think this unusual feature points to—Alexander Pope. Two of Pope's poems seem to me to be of relevance here. The *Essay on Man* has exerted a general thematic influence on *Mythopoeia*, whilst parts of the *Essay on Criticism* have had a far more specific effect.

To begin with the *Essay on Criticism*. The main parallel here is between three short sections of Pope's poem and the core section of *Mythopoeia* which Tolkien quoted later in *On Fairy Stories*. The passage of *Mythopoeia* in question is as follows:

The heart of man is not compound of lies,  
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,  
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,

---

Addison's Walk in the grounds of Magdalen College. This was the site of a long conversation between Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Hugo Dyson, after which C.S. Lewis became converted to Christianity.

man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.  
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,  
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,  
his world-dominion by creative act:  
not his to worship the great Artefact,  
man, sub-creator, the refracted light  
through whom is splintered from a single White  
to many hues, and endlessly combined  
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.  
Though all the crannies of the world we filled  
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build  
gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
and sow the seeds of dragons, 'twas our right  
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.  
We make still by the law in which we're made. (53-70)

The passages from the *Essay on Criticism* are as follows:

Most have the seeds of judgment in their mind:  
Nature affords at least a glimmering light;  
The lines, though touched but faintly, are drawn right.  
But as the slightest sketch, if justly traced,  
Is by ill colouring but the more disgraced,  
So by false learning is good sense defaced. (I: 20-5)

First follow Nature, and your judgment frame  
By her just standard, which is still the same:  
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,  
One clear, unchanged, and universal light,  
Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,  
At once the source, and end, and test of Art. (I: 68-73)

Those Rules of old discovered, not devised,  
Are Nature still, but Nature methodized;  
Nature, like Liberty, is but restrained  
By the same Laws which first herself ordained. (I: 88-91)

Pope is talking here about the critical faculty, Tolkien about the more essential quality of man as subcreator, but the resemblance should be clear. Both emphasise that while man's mind or nature is faulty, it still possesses the original correctness of vision as given by God or Nature.

There are a number of verbal echoes between the passages, some of which I shall mention in the course of the argument, but the most prominent of which is the use by Tolkien of *dis-graced* in an unusual and theologically redolent sense, beside Pope's use of the word in an unexpected though not theologically significant sense—the whole emphasis of the

Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at *Mythopoeia*

passage from Tolkien is upon the theologically pivotal position of man in the world, whereas, as usual, Pope is graced with a more secular aura.

Tolkien also develops some of Pope's images. Pope's use of the image of light in the first passage is taken up again in the second, in which Nature is extolled: this parallels Tolkien's central passage in which the glory of man is spelled out. Tolkien counters Pope's apparent worship of Nature specifically, in fact, in the line "not his to worship the great Artefact", replacing Pope's focus with one on man as subcreator. Pope's Nature is "one clear, unchanged, and universal light" (parallel to Tolkien's God, the "single White"): over against this we have Tolkien's man "the refracted light" who is not "wholly changed", who, as subcreator, is the medium of endless variety in Nature. Pope's "seeds of judgment" are echoed in Tolkien's very different "seeds of dragons" (in which, incidentally, Tolkien outdoes Pope at his own game of alluding to the classics, for the reference is clearly to the dragons' teeth sown by Cadmus—itsself a creative act which resulted in the peopling of Thebes). Typically the dragons and elves and goblins of this section of Tolkien's poem have no further counterpart in Pope, unlike all the other parts of the quoted passage of *Mythopoeia*. Implicit in the change from "seeds of judgment" to "seeds of dragons" is a choice on Tolkien's part to value creativity over criticism. The use of a poem on criticism as a model for one on creativity itself reflects the same thing.

The last section of the *Essay on Criticism* quoted implies a Platonic concept of discoverable ideas behind nature: this is not perhaps a particularly strong theme in Pope, but it is in *Mythopoeia*, as I shall discuss presently. The statement that Nature follows her own laws is echoed in Tolkien's point that man follows the law of his nature when he creates. Some of Tolkien's images come from elsewhere—thus the moving picture of man as a lord disgraced and in rags, yet not dispossessed of his creative powers, is suggestive of the the ragged King Orfeo in the wilderness, bereft of all but his power to charm nature through his music, in the Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo* (a favourite of Tolkien's which he even translated and had published). Nonetheless, the passage basically follows Pope, it echoes him verbally, and it makes use of his images, developing them into a powerful and original poetic statement on man's role as subcreator in the image of the heavenly creator.

Let us turn now to the *Essay on Man*. It is not to be expected that anything but a small part of this long poem will be reflected in the 149

lines of *Mythopoeia*: nonetheless some of the main themes, if not their treatments, are common to both. We do not on the whole find the sort of detailed correspondence noted in connection with the *Essay on Criticism*, however.

The most famous passage of the *Essay on Man* is the depiction at the beginning of Epistle II of man “placed on this isthmus of a middle state, a Being darkly wise, and rudely great . . . in doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast”. The opening lines of the section are “Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; the proper study of Mankind is Man”. This is a sentiment Tolkien certainly disagreed strongly with, and it could be said that *Mythopoeia* is his rejoinder to it. Since man is in the image of God, it is proper for him to study everything. But Tolkien goes further than this: his disagreement with Pope is fundamentally an epistemological one. Pope does not really question the type of knowledge to be pursued: “Go, wondrous creature! mount where Science guides”, he advises (II: 19); and although he comments soon after this on how paltry our knowledge is—“superior beings” after all look upon Newton as we look upon a show ape (II: 31-4 )—this does not constitute a criticism of the knowledge itself. The *Essay on Man* is permeated by the tension springing from the maxim “Know thyself”: man cannot know anything but himself, but until he does, he cannot see his position in the hierarchy of being, so cannot know himself. For Tolkien, man is not essentially a scientific beast, but a creative one: we might note in passing that one of the recurring images of the *Essay on Man* is the maze, a puzzle to be solved by investigation, whereas *Mythopoeia* has the image of the loom, on which tapestries with fine and varied pictures are made.

Tolkien thus rejects the very basis of Pope’s definition of man and the tensions that go with it, and he does so explicitly: “I will not walk with your progressive apes, erect and sapient. Before them gapes the dark abyss to which their progress tends”, he writes, cleverly implying that evolutionists are no better than apes, from which they say we developed—an image whose similarity to Pope’s depiction of Newton is perhaps not fortuitous, but than which it is certainly more negative. Tolkien said in *On Fairy Stories* that his theories on Faery were not hostile to scientific investigation (51), but he clearly felt that the pursuit of knowledge outside a realisation of the true nature of man was not merely limited but leads to damnation. That is the central antithesis of *Mythopoeia*. Parallels are easy enough to find elsewhere in Tolkien’s works: we have only to

Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at *Mythopoeia*

think of Saruman, splitting white to find out what it is and thereby leaving the path of wisdom, as Gandalf says (*Lord of the Rings*, bk II, ch 2), or Tompkins in *Leaf by Niggle* who failed to see anything in a flower but its use as a sexual organ (94). Tolkien is striving to offer an alternative to the "regimented, cold, Inane" that this type of thinking perceives the world to be. One of the main themes of the *Essay on Man* is the conflict between Reason and Passion, in which Reason, by which is meant rather the whole faculty of perceiving the truth than mere ability at ratiocination, is more the loser. Tolkien does not enter into this conflict in *Mythopoeia*—in fact the line "the heart of man is not compound of lies" may be taken as indicating a close link if not actual unity between passion and reason, and also a general approbation of them: man is marred, but it is misleading to see this as subsisting in any one aspect of his nature. However, the conflict between art and science in *Mythopoeia* perhaps acts as a counterpart to this struggle between passion and reason: a faulty reason leads to the acceptance of materialism as the only true philosophy, and this leads to man's damnation, to the abyss.

Another major difference between the *Essay on Man* and *Mythopoeia* is in the place of Christianity. Pope's is ostensibly a rationalist's poem—it lacks any discussion of the Fall, the Incarnation, or the Redemption, and this despite the fact that Pope accepts that something has gone wrong with man. *Mythopoeia* on the other hand is explicitly theist, and implicitly Christian: God is declared to be Creator of all, man derives his creative powers from him, the reality of evil is stated, those with faith in heaven are called blessed. The picture of the men of Noah's race building little arks to weather the storm on the way to the hoped-for harbour relies for much of its strength on the recognition that Noah's ark is an ecclesiastical symbol for the Church, a vessel of security in a storm-tossed world that finally will lead its passengers to safe haven. The last section of the poem presents a picture of man the artist in paradise. Pope's poem by contrast is imbued with a secular spirit: much of its strength derives from its masterly depiction of the uncertainty man feels about himself in the world. The world in itself, with its hierarchical structure, is fixed, as is man's position in it: the tension comes from man's inability to perceive and accept that position.

Tolkien is far less fatalistic: man does know at least sufficient about his position in the world, but is not bound to it; hence the tension arises from his willingness or otherwise to accept his role as subcreator. Pope's

philosophy cannot encompass man's free will, and is really antithetical to Christianity: thus he can write "Respecting Man, whatever wrong we call, may, must be right, as relative to all" (I: 51-2) for otherwise the necessary hierarchy of being would be broken. This all leads to his extraordinary conclusion that "Whatever is, is Right" (I: 294). Tolkien echoes this, and refutes it, when he concludes section VI of his poem with the words "and of Evil this alone is dreadly certain, Evil is" (79-80); he echoes it again, more positively, at the end of the poem: "then looking on the Blessed Land 'twill see that all is as it is, and yet made free" (135-6)—a thoroughly traditional Christian idea, very different from Pope's. There is an implicit criticism of Pope in the irony that while he called for a return to classical models of literature, it is Tolkien who offers a far more dynamic return to such a model. Pope leaves the impression of being interested in the classical models in merely a formal way, for his philosophy was modern. Tolkien on the other hand presents us with a thoroughly Platonic—albeit Christianised—view of man revealing the already existent truth about the world through his art, "digging the foreknown from experience" (39). I shall pursue this further later on.

Why should Tolkien, who supposedly scorned almost all post-medieval literature, have paid such attention to Alexander Pope? Some of the reasons are probably rather superficial: thus Tolkien, deciding to dedicate a poem on the nature of man to a friend, would perhaps think of Pope's *Essay on Man* with its similar theme and similar dedication, especially when that friend was C. S. Lewis, who would enjoy the allusions and the style, which borders on pastiche—the writing of which was one of Lewis's, but scarcely of Tolkien's, pastimes. However, I think the main reason was that Pope was a Catholic, and a poet, yet failed to offer a Catholic view of man the maker. Tolkien felt he had to step into the breach. This would be consistent with his practice on many other occasions: he was inspired time and again by works which were flawed, and hence offered scope for imaginative perfection. To pick just one well-known example: the coming of the ents to the Battle of Helm's Deep was inspired by Shakespeare's insipid use of Birnam Wood in *Macbeth*. I suggest he is doing the same with Pope: his use of the *Essay on Criticism* and the *Essay on Man* in writing *Mythopoeia* shows both respect to Pope for having chosen the subject matter, and disdain for his treatment of it.

That being so, it is natural to look elsewhere for closer parallels to *Mythopoeia* in terms of content. I shall consider two of these here. One of



Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at *Mythopoeia*

the earliest pieces of literary theory in English is Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie*. This is a beautifully written work, composed in the hey-day of English prose before the rise of the Royal Academy and its condemnation, in the true fashion of Tompkins of *Leaf by Niggle*, of all non-scientific language. Tolkien must surely have enjoyed reading Sidney for his style, but it is chiefly in terms of content that similarities are to be noted.

Sidney is keen to establish the authority of imagination: the poet depicts nature, but is not subject to it, and can invent his own nature:

There is *no Arte* delivered to mankinde, that hath not *the workes of Nature for his principall object*, without which they could not consist . . . : *onely the Poet, disdayning to be tied to any such subjection*, lifted up with the vigor of his *owne invention*, dooth *growe in effect, another nature*, in making things either better then Nature bringeth forth, or quite a *newe formes* such as never were in Nature . . . : so as hee goeth hand in hand with Nature, not inclosed within the *narrow warrant* of her guiftes, but freely ranging onely within the *Zodiack of his owne wit*. (14)

Man is a maker as being in the image of God the maker—it is man's creativity that above all marks him out as the image of God:

Neyther let it be deemed too sawcie a comparison to ballance the highest poynt of mans wit with the efficacie of Nature: but rather give *right honor to the heavenly Maker of that maker*: who having made man to his owne likenes, set him beyond and over all the workes of that *second nature*, which in nothing hee sheweth so much as in Poetrie: when with the force of a *divine breath*, he bringeth things forth far surpassing her dooings, with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam: sith our *erected wit*, maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our *infected will*, keepeth us from reaching unto it. (15-16)

Notable in the above passage is the centrality of the Fall and its effect on our imaginative powers, an emphasis evident in *Mythopoeia* but not in the *Essay on Man*.

An important theme of Sidney's work is his defence of poetry against Plato's condemnation of it. He argues that poets cannot be called liars, because people do not expect factual truth from them, whereas they do expect it from, for example, historians, and in not being given it are thereby the more deceived:

And therefore, as in Historie, looking for trueth, they goe away full fraught with falsehood: so in Poesie, looking for fiction, they

shall use the narration, but as an imaginative groundplot of a profitable invention. (41)

The first two quotations from the *Apologie for Poetrie* are closely paralleled in *Mythopoeia*, especially in the whole of section V, quoted above in the discussion of the *Essay on Criticism*: the theme pursued by both Sidney and Tolkien is man's "world dominion by creative act", as Tolkien calls it. Like Sidney, Tolkien stresses that man is above nature, does not worship it. Tolkien's talk of man's right to fill the world with elves and dragons echoes Sidney's point that by imagination man can create new worlds. Tolkien does not say specifically that man's will is corrupt, simply that he is "dis-graced", i.e. deprived of grace, which is both less categorical and more explanatory, and imaginative, than the traditional division between *reason and will* expounded by Sidney. However, the general point is the same, that man retains his creative *power* despite the Fall, and his imaginative capacity is an essential feature of his make up, manifesting more clearly than anything else his divine nature, and is unaffected by the Fall. Sidney, like Tolkien, stresses man's godlikeness: whereas for Pope man is "the glory, jest, and riddle of the world" (*Essay on Man* II: 18) for Sidney and Tolkien he is just its glory.

In his Platonism Tolkien exceeds Sidney, and in fact attempts a full-scale refutation of Plato's condemnation of poets by means of Plato's own doctrines. Far from telling lies, *they reveal the true ideas*, the true way things are, by sharing in that one life which indwells in all nature including man, Platonically "digging the foreknown from experience". "The heart of man is not compound of lies", declares Tolkien (53), directly challenging Plato, for man's wisdom is drawn from God, and is not in itself false by virtue of man's fallibility. The truths revealed are of course not necessarily about the universe as a physical entity: it is in fact the materialists who are the liars—thus Tolkien throws the popular concept of "scientific truth" on its head—since they bid us ignore the unpleasant truths of existence (they "have forgot the Night" (93), and offer us escapist pleasures ("lotus isles of economic bliss" (95): hope of salvation lies in following the truths perceived by our God-given imagination, not those circumscribed partial truths revealed by the limited and hence misleading philosophy of materialism.

This of course takes us beyond Plato—but still, I think, in a direction consistent with Plato's ideas. There is a reason for Tolkien to stress all this: if we look at the dedication of *Mythopoeia*, it is "to one who said that

Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at *Mythopoeia*

myths were lies and therefore worthless", to a C. S. Lewis whom we see from his biography to have been at this time a staunch defender of the conventionalities of materialism. The points Tolkien makes go beyond the ambit of Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie* too, but they have a close analogue and indeed source elsewhere, which I now pass on to.

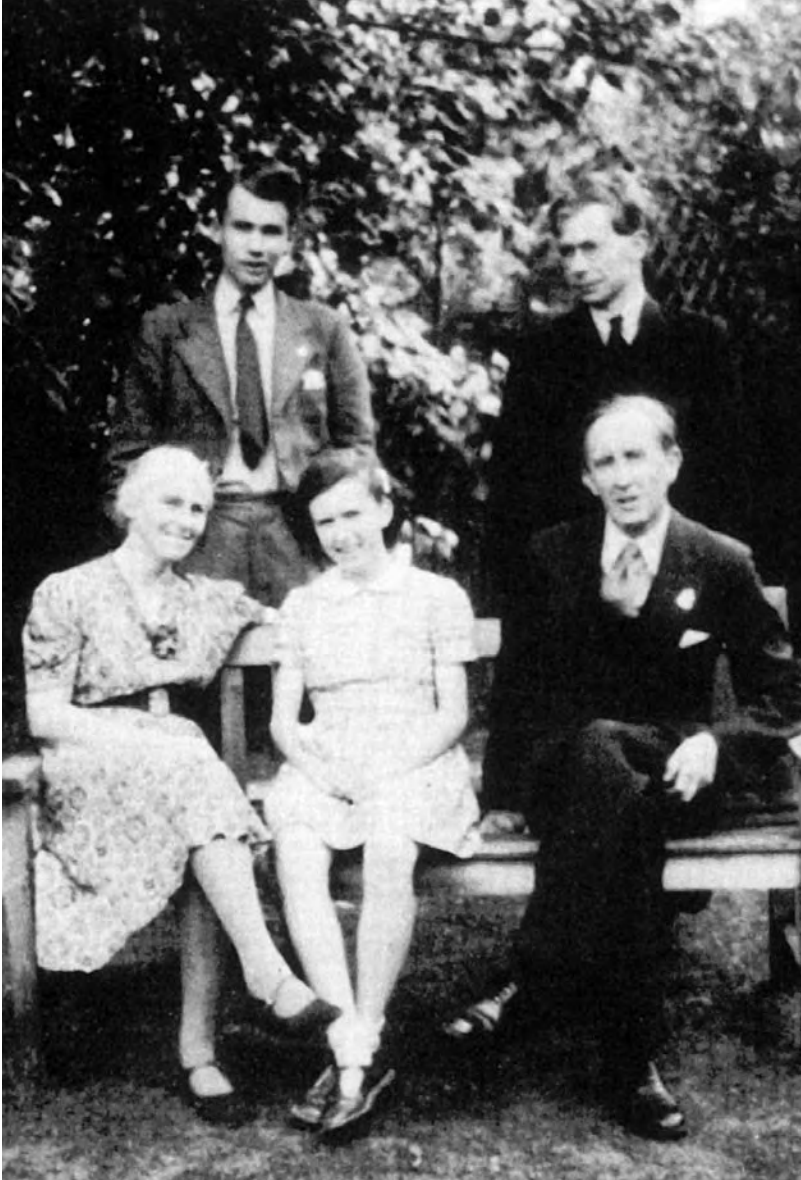
Tolkien was deeply impressed by his friend Owen Barfield's work *Poetic Diction* when it was published in 1928 (Carpenter 42). Looking at how closely *Mythopoeia* mirrors *Poetic Diction* one can see just how influential Barfield's work was. It would not be stretching things too far to say that *Mythopoeia* is a poetic version of the main arguments of *Poetic Diction*. Looking back, with the knowledge of *Lord of the Rings* and all his other works, there is nothing surprising in Tolkien finding Barfield's ideas so much to his liking: all that is surprising is the apparent novelty they represented to him, for with his close scrutiny of language one would have expected him to have anticipated Barfield in many of his ideas. But I mention this merely as a point of curiosity.

It is impossible to summarise adequately here the sometimes involved arguments of *Poetic Diction*: I shall confine myself just to some of the central points as they affect Tolkien. Barfield believes that mankind has undergone a development—one might say evolution—of consciousness from one in which certain things are perceived as one whole to one in which they are conceived as separate or at most related entities, e.g. the original unitary concept of breath-windspirit becomes split into the three or more concepts we recognise. This development is directly reflected in the words used to denote these percepts:

The language of primitive men reports them [relations between things] as direct perceptual experience. The speaker has observed a unity, and is not therefore himself conscious of *relation*. *But we, in the development of consciousness, have lost the power to see this as one*. Our sophistication, like Odin's, has cost us an eye; and now it is the language of poets, in so far as they create true metaphors, which must restore this unity conceptually, after it has been lost from perception. (86)

The unities perceived are not merely created by the poet, however: *he is more of a discoverer than an inventor*. Thus he serves to reveal the truth about the nature of things:

Myths, which represent the earliest meanings, were not the arbitrary creations of "poets", but the natural expression of man's being and consciousness at the time. These primary "meanings"



Tolkien Family in 1942.  
*Left to right (standing):* Christopher, John. *(Sitting):* Edith, Priscilla, J.R.R.

Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at *Mythopoeia*

were given, as it were, by Nature, but the very condition of their being given was that they could not at the same time be apprehended in full consciousness; *they could not be known, but only experienced, or lived*. At this time, therefore, individuals cannot be said to have been responsible for the production of poetic values. . . . But with the development of consciousness, as this "given" poetic meaning decreases more and more, the individual poet gradually steps into his own. In place of the simple, given *meaning*, we find the *metaphor*—a real creation of the individual—though, in so far as it is true, it is only recreating, registering as *thought*, one of those eternal facts which may already have been experienced in perception. (102)

Thus the poet reveals truth; Barfield specifies this a little further:

"Meaning" itself can never be conveyed from one person to another; words are not bottles; every individual must *intuit* meaning for himself, and the function of the poetic is to mediate such intuition by suitable *suggestion*. (133)

It would be interesting to trace the philosophical heritage and treatment of these ideas back through Coleridge to Schelling (whose understanding of poetry as a mediator of truth seems particularly close to Barfield's; Barfield does not mention him in *Poetic Diction*) and to Kant and Locke (whom Barfield deals with and attacks in *Poetic Diction*) and beyond. Since there is no time for such a demanding undertaking here, suffice it to say that it is difficult to accommodate Barfield's ideas in much of the western philosophical tradition, for they require us to accept that truth may be arrived at by *other means than mere reasoning*, which has been the basic tenet of that philosophical tradition, in particular of the positivism which gave rise to modern science and *materialism*. Barfield notes that "western philosophy, from Aristotle onwards, *is itself a kind of offspring of Logic*". Thus we are left only with Plato and the pre-Socratics. Again, time prevents a consideration of the latter, highly interesting though it would be, in particular with respect to Heraclitus, who was constantly in search of *hidden unities of meaning behind apparently disparate words*. As for Plato, Barfield says: 'The old, instinctive consciousness of single meanings, which comes down to us as the Greek myths, is already fighting for its life by Plato's time as the doctrine of Platonic Ideas' (95).

Thus Plato himself only just gains the fold for Barfield: still, the quotation is sufficient to show that Barfield recognised an underlying

similarity of his ideas to Plato's. Barfield makes an important point about the nature of words:

The full meanings of words are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames—*ever-flickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them*. To the Locke-Müller-France way of thinking, on the contrary, they appear as solid chunks with definite boundaries and limits, to which other chunks may be added as occasion arises. (75)

The way of thinking Barfield rejects is reflected at the very opening of *Mythopoeia*:

You look at trees and label them just so,  
(for trees are “trees”, and growing is “to grow”)

then in lines 45-9 we find Tolkien echoing Barfield almost verbally:

He sees no stars who does not see them first  
of living silver made that sudden burst  
to flame like flowers beneath an ancient song,  
whose very *echo after-music* long  
has since pursued.

For Barfield, things in the world do not exist as *entities* until we perceive the *relationships* that enable us to define one thing as distinct from another: “The mind can never even perceive an object, as an object, till the imagination has been at work combining the *disjecta membra* of unrelated percepts into that experienced unity which the word “object” denotes” (27).

These ideas are expressed in section III of *Mythopoeia*:

Yet trees are not “trees”, until so named and seen—  
and never were so named, till those had been  
who speech's involuted breath unfurled. (29-31)

On the rational principle, that emerges with the evolution of consciousness, Barfield writes:

“In Platonic terms, we should say that the rational principle can increase *understanding*, and it can increase *true opinion*, but it can never increase knowledge” (144).

Hence it follows that

“The scientist, if he has ‘discovered’ anything, must also have discovered it by the right interaction of the *rational and poetic principles*. Really, there is no distinction between Poetry and Science, as kinds of knowing, at all” (138).

Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at *Mythopoeia*

To treat them as distinct in fact leads straight to the idea of art as meaningless symbolisation of personal emotion (140). Unfortunately, this is just what has happened:

Science deals with the world which it perceives but, seeking more and more to penetrate the veil of naïve perception, progresses only towards the goal of nothing, because it still does not accept in practice (whatever it may admit theoretically) that the mind first creates what it perceives as objects, including the instruments which Science uses for that penetration. It insists on dealing with "data", but there shall no data be given, save the bare percept. The rest is imagination. Only by imagination therefore can the world be known. (28)

The linguistic implications of scientific rationalism are pointed out quite starkly by Barfield:

"He could only evolve a language, whose propositions would *really* obey the laws of thought, by eliminating meaning altogether. But he compromises before this zero point is reached." (131)

On the other hand, whether the scientist likes it or not, it follows that

a great deal—perhaps most—of the technical vocabulary of philosophy and science can be shown to be not merely figurative, but actually *metaphorical*. (135)

It will already be clear from my discussion earlier that much of what Barfield has to say on science is reflected in *Mythopoeia*. Thus the point that science is reliant on the imagination is evident in the lines quoted earlier, that "he sees no stars who does not see them first of living silver made"; Barfield's passage on science progressing to a goal of nothingness is particularly close to *Mythopoeia* 119-21 "I will not walk with your progressive apes, erect and sapient. Before them gapes the dark abyss to which their progress tends", although Barfield did not write the passage until 1951, for the second edition of *Poetic Diction*. The fruitlessness of scientific language is firmly rejected in the same section of the poem:

I will not tread your dusty path and flat,  
denoting this and that by this and that,  
your world immutable wherein no part  
the little maker has with maker's art. (125-8)

Tolkien explicitly rejects evolution in the popular Darwinian sense in *Mythopoeia*. Nonetheless the poem reflects both a traditional Christian movement from creation to a (new) heaven, and also Barfield's ideas of

evolution of consciousness. Thus we begin with a picture of the universe as “cold, Inane” (7), like the world before the spirit of God moved across the waters, then “at bidding of a Will” (9) creation takes place. We move through the Fall (55-9) and the Shadow of Evil (80-6) that follows it, the Ark on a storm-tossed sea (87-90) (representing, I take it, also the Church), modern materialism and “scientism” (91-130) in the midst of which takes place the narrator’s own creative efforts (107-18), and on to Paradise at the end (131-49). This series does not however represent a chronological course of events: it is more a tracing of the development away from the accepted notion of the universe and the words that denote it as dead to the creative fulfilment of Paradise, when “*poets shall have flames upon their heads*”. The chronological sequence is used as a framework or simile of this, just as the Church uses the events of the Bible as an image of the course of salvation (notably in the baptismal readings incorporated into some of the Easter services).

There is also an evolution in the creative faculty through the poem, which is hinted at in line 41 “great powers they slowly brought out of themselves”. Thus first trees are named, then, more demandingly, the stars and firmament, then the elves and goblins and dragons, then legends “of things not found within recorded time”; we next hear of those on a wandering quest who have passed beyond the fabled West, and finally in Paradise the poet can “renew from mirrored truth the likeness of the True”.

It is ironic that the poet emerges as the poetic force of language declines—for it is his job to restore the once perceived unities that the rational principle has divided up. The white light must be splintered to provide colour and variety, as Tolkien says in *Mythopoeia*: but *this White is also the Word who has to be split into words* (as Flieger points out in her book *Splintered Light*): for Tolkien uses the image of man refracting the light of God into myriad forms as a symbol for what he does as a poet with words. Yet the White may be split for the wrong reasons—as with Saruman. Both Barfield and Tolkien are concerned that the right balance should be maintained between the poetic and rational principles, otherwise truth is lost. The parallels between the images of light and language, and creativity and Fall, have been well traced through Tolkien’s works by Flieger, who also illustrates how integral to an understanding of Tolkien’s fiction an awareness of his theories on subcreation is. Since I do not have time to go into more than *Mythopoeia* at present, I recommend Flieger’s book for a wider perspective on this.



Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at *Mythopoeia*

Before leaving Barfield, I would like to point out what seems to me the greatest problem with his, and hence Tolkien's, argument. How do we know, when confronted by a new and perhaps striking metaphor, that a true unitary concept is being presented to us, rather than just a clever juxtaposition of concepts by the poet? Barfield distinguishes true and false metaphors in this sense, but simply says they are difficult to tell apart. It is presumably to be inferred that we are all possessed of an inherent capacity to recognise the true unitary concepts, but are unable to see them until a poet points them out. Barfield has some interesting comments, which do not however solve this question: explaining that *false metaphors are based on a synthesis of ideas* rather than on an *immediate cognition* of reality, he writes:

The distinction between true and false metaphor corresponds to the distinction between Myth and Allegory, allegory being a more or less conscious hypostatization of ideas, followed by a synthesis of them, and myth the true child of Meaning, begotten on imagination. (201)

This is tantalizing, and needs pursuing.

Tolkien does not maintain Barfield's distinction between types of metaphor, at least explicitly. The result is that it is never very clear what sort of knowledge the poet in fact reveals. *On Fairy Stories* does not move much further towards clarity. Further questions arise: how far, for example, is the poet really like God, creating new worlds of his own (as Sidney says), or is he merely a discoverer, a "wandering explorer" as Tolkien calls himself in the introduction to *On Fairy Stories* (9)? Does this diminish the poet's role? If so, is it not ironic that Tolkien calls for greater respect for the poet whilst at the same time lessening his traditional role? These are difficult problems: some of them were confronted, inconclusively, by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, so Tolkien may perhaps be forgiven. In any case, Tolkien and Barfield open up the possibility, and indeed necessity, of far more discussion of these themes.

I have indicated that to a large extent *On Fairy Stories* is an expanded version of *Mythopoeia*, and it borrows not only the arguments but much of the imagery of the poem. Many of the obscurer passages of the poem are explained by reference to the essay. I shall not attempt to give a detailed account of how the two works match; I would however like to point out one extraordinary difference. One of the central points of the essay is that fairy stories are characterised by what Tolkien terms "*euclatas-*

*trophe*”, the happy ending following hardship, a concept inspired in part I believe by that of “*edwenden*”, the pivotal change in fortune so important in Old English poetry. For Tolkien the classic example of *eucatastrophe* is the story of the Gospels: the story of Christ is a true fairy story. Thus *eucatastrophe* lies at the core of the ways things really are, which it is the role of the poet to reveal. Yet *eucatastrophe* is absent from *Mythopoeia*, as is any mention of the Incarnation. Of course, Tolkien says that *eucatastrophe* is specific to fairy tales, but that seems hardly sufficient to explain the absence from the poem of it, or at least something like it that would place the Incarnation at the centre of the theory of subcreation. It is all the more odd when we remember that *Mythopoeia* was supposed to help Lewis on the path to Christianity, by showing him that myths are not lies: the Incarnation is the very meeting point of myth and historical reality. It might be argued that the Incarnation is sufficiently evident by implication in *Mythopoeia*, e.g. in the symbolism of light and language noted above, but again this seems insufficient. As far as I can see the best that can be said is that in the essay Tolkien provided his argument with the heart it had lacked in its poetic form.

To conclude I would like to outline what I believe to be of importance for Tolkien studies in what I have covered. I think it is clear that Tolkien used passages of Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* for the focal section of his poem *Mythopoeia*, and that the poem shows a more general awareness of the *Essay on Man*. The two writers perhaps do not share much, but it is important to note that Tolkien engages with a major writer of the period he claimed no interest in or knowledge of. Shippey has pointed out his similar treatment of Shakespeare. His familiarity with Pope should act as a further warning against taking Tolkien too much at his word on this matter. I doubt that Tolkien consciously imitated Sidney, and I discussed him chiefly to show that Tolkien’s ideas are not unparalleled in the main stream of traditional literary theory. Most important however is the realisation of the influence of Barfield on Tolkien. *Mythopoeia* and *On Fairy Stories* set out much of the theory that Tolkien puts into practice in *Lord of the Rings* and the other works. Barfield is a major influence on these theories, and hence on some of the most popular, and I would say finest, literature of the twentieth century. Thus Barfield cannot be ignored. His influence on C. S. Lewis was likewise strong, which adds further weight to this plea for his wider recognition. Barfield is, however, worth reading in his own right, making a major contribution to our understanding of

## Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at Mythopoeia

poetic language and the nature of knowledge. He should be read alongside authors like Ernst Cassirer and, more recently, Janet Soskice.

Let me give the last word to Sir Philip Sidney, who concluded his *Apologie for Poetrie* with these flamboyant sentiments:

But if, (fie of such a but) you be borne so neere the dull making *Cataract of Nilus*, that you cannot heare the Planet-like Musick of Poetrie, if you have so earth-creeping a mind, that it cannot lift it selfe up, to looke to the sky of Poetry: or rather, by a certaine rusticall disdainne, will become such a Mome, as to be a *Momus* of Poetry: then, though I will not wish unto you, the Asses eares of *Midas*, nor to bee driven by a Poets verses, (as *Bubonax* was) to hang himselfe, nor to be rimed to death, as is sayd to be doone in Ireland: yet thus much curse I must send you in the behalfe of all Poets, that while you live, you live in love, and never get favour, for lacking skill of a Sonnet: and when you die, your memory die from the earth, for want of an *Epitaph*. (59-60)

### Bibliography

- Barfield, O.: *Poetic Diction*, 2nd edn, London, 1952  
Carpenter, H.: *The Inklings*, London, 1978  
Cassirer, E.: *Language and Myth*, London, 1946 (English trans)  
Coleridge, S. T.: *Biographia Literaria*, London, 1817  
Flieger, V.: *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*, Grand Rapids, 1983  
Pope, A.: *Works*, London, 1751  
Rhys, E.: *The Prelude to Poetry*, London, 1927  
Shippey, T.: *The Road to Middle-Earth*, London, 1982  
Sidney, P.: *An Apologie for Poetrie in Rhys*  
Soskice, J.: *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Oxford, 1985  
Tolkien, J. R. R.: *Tree and Leaf*, Including the Poem "Mythopoeia", London, 1988 (including *On Fairy Stories* and *Leaf by Niggle*)



The Library, Exeter College, Oxford



# A Cautionary Tale

Verlyn Flieger

VERLYN FLIEGER, *a Professor of English Literature at the University of Maryland, teaches courses in Tolkien, and has published three books on his work—A Question of Time, Tolkien’s Legendarium, and Splintered Light. This last, revised and enlarged, is due to be republished by Kent State University press in the summer of 2002. Web address: <<http://www.mythus.com>>*

With the considerable increase in published work by J.R.R. Tolkien subsequent to his death in 1973, a fair amount of critical attention has been paid to his stated ambition to write what he intended to be a “mythology for England.”<sup>1</sup> Both the extent to which his work actually qualifies as a mythology, and the ways in which it connects with English myth, legend, and history<sup>2</sup> have been subject to scrutiny. Taking as given both its status as an invented mythology and its connections, direct or oblique, with Tolkien’s England, I want to explore what that mythology might reveal about how Tolkien saw his England at a particular moment in history, and what he might have wanted to tell it in mythological terms.

For all his reputation as a fantasist, J.R.R. Tolkien was a writer whose work was grounded in the upheavals, the confusions, and the uncertainties of the twentieth century in which he lived and wrote. It was a century torn by the two most widespread wars in history, haunted by both long after the fighting ceased. The first war, in which Tolkien saw service and lost within the space of a few weeks all but one of his closest friends, came perilously close to wiping out his generation. Certainly, it changed irrevocably the world in which he had grown up. Yet for all its disruption of a way of life, World War I accomplished surprisingly little except to pave the way for World War II. Both wars, together with the uneasy peace that interrupted them, were the immediate external context for Tolkien’s fic-

---

The last photograph of J.R.R. Tolkien, taken next to one of his favourite trees in the Botanic Gardens, Oxford, August, 1973.

tion, and it is in this context that I propose to consider it.<sup>3</sup> His major work, *The Silmarillion*—by which I mean the legendarium as a whole, including *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>4</sup>—was bracketed by these wars. It was conceived as the first one was getting under way, written largely in the period between the two, and for all practical purposes brought to a close not long after the finish of the second.<sup>5</sup> It reflects its time and circumstances in many ways, but chiefly because it is all about war. The last third of *The Hobbit* concerns the Battle of Five Armies and describes in remarkable political detail for a children’s book the uneasy coalitions and alliances that make up both sides. *The Lord of the Rings* shows a world preparing for and engaging in major battles. *The Silmarillion* is focused on warfare of all kinds, from sustained campaigns to pitched battles to guerilla fighting.

If this is a mythology for England, it presents a picture of a culture in decline, torn by dissension and split by factions, a society perpetually at war with itself. Read in this light, Tolkien’s work seems more like Orwell’s *1984* than the furry-footed fantasy its detractors never cease to categorize and deride. Tracing an arc from the “Ainulindalë,” or song of creation, to the destruction of the One Ring, the Scouring of the Shire, and the end of the Third Age of Middle-earth, Tolkien’s history begins in imperfection and ends (or rather stops, for Tolkien never fully reached the end) with a decisive yet admittedly temporary defeat of the forces of evil. Along the way, much that is fair and wonderful passes forever, as Theoden says, out of Middle-earth.

The primary function of any mythology, real or feigned, is to mirror a culture to itself, giving its world a history and its people an identity, as well as connecting both to the supernatural or transcendent. The stories of gods and heroes that make up the bulk of any primary mythology reflect the worldview of the society that generates them, and interpret the contending forces that society perceives as governing its world. True of any primary mythos, this is no less true of Tolkien’s secondary, invented mythology. What, then, is the worldview of this mythology and how do the contending forces play out? Who are the gods and heroes of his invented world, and how do they enact its story?

Tolkien borrowed from the myths of northwestern Europe for the flavor of his stories, and much has been written about his debt to existing mythologies from Scandinavia to Sumer. Nevertheless, he wrote to father Robert Murray that *The Lord of the Rings* was “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work” (Letters 172), and one might assume that nothing in

## *A Cautionary Tale*

the legendarium as a whole would contradict that. Rather surprisingly, a quick comparison between the two reveals some fundamental differences, and not just on the level of doctrine or creed. Tolkien's is a far darker world than that envisioned by Christianity, and falls short of the promise and the hope that the older story holds out. Unlike the Judaeo-Christian mythos with which it is so often compared, and which tells of a world fallen through human willfulness and saved by sacrifice, Tolkien's mythos as a whole begins with a fall long before humanity comes on the scene. He wrote of his story:

I suppose a difference between this and what may be perhaps called Christian mythology is this. In the latter, the Fall of Man is subsequent to and a consequence (though not a necessary consequence) of the 'Fall of the Angels'; a rebellion of created free will at a higher level than Man, but it is not clearly held (and in many versions not held at all) that this affected the 'World' in its nature: evil was brought in from outside, by Satan. In this [i.e. Tolkien's own] Myth the rebellion of created free-will precedes creation of the world (Eä); and Eä has in it, subcreatively introduced, evil, rebellions, discordant elements of its own nature already when the Let it Be was spoken. The Fall, or corruption, therefore, of all things in it and all inhabitants of it, was a possibility if not inevitable. (Letters 286-87)

Thus original sin (if one may borrow that term) enters the world in the very process of its coming to be, when the melodic theme that is the metaphor for creation is distorted by the clamorous and discordant counter-theme of the rebel demiurge Melkor. The resultant Music sets the tone for all that is to follow.

The supreme godhead, Eru/Il'vatar, who both proposes the theme and conducts the Music, is neither the Judaic God of Hosts who alternately punishes and rewards his people, nor the traditional Christian God of love and forgiveness. Rather, he is a curiously remote and for the most part inactive figure, uninvolved, with the exception of one cataclysmic moment, in the world he has conceived. The lesser demiurgic powers, the Valar, have only partial comprehension of the world they have helped to make. The primary heroes, the Elves, are gifted beings caught in a web of pride, power, and deceit—largely of their own weaving—that hampers and constrains every effort they make to get free of it. The secondary heroes, Men, are courageous but shortsighted blunderers with but little sense of history and even less comprehension of their place in the larger scheme of things.



Moseley Bog

Woods and forests play a big part in Tolkien's Middle Earth. The terrifying Old Forest, the magic land of Lothlorien, home of wood elves, and the ancient forest Fangorn all form the backdrop of key passages in *The Lord of the Rings*. Similarly Tolkien painted vivid pictures of marshlands—notably the Midgewater Marshes where Sam Gamgee is nearly eaten alive by the “Neekerbreakers”, and the Dead Marshes outside Morder, through which Frodo and Sam are guided by Gollum. Moseley Bog, where Tolkien would have played as a child is now a nature reserve, following a sustained campaign by local people to save it from development.



## *A Cautionary Tale*

The whole narrative of *The Silmarillion* is a story of enterprise and creativity gone disastrously wrong. From the first rebellious theme of Melkor, Tolkien's invented world is characterized by strife and dissension wherever there should be peace and harmony. Melkor's intervention in the Music results in contending themes whose two interactive forces of discord and harmony thereafter operate together as Fate. Within this fate, the greatest of the Elves, the craftsman-figure Fëanor, achieves a transcendent creation, the Silmarils, yet his very creativity leads directly to his downfall. These great gems, housing the last of the light, are stolen by Melkor to become the Jewels in the Crown. Instead of shedding light, they engender darkness. They are the proximate causes of pride, possessiveness, and lust. Obsessive desire for them leads Fëanor to the Oath which binds him and his sons to pursue anyone who holds a Silmaril. This is the Fall of the Elves, resulting in theft, betrayal, kinslaying, and war; and finally, in the death—without ever regaining the Silmarils—of Fëanor himself.

Even after Fëanor's death, the story of the Elves in Middle-earth is a history of contention centering on the establishment and defense of beleaguered strongholds such as Gondolin and Doriath and Nargothrond. It is an account of successive battles—Dagor-nuin-Giliath, the Battle under Stars, Dagor Aglareb, the Glorious Battle, Dagor Bragollach, the Battle of Sudden Flame, and Nirnaeth Arnoediad, the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. Elven history is strung on these battle-names like beads on a string. Some of the battles they win and some they lose, but there is never a decisive victory, and all are part of the struggle that shapes their lives in Middle-earth.

Tolkien's Men fare little better than his Elves. Of their major heroes, one—Beren—loses his hand in obtaining a Silmaril for the Elven king Thingol, who in his turn is first corrupted and then killed by his desire to possess it. The price Beren pays for the Silmaril seems to have bought little more in the end than the price paid by the thousands of Tolkien's generation who lost their lives on the Somme in 1916 in "the war to end all wars." Another of his fictive heroes—and in terms of characterization one far more memorable than Beren—is the hapless Túrin Turambar, "Master of Fate, by Fate Mastered," a man of good intentions who careens from disaster to disaster and bad choice to bad choice, finally killed by his own sword after his belated realization of all the havoc his actions have wrought. The story of Túrin was one of the earliest to take

shape in Tolkien's legendarium, and his desire to write it goes back to his discovery while still in school of Kullervo, the equally hapless and doomed hero from the Finnish epic *Kalevala*. That he gave Kullervo a formative role his mythology for England may very well say something about Tolkien's notion of what England might need to know about itself, but it does not suggest that he had much hope for the future of his country.

And finally, there is the hero most typical of the twentieth century, the little man Frodo Baggins, struggling his slow, painful way to Mordor, falling more and more under the spell of the Ring, and finally losing himself to it utterly at the Cracks of Doom. What Tolkien does to Frodo provides the bleakest outcome of the entire history. Frodo is infected with the darkness of the Morgul knife, stung by Shelob, and maimed by Gollum in cruel and even less rewarded replication of Beren's lost hand. The peace he has won for Middle-earth is not his to enjoy, and he gets no recognition of his achievement on his return to the Shire he saved. He is like the thousands of returning servicemen from both wars—from any war, really—who come back to a world that has no way to understand where they have been or what they have experienced. In Tolkien's 1916 and for decades after it was called "shell shock." Now we call it "post traumatic stress syndrome" and we still have no remedy for it. Frodo loses his finger, his home, and his innocence. Worst of all, he loses the Ring he carried for so long and which has left its ineradicable mark on him, no less indelible even for having been destroyed. "It is gone forever," he tells Sam. "and now all is dark and empty" (LOTR 1001). This greatest loss—a deprivation at once emotional, psychological, metaphoric and symbolic—cannot be made up, and Frodo is bereft of more than a finger.

If through his mythology Tolkien was trying to show his country something (and I think he was) what was it he wanted the England of the twentieth century, a country battered by two disastrous wars, marked by post-war austerity, ultimately bereft of its imperial possessions, to know about itself? I have called this essay "A Cautionary Tale" on the model of Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary Verses*, one of which advises children to "always keep a-hold of Nurse, for fear of finding something worse." Tolkien's advice, put more dramatically, though somewhat less poetically, would have been not to keep a-hold, but be able to let go. It is the advice of Ulmo the Vala to Turgon the Elf. "Love not too well the work of thy hands and the devices of thy heart" (*Silmarillion* 125). It is just what

## A Cautionary Tale

Frodo cannot not do, nor Fëanor, nor Thingol, nor the Elven kingdoms of Middle-earth. It is advice no nation is likely voluntarily to take to heart and put into practice. Nevertheless, it is good advice to any nation at any time.

### Bibliography

Belloc, Hilaire. *Cautionary Verses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981.

*The Lord of the Rings*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991.

*The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, a misnomer, but one now so firmly entrenched in Tolkien scholarship it is too late to dislodge it. What Tolkien actually described was a mythology he could “dedicate” to England. There seems little qualitative difference between the two phrases.

<sup>2</sup> See Carl Hostetter and Arden Smith, “A Mythology for England” and Anders Stenström, “A Mythology? For England?” in *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference, 1992*, also Jane Chance, *Tolkien’s Art: A Mythology for England*, University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

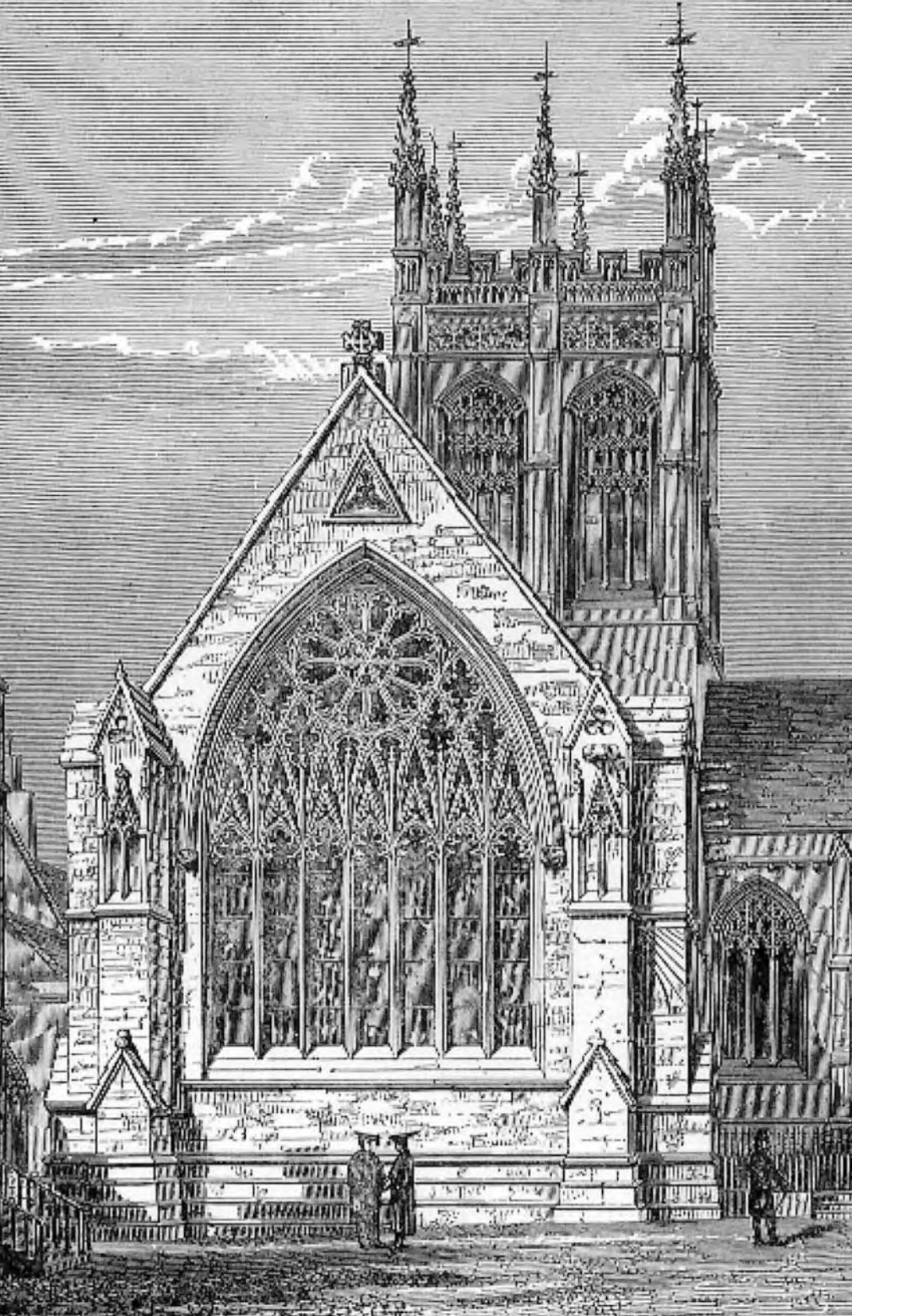
<sup>3</sup> The outdated notion that *The Lord of the Rings* was an allegory of World War II can safely be dismissed, but the more general mood of the story is certainly directly connected to the war-torn twentieth century

<sup>4</sup> Any doubt that the works belong together and project the same vision can be resolved by consulting the conversation on the Stairs of Cirith Ungol where Sam suddenly realizes by way of the Phial of Galadriel, that he and Frodo are in *The Silmarillion* and the story is still going on.

<sup>5</sup> His first efforts at the mythology, a poem called “The Voyage of Earendel” and a school notebook titled in pencil “The Book of Lost Tales,” were begun in 1914 and 1917 respectively. *The Lord of the Rings* was begun in 1938 and was roughly three-quarters finished by 1945.



J.R.R. Tolkien in his study at Merton Street, Oxford in 1972



# The Little Way Through Middle Earth

Dwight Longenecker

DWIGHT LONGENECKER *lives in England where he works as a freelance writer and broadcaster. He contributes to many magazines and papers in the United States and Great Britain. His most recent book is Saint Benedict and Saint Thérèse—The Little Rule and the Little Way. His book, More Christianity is published by Our Sunday Visitor in Autumn 2002.*

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” Tolkien admitted that he wrote these words absentmindedly on the back of an exam paper he was marking.<sup>1</sup> Such spontaneous inspiration suggests the work of the subconscious mind, and if the subconscious mind, then a more mysterious source of inspiration may well be at work. Peter Kreeft has suggested that *The Lord of the Rings* is a divinely inspired work<sup>2</sup>, and in the broadest sense this has to be true. Inspiration comes from earthly experience just as much as from heavenly guidance, and Tom Shippey has shown how the very word “hobbit” emerged from the context of Tolkien’s lifelong interest in words and language.<sup>3</sup> The idea of little people who turn out to be the greatest would also have sprung from Tolkien’s devout Catholic faith. Not only does the gospel say that we have to be little to get into the kingdom, (Matthew 18:4) but the apostle John constantly refers to the faithful as “little children”. (e.g. I John 2:28) Furthermore, Tolkien would have been well aware that one of the Catholic saints most in the ascendant during his lifetime was the apostle of the “little way.” Thérèse of Lisieux teaches that, “To be little means recognising one’s nothingness, expecting everything from the good God, as a little child expects everything from its Father.”<sup>4</sup>

Now Tolkien was not writing a book about saints and going to heaven. Apart from a minor character saying grace before a meal, there is

nothing in *The Lord of the Rings* which is remotely religious in the conventional sense of the word. Nevertheless Tolkien was clear that his Christian faith provided the underlying matrix for the story. In 1953 he wrote that *The Lord of the Rings*, “is of course; a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.”<sup>5</sup> Tolkien didn’t want to write a religious book, he wanted to create a myth for the English people. But the myth he has created is a very Christian myth. At the heart of *The Lord of the Rings* is a Christian worldview that gives a foundation for the entire story. David Mills has observed that a story can be Christian to the degree in “which Providence works as Providence, that is, to which it includes the requirements of obedience and the acceptance of permanent loss involved in the Christian teaching of Providence and shows it at work in the plot.”<sup>6</sup> Frodo, the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*, exhibits this obedience to a full extent.

Shippey has observed that Tolkien’s work, while set in an archaic, fantasy world is unmistakably modern.<sup>7</sup> Frodo’s struggle to obey the call of Providence is also modern. From the beginning of his stewardship of the Ring, Frodo is filled with angst. He is uncertain and disturbed by his destiny. After Gandalf tells him of the Ring’s origins, “Frodo sat silent and motionless. Fear seemed to stretch out like a vast hand, like a dark cloud rising in the East and looming up to engulf him. ‘This ring!’ he stammered. ‘How, how on earth did it come to me?’”<sup>8</sup> and after Gandalf reveals what must happen to the Ring Frodo cries, “I am not made for perilous quests! I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?”<sup>9</sup> It is this very reluctance to be a hero that seals Frodo’s status as the most excellent modern hero. His greatness is one that is filled with existential self-doubt and a despair which is only punctuated from time to time with glimmers of hope. *The Lord of the Rings* is no easy fantasy with a sentimental, happy ending and Frodo is no bluff super-hero who sets off on an easy quest to defeat the bad guys. Frodo struggles with his inner doubts and fears as much as he does with the dreadful burden of the Ring and the dark power of Sauron.

Frodo’s reluctance to play the hero is not cowardice. It is the mark of his humility, for humility is a simple realistic assessment of oneself. In contrast, both pride and false humility are unrealistic about the self. In *The Lord of the Rings* Boromir is the best example of pride. He really does believe that he would be able to use the Ring for a good purpose, “the Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the

### *The Little Way Through Middle Earth*

hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!”<sup>10</sup> False humility also has an unrealistic assessment of the self. Gollum exhibits the groveling subservience of false humility while all the time he is using his subservience as a tool to manipulate others and regain the Ring. Gandalf and Galadriel also have the necessary self-knowledge to be humble. Like Boromir, they are both tempted, to take the Ring and use it for good, but both of them know they are not innocent enough to bear the Ring without it corrupting them. Even Sam, for the short time that he holds the Ring is tempted by the vision of “Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age.”<sup>11</sup> Frodo alone, while weighed down by the burden of the Ring, is not tempted to use it for his own long term glory, until at the last moment he weakens and the Ring’s power infests his heart. The humility of Frodo can be contrasted with the hubris of the classical hero. Hubris is that overweening self-confidence which eventually provides for the hero’s potential downfall. This hubris is linked with the tragic flaw in the classic hero. In a tragedy the hero’s flaw combined with hubris brings about the hero’s defeat or even death. Hubris is linked with the tragic flaw because it does not allow the hero to see his tragic flaw and change it. This means the classic hero lacks that realistic self-assessment on which real humility depends. Frodo is totally lacking in hubris. Instead, throughout *The Lord of the Rings* he is full of fear, dread, confusion and self-doubt.

What keeps Frodo from being a weak character is his obedience. The word obey has its roots in the verb “to listen” and Frodo listens to the call of what can only be called Providence at the crucial stages of his journey. That he obeys the call is the mark of Frodo’s true strength. True obedience is always linked with courage, and Frodo constantly moves forward in obedience despite his fear. Finally obedience is linked with faith—not religious faith per se, but faith as a quality of positive trust in Providence. For Frodo these traits of obedience, courage and faith come to a climax at the Council of Elrond. There he hears the voice of Providence, and then he hears the real Frodo—almost like a disembodied voice—respond in positive courageous obedience to the call. After the Council had decided that the Ring must be taken to the Cracks of Doom, “a great dread fell upon him [Frodo] as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after never be spoken. . . . At last with a great effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words as if some other will was using his small voice. ‘I will take the Ring,’ he said, ‘though I do not know the way.’”<sup>12</sup>



Edith and Ronald Tolkien at the gate of 76 Sandfield Road, Oxford in 1966.



### *The Little Way Through Middle Earth*

In creating a character who responds to the voice of providence with genuine humility and obedience Tolkien has created a new kind of mythic hero. Many writers have created Christ-figures and *The Lord of the Rings* is not without its own (Aragorn the triumphant returning King, Gandalf who returns from the dead) but Frodo's heroism is compelling not because it typifies Christ, but because it exemplifies the heroism of the Christian saint. Frodo steps out even though he does not know the way and the saint also, like Frodo, walks by faith not by sight. (2 Cor. 5:7) Frodo goes through the utter darkness driven only by his obedience and courage.

Compare Frodo's journey through uncertainty and doubt to Thérèse of Lisieux who wrote, "Jesus took me by the hand and brought me into a subterranean way, where it was neither hot nor cold, where the sun does not shine, and rain and wind do not come; a tunnel where I see nothing but a brightness half-veiled. . . . I do not see that we are advancing towards the mountain that is our goal, because our journey is under the earth; yet I have a feeling that we are approaching it, without knowing why."<sup>13</sup> The path of the humble soul is always uncertain. What seems to be progress may only be the advance of pride. Up until the very last moment Frodo is unsure whether he is making progress and doubts whether he will succeed. Again Thérèse says, "I learned very quickly that the farther one advances along this road, the farther from the goal one believes oneself to be."<sup>14</sup> Even Frodo's failure at the Cracks of Doom is a paradoxical sign of his saint-like calling. He has advanced in genuine humility and sheer dogged obedience, then when the final test comes Frodo seems to fail. He who has never yielded to the temptation to use the Ring for his own ends rises up and says, "I have come, but I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!"<sup>15</sup> He puts on the ring and disappears, only to have Gollum leap for the ring, bite off his finger and plunge with the Ring into the pit. It has often been remarked how the turn of the plot at this stage is a sign of the strange workings of Providence. Frodo seems to fail the test in the last moment, but Frodo (and before him Bilbo) had spared the life of Gollum, and this act of humble mercy redounds for his salvation at the crucial point.

Similarly, Thérèse faced the worst kind of desolation and trial during her final illness. "Look!" she cries to her sisters on her deathbed, "Do you see the black hole where we can see nothing? Its in a similar hole that I am as far as body and soul are concerned. Ah! what darkness!"<sup>16</sup> She was

tempted not only to despair, but to suicide. Yet it was her earlier unceasing habits of faith, obedience and courage which enabled her to say in her final terrible days, "What a grace it is to have faith! If I had not had any faith, I would have committed suicide without a moment's hesitation."<sup>17</sup> Frodo's humility not only leads to the triumph over Mordor, but Frodo himself is transformed. The Frodo who returns to the Shire is much more like the classical hero. He rides in and takes command with confidence. There is no fear, confusion or doubt about him. Frodo says to the ruffians who have invaded the Shire, "I see that you're behind the times and the news here. . . . Your day is over . . . the Dark Tower has fallen, and there is a King in Gondor. Isengard has been destroyed and your precious master is a beggar in the wilderness. The King's messengers will ride up the Greenway now, not bullies from Isengard."<sup>18</sup> In his transformation Frodo shows that the authentic hero is one who has gone through the darkness of doubt, fear, rebelliousness and arrogance to conquer with the weapons of faith, courage, obedience and humility. The authentic hero attacks the enemy with his humility intact, but with the added quality of real self-confidence.

Finally, Tolkien presents us with a Christian hero and type of the Christian saint because Frodo, in his faithful obedience and humility lives out the way of sacrificial love. Redemptive suffering lies at the heart of the Christian way, and like the saint who emulates the Master by taking up his cross, Frodo is the wounded hero. Although he has saved the Shire he cannot stay and enjoy it. As he departs for the Grey Havens he explains to a tearful Sam why he can't stay in the Shire. "I have been too deeply hurt Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so Sam when things are in danger. Some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them."<sup>19</sup>

In giving us a humble hero Tolkien reminds us that it is the foolish things of God which overturn the wisdom of the world. Things are not what they seem. As Bilbo blurts out at the Council of Elrond, "All that is gold does not glitter/ Not all those who wander are lost."<sup>20</sup> The small ones turn out to be mighty while the mighty are fallen. It is the secret agents of the world who hold the key to final victory. The hidden soul who overturns the power of evil is the essential theme of *The Lord of the Rings*, and this theme is echoed in the gospel and in the little saint of Lisieux who writes, "To find a thing hidden, we must be hidden ourselves; so our life must be a mystery."<sup>21</sup> These are the secret ways of the Spirit which

## *The Little Way Through Middle Earth*

eventually bring down even the worst powers of Mordor. The triumph of the halfling Frodo is an inspiration to every soul who attempts the little way. Each one who does can be encouraged by the words of Elrond, “The road must be trod, but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world. Small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.”<sup>22</sup>

Dwight Longenecker’s new book, *St. Benedict and St. Thérèse—The Little Rule and the Little Way* is published by Gracewing and *Our Sunday Visitor*.

<sup>1</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R.Tolkien, A Biography*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1977, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Kreeft, Wartime Wisdom: Ten Uncommon Insights about Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*, *St. Austin Review*, Vol. 2, No.1, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Shippey, *J.R.R.Tolkien, Author of the Century*, London, HarperCollins, 2000, pp.2-5.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas N. Taylor (tr), *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, The Little Flower of Jesus*, New York, P.J.Kennedy, 1926, p.232.

<sup>5</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1981, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> David Mills, The Writer of Our Story, Divine Providence in *The Lord of the Rings*, *Touchstone Magazine*, Jan-Feb 2002, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Shippey, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> J.R.R.Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1965, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 515.

<sup>11</sup> J.R.R.Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1965, p.216.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>13</sup> F.J. Sheed, *Collected Letters of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1949, p. 121.

<sup>14</sup> John Clarke OCD, (tr); *The Story of a Soul: the Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, Washington, ICS, 1976. p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> *The Return of the King*, p. 274.

<sup>16</sup> John Clarke OCD, (tr.) *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, Washington, ICS, 1977, p.173.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.196.

<sup>18</sup> *The Return of the King*, p. 351.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>20</sup> *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 325.

<sup>21</sup> John Clarke OCD (tr), *General Correspondence*, Vol. II, Washington, ICS, 1988, p. 809.

<sup>22</sup> *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 353.



# Film Review

Léonie Caldecott

LEONIE CALDECOTT is co-director of the Centre for Faith & Culture in Oxford, and one of the editors of *Second Spring*. Mother of three children, she is an award-winning writer who has published extensively in both the religious and the secular press.

Christmas 2001 saw the virtually head-on clash between two titanic movies based on titanic books: *Harry Potter* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Both are escapist, in a time when people are looking more and more urgently for distraction and entertainment. Both owe part of their success to the latest digital special effects, which they display to excellent advantage. Nevertheless, both films are preoccupied, in a deeper sense, not with “escape” at all (except perhaps escape from the illusion called “everyday life”), but rather with the perennial battle between good and evil. Without that deeper dimension and concern, it is highly unlikely that either would have been able to command such huge audiences. To be effective, storytelling must grip the reader or listener by casting a hook into the heart. *Harry Potter* is a skillful blend of three genres: the English boarding-school adventure, the amateur detective story or “whodunit”, and the folklore tradition with some nods in the direction of sword-and-sorcery. *The Lord of the Rings* (of which *Fellowship* is the first of three parts) is also something of a mixture of genres—evident in the contrast between the agrarian fantasy of the Shire and the epic adventure into which the Hobbits are precipitated by the discovery of the Ring. But *Lord of the Rings* is much more “serious”, and is aimed at an older audience.

*The Fellowship of the Ring* is also more successful as a movie than *Harry Potter*. Its flaws can be forgiven in view of the evident good will of the director and actors. Unusually for such a big-budget production, the cast and crew seemed mostly to share a real love for the material, and a willingness to enter into the spirit of Tolkien’s universe. As a result, many

---

Silver birches and bracken on the slopes of Kinver Edge, near Birmingham.

of the major themes of the book—nostalgia for a lost idyll, friendship in adversity, courage and nobility of soul, the reality of providence and the need for grace—emerge unscathed. The score, mostly by Howard Shore, is powerful and atmospheric, even if the songs by Enya are too saccharine-celtic for some tastes (my daughters, who are both Tolkein fans and celtomanes, love them, I have to say).

The flaws in the film perhaps reflect the fact that the director, Peter Jackson, has until now mostly made his name with horror movies. The pace is unrelenting. The three hours of the movie seem to consist of one long series of chases, death and near-death experiences, reminiscent of Steven Spielberg in its action-packed roller-coaster of a plot. The Orcs are as repulsive as modern special effects can make them (another mother I know was so sorry for the poor beasts that she was tempted to set up an orc-rights movement). The Elves, by contrast, are feeble and fey—Legolas being an honourable exception. Lothlorien, in particular, is a missed opportunity to present real goodness on screen. Here is how that land is described in the book, as Frodo first discovers it.

“It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured for ever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. In winter here no heart could mourn for summer or for spring. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen on anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lórien there was no stain.”

“Though he walked and breathed, and about him living leaves and flowers were stirred by the same cool wind as fanned his face, Frodo felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness. When he had gone and passed again into the outer world, still Frodo the wanderer from the Shire would walk there, upon the grass among elanor and niphredil in fair Lothlórien.

“They entered the circle of white trees. As they did so the South Wind blew upon Cerin Amroth and sighed among the branches. Frodo stood still, hearing far off great seas upon beaches that had long ago been washed away, and sea-birds crying whose race had perished from the earth.”

## *Film Review*

Yet in the film, Lothlorien leaves the impression of a complicated and somewhat sinister tree-house seen by moonlight. Much better would have been to use the digital special effects demonstrated more effectively in recent films like *Shrek* (and in the images of evil in *The Fellowship of the Ring*) to construct the vivid, beautiful landscape described by Tolkien, or even (though I would hate to put real actors and actresses out of business) the Elvish characters themselves. The important relationship between the Dwarf Gimli and Galadriel has also been left out ? unless the director plans to bring this in by flashback in the next installment. Indeed Cate Blanchett as Galadriel disappoints, particularly in view of the range this actress has shown herself capable of elsewhere. She should be majestic and motherly, remote and tender, unearthly yet super-real, set in a daylight landscape of bright colours, green and gold, white and silver, under a blue sky. Instead she justifies Gimli's voiced suspicions of the 'witch' in the woodland. Haughty and cold, she appears to lure Frodo into an ill-advised contemplation of the mirror????..., seeming at best unprotective of his interests, before relating her own temptation by the Ring in such a fashion that she seems to enter into it with her will as well as her mind, which is a crucial blurring between the state of temptation and the state of actual sin. Admittedly the technique of projecting her face as a photographic negative of its normal self, as ugly as the true Galadriel is beautiful, demonstrates the connection between beauty and goodness. But it is definitely a lost opportunity to capture this essentially Marian moment in Tolkien's creation.

Aragorn, on the other hand, is made a more complex character than in the book, by introducing the idea that he had renounced his claim to the throne of Gondor through fear of his own weakness (for it was his ancestor Isildur who had failed to destroy the One Ring). His bride-to-be Arwen is given some of the role that in the book belongs to Glorfindel and Gandalf, rescuing Frodo at the Ford and causing the river magically to rise and sweep away the Black Riders. This particular action sequence is one of the best in the film, with the grace and manoeuvrability of Arwen's horse contrasting vividly with the brutish strength of the festering black steeds. Indeed Arwen takes on some of the Marian qualities that Galadriel should have, culminating in the sublime moment when she prays for the dying and hell-bound Frodo, to the effect that whatever grace she may possess be given to him, in order that he might be saved from the soul-wracking power of Mordor. Saruman is consciously in the

employ of Sauron, whereas Tolkien makes it clear in the book that he is trying to deceive Sauron and attempting to become a Power in his own right. The knock-on effects of such changes will become more apparent in the course of the subsequent movies. At the Breaking of the Fellowship, Aragorn deliberately lets Frodo depart for Mordor on his own. Is it not more likely that he would have sent the others on to rescue Merry and Pippin, while he himself accompanied the Ringbearer? In the book, of course, Frodo slips away unseen.

However, these changes, as I said, are forgivable. They mainly consist in changes of emphasis, or extensions of ideas that already do exist in the book. The contribution, for good or ill, that they make to the development of the story will only become clear when we can see the later instalments. The only other criticisms I have concern the editing. Some sections of the story have been lost entirely, the Old Forest and the encounter with Bombadil in particular, while others have been telescoped together. That makes sense. There was too much in the book to fit even into a three-hour movie. But despite the fact that a great deal of film has been cut, a little more could have been lost to tighten up the final product. The camera lingers a few seconds too long on Frodo's face at times. I am tempted to say that this applies also to Gandalf as he clings to edge of the abyss in Moria, and on Boromir's slow death by many arrows, if it were not for an experience that I had when I saw the movie for the second time. I went with my sixteen-year old daughter and a group of her school-friends, as a celebration after they finished some exams. By the end of the movie, most of my daughter's friends were in tears, and I was passing the tissues down the line in the cinema, as most of my daughter's friends were in tears. Yet this was not the first time they had watched the movie. One girl, in particular, had seen it six times already. Yet she was as shaken by the loss of Gandalf, and the death of Boromir, especially after his terrible moment of temptation by the ring, as she had been the first time.

This perhaps demonstrates how well the film, with few exceptions, is cast. The acting is powerful and sincere. The characters become real for the audience in a way that does credit to Peter Jackson and his associates. But it also demonstrates something else. My daughter's friend is not a Christian, nor indeed particularly religious in any way. Yet she has a passion for the intelligent fantasy world of Star-Wars and even Star-Trek, and above all for Tolkein, whose Christian inspiration is known to her. As she walked out of the cinema still unashamedly weeping, I wanted to say to her:



“Do not grieve! There is a place where Boromir lives still, where everyone and everything we love and care for can be found anew. There is a place where good overcomes evil, no matter how severe, where no sacrifice is in vain, where love conquers death, once and for all. There is a God and His Son has indeed destroyed the Ring of Power. Come with me and I will show you.”

But I could think of no place on this earth where I could take her. For the scouring of the Shire has not yet been accomplished.



Sarehole Mill, near Birmingham

In the forward to *Lord of the Rings* J.R.R. Tolkien bemoaned seeing a picture in a newspaper of a once thriving corn-mill from his childhood days now falling into decrepitude. Tolkien would be delighted to see Sarehole Mill, which was near his childhood home, restored by the city council and thriving as a museum. When the Hobbits return from their adventures in *The Lord of the Rings* they find that the old mill in Hobbiton has been torn down and replaced by an ugly new one spewing smoke. Eventually they restore the Shire to its former glory and there are many who believe that Tolkien would have liked to be able to roll back the effects of the industrial revolution on the city of his childhood.



W.C.B.

# Tolkien, the Ring and I

Peter Milward, SJ

FATHER MILWARD, *a member of Chesterton Review's Editorial Board, is the Director of the Renaissance Institute at Sophia University, and one of the most prolific and distinguished writers in the field of Renaissance scholarship and Catholic culture. His books include Shakespeare's Religious Background and Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age.*

Fifty years ago an important event occurred in my little world of man. I was then reading classics at Oxford, and I had just finished the first part of that degree known as “Classical Mods”, with a formidable week-long examination. But then, instead of going on to the second part known as “Classical Greats”, I changed to English for my finals. The reason was, to put it simply, my destination for Japan and the Jesuit University of Sophia in Tokyo, where a degree in Classics would have been next to useless, at least in comparison with one in English.

For me at that time a special advantage in the study of English at Oxford was the presence of two outstanding scholars in the field of mediaeval English, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien—both of whom seemed to insist rather on their initials than their personal names. The writings of the former had long been familiar to me, in the field rather of Christian apologetics than of mediaeval literature. As for the latter, he had been little more than a name to me, till my tutor in Old English, Professor Wrenn, informed me in my first session with him that there was one man of genius in the School of English: not himself, nor Lewis, but Tolkien.

Naturally, I took the first opportunity I had of attending Tolkien's lectures, on the Middle English poem on “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”. But on my arrival, I found the classroom was already full and I had to take my place at the back. I also found, when he entered and began to speak, that I couldn't hear a word he was saying. Evidently, for all his

---

Magdalen College Tower, Oxford. Sketch by W.G. Blackall.

genius, he had no idea—unlike his friend C.S. Lewis—of the important art of verbal communication. So like the young man in the Gospel story, I went away sorrowful; for it was impossible for me to reach that classroom any earlier. And so I had to content myself with reading whatever he had written on Old and Middle English—though it wasn't very much. I never heard of a story he had published long before entitled *The Hobbit*.

On the other hand, I attended all the lectures offered by C.S. Lewis (who was then only Mr. Lewis, whereas Tolkien had long been Professor). He attracted a much larger number of students, because he was a real master of the art of verbal communication—of the related art of adapting the rich material at his disposal to the minds of his audience. Already I had read all his trilogy of science fiction, as well as his apologetic writings, but now I made a point of reading all his academic writings, too. But I was still ignorant of his Narnia stories, which had just begun coming out in that year 1952. Once I went to see him in his rooms at Magdalen College, and before I could ask him a question, he popped one at me: “Why is it that so many Irishmen remain celibate?” Of course, I didn't know; but afterwards I came to know the answer, not to his question but to the reason behind his question, namely the intrusion into his celebrate Northern Irish life of a lady named Joy.

Then in 1954 I took my final examinations in English, when Lewis himself was one of my examiners; and then I was free to go out to Japan—and Lewis himself exchanged his allegiance from Oxford to Cambridge, where he had been offered a professorial chair, specially designed for him to fill, on mediaeval and Renaissance literature. It was also the year, as I discovered soon after my arrival in Japan on perusing a recent issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, for the publication of Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring*, the first of his great trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*; and then I could realize the hidden meaning of that remark by Professor Wren to me—though I don't know if that was what Wren actually had in mind. Maybe not! I had a copy sent out to Japan as soon as possible; but I found it heavier reading than I had expected. It was about the same time that I first became aware of the ongoing publication of Lewis's Narnia stories, which were more to my taste.

The next important date in my unimportant academic career was 1962 when, after my further studies of Japanese (two years) and theology (four years), I was at last able to take up the task for which I had been destined since 1952, that of teaching English literature (with special

*Tolkien, the Ring and I*

emphasis on Shakespeare) to Japanese students. From then onwards I have come to realize that (apart from Shakespeare and Hopkins) the two English authors who seem to exercise most attraction on young Japanese minds, even before they may turn to English literature for special study, are Lewis and Tolkien—Lewis for the Narnia stories, Tolkien for his tales of the Ring. And now, of course, J.K. Rowling has also come on the scene with her Harry Potter stories.

Much of this time, too, there has been a flourishing C.S. Lewis Society (as well as a Hopkins Society and a Chesterton Society, not to mention the much larger Shakespeare Society), but no Tolkien Society, as he has been subsumed with all his fellow Inklings by C.S. Lewis. Much as I admired the academic writings of both these teachers of mine at Oxford, I found it was naturally their more creative and imaginative writings that appealed to the Japanese, for whom the one word *sōzō* is used (with different Chinese characters) for both “creation” and “imagination”. So it is that in departments of English Literature at Japanese (and I think at American) universities innumerable theses have been produced at both undergraduate and graduate levels on both Narnia and the Ring. And the direction, as well as inspiration, of many of these theses has doubtless come from the scholarly members of the Lewis Society, which I helped to found in the 1970s with Professor Yamagata, the president.

All this activity, and much besides, has now come to a climax with the successive release of two block-busting films, first of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* in the autumn of last year, and next of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in the early spring of this year. It is astonishing how they have come to compete with each other, running almost neck and neck, like champing horses at the races. The other day I happened to visit the large bookshop of Kinokuniya, with its floor for foreign books; and there I found, as in the old days at Blackwell’s in Oxford, two whole sections, one taken up with Harry Potter and the other with Tolkien and the Ring. (Somehow the name of J.K. Rowling has taken second place to Harry Potter; whereas neither Frodo nor Bilbo Baggins have been able to displace Tolkien in reputation.)

Needless to say, I have been to see both films, Harry Potter last year and the Ring this year; and I have even been giving series of lectures on Internet about the world, first of Harry Potter (up to the appropriate number of thirteen) and now of the Ring. So now I have to face the frequent question of my preference, with the reasons of why I prefer the one to the

other. The whole trilogy of the Ring I read, for the first and so far the only time, when I was on summer vacation in California, as a relaxation from more serious studies (on the religious controversies of Shakespeare's time) at the Huntington Library near Los Angeles. I could fairly say that I ploughed through the trilogy, largely out of a sense of duty and the consideration that it was expected of me as a director of theses on those stories. I recognized it as being without doubt a masterpiece of literature, an epic novel of classical proportions; but perhaps I came to it too late in life to enjoy it as so many teenagers have enjoyed it, whether in the original English in England and America or in Japanese translation in Japan. ( I have to add that even in departments of English literature in Japan the students mostly read the tales of the Ring in Japanese translation, even for their theses!)

By contrast, I have to admit that my first impression of Harry Potter, on picking up one of his books for instant perusal at the children's section of Blackwell's, was unfavourable. I didn't so much mind the presence of so many wizards and witches in the story. They have long been a staple of children's literature from the time of the brothers Grimm onwards; but I wasn't so impressed by the personality of Harry Potter himself, or perhaps by his name. But then, last year, for some reason, I picked up three of his stories in paper-back at the local university bookshop, and I got hooked on them. I read them all through at a stretch during the two weeks of our Easter vacation, not because I had any sense of duty, but simply because I enjoyed the books—or in Edgar's closing words in *King Lear*, "not what I ought to say" but "what I felt". I didn't have to do any ploughing, as I had with *The Lord of the Rings*, but I was now fascinated, even bewitched by the story, as are so many readers today—of all ages from seven to seventy.

And now I have found the same with the two films. First, when I went to see *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, I thought I had never enjoyed a film so much. All through I felt as if I was in a pleasant dream, in a kind of Disney World; and yet, as in Tolkien's trilogy, there was a basic contest between good and evil, the good for which the children basically stand (though they have their escapades when infringing the rules of the school) and the evil which threatens from the outer world of darkness. After all, Rowling has admitted to the influence of Tolkien in her original inspiration. (Incidentally, I fail to understand the concern of some Christian critics about the absence of any explicit religious refer-

*Tolkien, the Ring and I*

ence in the Harry Potter stories. For then they would have to condemn most children's literature, and Tolkien's trilogy, too—though he was all his life a devout Catholic!)

Next, I went to see *The Fellowship of the Ring*, fully prepared to enjoy it as much as, if not more than, the Harry Potter film. And such was indeed my enjoyment for most of the film. But then came the Black Riders or Ring-Wraiths, and then the orcs and the were-wolves, and battle-scenes between the forces of good and those of evil, with much spilling of blood; so that I could stand it no longer and had to shut my eyes. Somehow, in the filming of Harry Potter, thanks to the personal insistence of the lady author, the forces of Hollywood, with their taste for blood and thunder, had been kept at bay. But in the filming of *The Ring*, with poor old Tolkien dead and in his grave, there was no authorial supervision, and the outcome was—in my personal opinion—much too gruesome.

On the whole, however, I welcome both authors, my former “teacher” at Oxford and his lady disciple, both their stories of hobbits and school-children (even if they are learning the arts of wizardry and witchcraft), and the films of both stories—with my reservations on *The Ring* rather concerning the undue influence of Hollywood. I welcome them for a reason that is rarely mentioned by the critics nowadays, and that is an eschatological reason: that they serve, with St. John the Baptist and Jesus himself, “to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children” and to make us all, even the sadly rapidly aging members of the younger generation, children again, thereby preparing us in an unseen manner for reception into the kingdom of heaven.



Oxford, from Magdalen Tower





# Wagner and the Wonder of Art

Owen Lee, CSB

FATHER OWEN LEE, a Basilian priest, is a professor of classics at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. The author of books on Horace and Virgil as well as books and articles on both classical and musical subjects, he teaches not only Greek and Latin poetry but courses in comparative literature, art, music, and film. He is a frequent guest on the intermission features of the Metropolitan Opera Texaco radio broadcasts.

We begin this new broadcast season still feeling the loss of and proudly remembering the selfless courage of so many in this city and in this country. And it may seem inappropriate to be remembering them with a comedy. But *Die Meistersinger* is no ordinary comedy. It can help us, as all great art can. For it ponders the madness that sometimes affects human lives, even as it celebrates the mutual interdependence of our lives and, above all, the importance of art in our civilizations. One of the wonders of *Die Meistersinger* is that it is a work of art that is about *creating* a work of art—and it does this, not just in a prodigious outpouring of melody but also, in the text, in a pattern of images and metaphors that gather and cluster and grow in meaning and finally constitute a whole aesthetic. And that—aesthetics, the study of the nature of art, what it means and why we need it—is what I'd like to consider briefly this afternoon as we listen together.

What is art? Why do we produce it? Why do some works of art seem to us of greater significance than others? I'm sure you have, at one time or another, asked yourself such questions. They are hardly new. Two of our earliest thinkers in the West have said in their different ways that art is fundamentally a *mimesis*—an imitation. The human animal imitates reality, caring because there *is* creation and he is alive with it. Plato taught

---

Cheddar Gorge, Somerset

that art imitates reality at what today, we might call two degrees of separation. Aristotle taught that art gives us the *universal* aspects of life that otherwise we might know only from particulars. Wagner knew that. In the act we have just heard, the mastersingers of Nuremberg, who seem to know more about *rules* and particulars than about nature and life, ask young Walther where he learned the art of singing, and he answers that he learned it in the wintry stillness of his castle, by his fireside, reading an old book of poems by Walther von der Vogelweide—that is to say, Walther of the bird-meadow. And then, when spring came and the earth was full of sound, Walther says he learned still more from the meadow birds themselves. In short, he learned first not from rules but by *mimesis*. And from that moment on, Wagner gives us a whole, pattern of imagery that courses through the music: the songbird becomes a metaphor for the poet.

The foremost thinker of the Middle Ages thought of art primarily in terms of beauty—but defined it simply as the *recta ratio factibilium*, the “right way of making something”. Poetry is, after all, just a Greek word for making, and for Thomas Aquinas, there would be no fundamental difference between making a good poem and making a good shoe: a proper organization of the parts will *naturally* result in a thing of beauty. In the New Criticism of my undergraduate days, understanding poetry was understanding how the separate elements of poetry—words, sounds, and images—came together to make a poem. Art, according to this aesthetic, is good craftsmanship. Wagner knew that. Young David, learning his craft from Hans Sachs, tells Walther in the first act, “*Schumacherei und Poeterei, die lern’ ich da alleinerlei*”. “Shoemaking and poetry, I’m learning them both at the same time . . . how to sole the shoe with a well-fitted stanza”. And from that moment on, through the rest of the opera, the well-made shoe becomes a metaphor for the well-made song.

In modern times, the question asked became less “What is art?” and more “Are there any objective standards, or is our appreciation of art relative, a matter of personal choice?” Santayana and others have said that, when we contemplate a work of art, we project our own emotions onto it, and it becomes beautiful to us. It is not really a case of “I know what I like” or “I like what I know”, but “You can only see in a work of art what, to some degree, you already have within *yourself*.” Those who do not like, say, Bach have not yet developed in *themselves* a consciousness of, and a feeling for, what Bach is doing in his music. Hans Sachs knows that one

## *Wagner and the Wonder of Art*

can always learn to like, even love, what one does not at first understand, and he shows this in the opera from beginning to end. He has no patience with the false maxim “de gustibus”. Taste can be cultivated. Horizons can be expanded. And throughout the opera we watch all the people of Nuremberg, including its masters, grow in the knowledge and love of music that is innovative and new to them, music that requires that they go out of themselves to hear the beauty in it.

Another question asked in aesthetics is “How does an imperfect man find it in him to make beautiful things?” That is a question often asked about Wagner himself. We’ll get Wagner’s answer to it, metaphorically as always, near the start of the act we are about to hear. As Hans Sachs sits beneath his elder tree making a shoe, he wonders about Walther’s song: how could such a young hot-head possibly have made eight notes of music into a strain so beautiful that now he can’t get it out of his memory? Well, Sachs concludes, “A song bird sings because it is his nature to sing. There is a sweet compulsion that *drives* him to sing. And because he *must* sing, he *can*.” Any artist worthy of the name will tell you of that compulsion: an artist creates because he has to. And that compulsion not only *demand*s that he exceed his limitations; it *enables* him to do so.

Then there is the really profound question about art: “What does it mean?” Wagner’s philosopher of choice, and a major influence on his greatest works, was Arthur Schopenhauer, who held that art expresses, in words or shapes or (most powerfully) in music, an otherwise imperceptible reality that, for good or—far more often—for ill, operates in human lives. Schopenhauer called it *Wille*. Hans Sachs, in a moment of profound and even pessimistic introspection, calls it *Wahn*. Perhaps the best translation of that difficult word, for this century, is “the irrational”. Unreason, for better or worse, acts in the lives of us apparently reasoning creatures. It runs through each of us like a flaw in bright metal. It can be terribly destructive; it can also be, Wagner says, the potential source of our finest art. But it has to be directed. In the soliloquy “Wahn, Wahn” in Act III, at the great heart of this opera, Hans Sachs, pouring over a book of history, wonders about the endless succession of miseries the race has passed through, ponders the ambivalent force, *Wahn*, that drives us to destruction—and then rises from his book, goes to his window, sees morning light break over the rooftops of his city, and vows to direct that irrational, potentially destructive force, *Wahn*, to good ends. When Walther comes to him with a song that has welled up in him in a dream (that most irra-

tional of human experiences), Sachs tells him that the truest revelation of *Wahn* comes to us in dreams. He helps Walther fashion his midsummer-night's dream into a work of art—and into no ordinary work of art, but into a song that solves the problems that, the night before, beset his beloved city.

And as always in this opera, there is a metaphor that supports this. Baptism. Art can have an almost sacramental power, a power to cleanse, to *save* us from our *Wahn*. (Schopenhauer himself had suggested a correlation between his concept of *Wille* and the Christian doctrine of original sin, from which baptism redeems the believer.) All of *Die Meister-singer* takes place on the eve and the feast of John the Baptist. Sachs is named for John the Baptist. At the opera's start, the people of Nuremberg hymn their hope that the Baptist will lift them up by the river Jordan. Well, the song Hans Sachs helps Walther create out of his *Wahn*, the song he christens, the song he slyly arranges to be sung at the river Pegnitz in the last scene—that song brings a great wash of cleansing and rebirth (Wagner's own word is redemption) to all the characters whose lives have been thrown awry by the madness of *Wahn*.

And so to our last question—"Why do we need art?" I don't suppose Leontyne Price ever considered herself a philosopher, but she answered that question once, before a senate panel, pleading for national support of the arts and quoting from Herodotus, who spoke some twenty-five centuries ago of an ancient people who succeeded in conquering other nations—but no one knows anything else about them now because they produced no artists. Art is the expression of a people, and it still speaks when empires pass away. So, in his last great solo at the opera's end, Hans Sachs tells Walther, the young knight with a sword and a song, that the survival of his civilization, of his Germany, depends not on making war but on creating and preserving great works of art. And that, he says, is something the masters of Nuremberg, whatever their faults, have always known. Walther must respect that.

But, deepest of all, we need art if we are to deal with the inevitable sadness in our lives. Wagner only allows Hans Sachs one line about the great loss he suffered in the past. "Hatt' einst ein Weib und Kinder genug", he tells Eva. "I once had a wife and children enough to satisfy me." The historical Hans Sachs *lost* his wife and seven children, probably from the plague. Wagner's Hans Sachs has nurtured a hope of marrying Eva and having children again. But, in the act we are about to hear, he

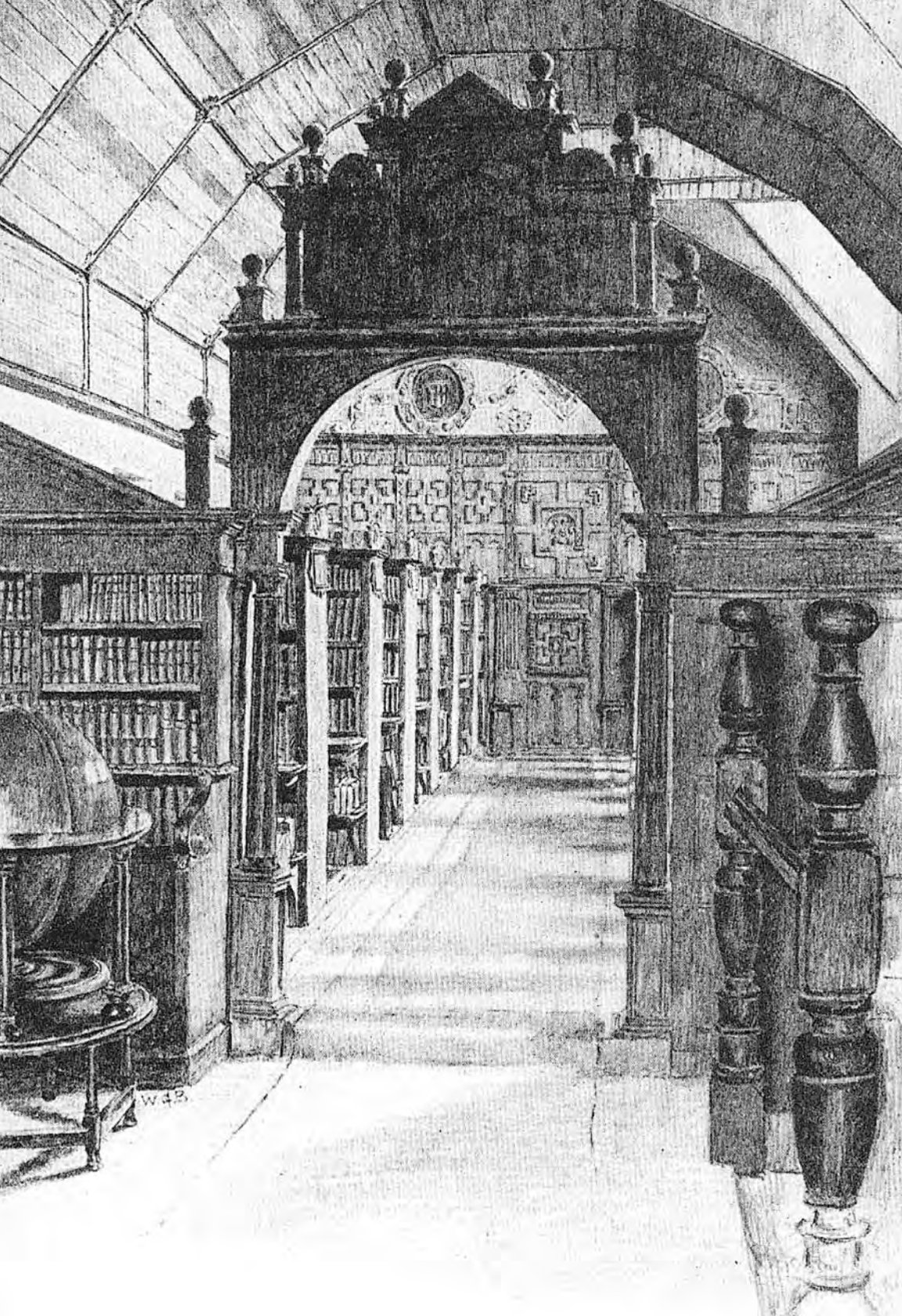
### *Wagner and the Wonder of Art*

realizes that he must resign himself and give her up to the younger poet with whom she has fallen love. *It is Sach's dedication to his art that enables him to make that sacrifice.* Wagner tells us this, not in words, but in the prelude to Act III, where themes associated with selfless resignation, humble shoe-making, and ennobling art come together, and we look into the soul of Hans Sachs. Here is the “Resignation Theme” that begins Act III and will recur, with almost tragic poignancy, in all of its great moments:

Can we sum up Wagner's aesthetic, as expressed in *Die Meistersinger*, in the half-minute that remains to us? If we read the music and the metaphors rightly, we can say that art, for Richard Wagner, is fashioned from both innovating spirit and respect for tradition. It can speak powerfully to us *if* we have within ourselves the capacity to respond to it. It can survive the fall of empires, to speak to future civilizations about the civilization that produced it. It can tell us what we need to know about ourselves, perhaps most of all about the flaw in human nature that makes mysteries of our lives. And it can help us to accept the inevitable sadness in life—as well as to sing like songbirds from the sheer joy of being alive.



Tolkien lived at 76 Sandfield Rd. in Headington for 15 years, from 1953 until 1968. There is a plaque above the garage saying this.



W.B.

# Wise Words for University Graduands

Owen Lee, CSB

Mr. Chancellor,  
Mr. President,  
Distinguished colleagues,  
Parents and friends of the graduands,  
Fellow members of the class of 2001:

A very long time ago, when I was your age, a graduating student asked the historian Charles Beard, “Can you sum up everything you have learned in five minutes?” He answered that he could do better than that. He could do it in just four lines:

“Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad,”  
“The mills of God grind slowly,  
but they grind exceeding fine,”  
“The bee fertilizes the flower it robs,” and  
“When it is dark enough you can see the stars.”

It was the reply, not just of someone who had pondered the wisdom of books of many peoples, but of someone who had experienced, over a long span of years, the complexities of life. Well, I have five minutes here to be wise, and I’ve taken those four lines as my text because, while you have honoured me here today, I am not yet the wise man Charles Beard was then, and the occasion calls for wise words—to mark the successful completion of the higher education of the men and women ranged in rows across this hall. I should like to address the burden of my remarks to them.

Dear graduates, what you receive at this ceremony is called a degree, that is to say, a step forward in the onward progress of your learning. You may now begin learning beyond the degree you have earned. Now, we may hope, you can begin, with your newly acquired qualifications, to help the rest of us face our common problems.

They are not easy problems:  
the impotence of our religions,  
the hypocrisy of our morals.  
the absurdity of our economic systems,

---

The Library Interior at Merton College, Oxford. Sketch by W.G. Blackall.

the desecration of our natural environment,  
the inanity of our entertainments,  
the ferocity of our sports,  
the lameness of our laws, and most of all,  
the insufficiency of our love.

Those are the problems we face. I haven't made them up. I've quoted them from the conscience of the Jewish novelist Chayym Zeldis.

Those of us who have already lived most of our lives need your help, because *you* are, please God, still sane with the sanity of what you have learned and, as is clear every night on the evening news, some of *us*, those whom the gods would destroy, appear to be mad. Will you be able to do anything for us? A cynic, seeing how little progress in real goodness has been made in his lifetime, would say, "No". A saint might say, "Perhaps, but not in one lifetime. In God's time." Well, the earth has existed four and a half billion years, and of all that time the human race has existed only one quarter of one percent. And yet we can say, with some justification, that God's time is accelerating, from our human point of view. The mills have indeed ground slowly but—your parents may remember the way it was put in their generation—suppose we gather together eight hundred people, one person for each lifetime in the history of the human race, and then line them up in order, here, down and around the aisles. The astonishing facts are that

most of those 800 people, a full 640, would not even have built a  
house to live in;  
only the last 150 were even remotely civilized;  
only the last 70 could put their knowledge in writing;  
only the last 30 could have been Christians;  
only the last 3 knew the uses of electricity,

and the last 1, who is you—ought you to wait for another ten or another hundred in line to succeed you before the human race makes the greatest advance of all—solving the problems of war, violence, injustice, ignorance, and hate?

No. *The mills are grinding slowly*, but the race, for all the setbacks it has suffered, *is* being ground to a finer grain. And we've got to keep inching forward, each of us helping in some way, each of us giving something for what he takes.

*The bee fertilizes the flower it robs.*

Life is a gift, and its problems are challenges to be met. We can't afford to opt out, drop out, retreat to the isolation of drugs or aestheticism or mere money-making just because the world today is in a scarifying mess.



## Wise Words for University Graduates

*When it is dark enough you can see the stars.*

So we *don't* live to see all the wrongs righted. We've still got to make the effort to right the wrongs. Because no one else will do it. God will not do it. God works through human lives. Through *us*, when we do what we can. You've got immediate problems to face, finding your way in the world. A person's twenties—which is where most of you are—are not the easiest time of life. And it may seem unrealistic and even selfish of me to ask you, in your twenties, to help us—three times your age—with our problems. But that is what I am asking you to do, each of you in your own way. You are our best hope.

Perhaps you believe with all your heart that there is a God to help you, to work through you. Perhaps you do not believe that there is a God at all. I took my lead here today from a wise un-believer, Charles Beard, for that reason. And I'm going to conclude now with a statement from an unlikely believer, Rainer Maria Rilke. From his *Book of Hours*, poems addressed to God. To the God who needs us. That God, Rilke said, speaks to us all—but only once: "*Gott spricht zu jedem . . .*"

God speaks to each of us only once—  
at the moment *before* he creates us.  
Then he walks silently with each  
of us out of the night.  
And the words He says before life begins,  
those cloud-words, are these:  
"Sent forth by your senses and  
your intelligence,  
Go to the farthest limit of your longing.  
Give me substance.  
Grow like a flame behind the  
things you experience  
So that the shadow they cast may cover Me.  
Let everything happen to you,  
beauty and terror.  
Only go. No experience is the ultimate one.  
And let not yourself be separated  
from me."  
"Near is the land that they call life.  
You will recognize it by its seriousness."  
Give me your hand.

*Gott spricht zu jedem nur eh er ihn macht,  
dann geht er schweigend mit ihm  
aus der Nacht.  
Aber die Worte, eh jeder beginnt,  
diese wolkigen Worte, sind:  
Von deinen Sinnen hinausgesandt  
geh'bis an deiner Sehnsucht Rand;  
gieb mir Gewand.  
Hinter den Dingen wachse als Brand,  
dass ihre Schatten, ausgespannt,  
immer mich ganz bedecken.  
Lass dir Alles geschehn: Schönheit  
und Schrecken.  
Man muss nur gehn: Kein Gefühl  
ist das fernste.  
Lass dich von mir nicht trennen.  
Nah ist das Land, das sie das  
Leben nennen.  
Du wirst es erkennen an seinem Ernste.  
Gieb mir die Hand.*

Graduates, after this beginning today, keep learning. Open yourselves up to all experience that is truly human. Give back to the flower of life what you take from it. Don't be afraid of the inevitable crises in life. They mean growth. When it is dark enough you can see the stars. Some of *us* may seem mad, bent on destruction. But let goodness work in *you*. Give it substance. And in His own good time, which is accelerating in your day, may God speed you on your way.



## Reviews

### *Recent Biographies*

*Tolkien: Man and Myth (A Literary Life)* by Joseph Pearce. London and San Francisco: HarperCollins and Ignatius, 1998.

*Tolkien: A Celebration* by Joseph Pearce. London and San Francisco: HarperCollins and Ignatius, 1999.

*Tolkien: A Biography* by Michael White. Little, Brown and Company, 2001.

*J.R.R. Tolkien: The Man Who Created The Lord of the Rings* by Michael Coren. London: Boxtree, 2001.

*J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator* by Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull. London: HarperCollins, 1995.

*The Inklings Handbook* by Colin Duriez and David Porter. London: Azure, 2001.

*Tolkien's Ring* by David Day, illustrated by Alan Lee. London: Pavilion, 1994/1999 (first paperback edition 2001).

*Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England* by Jane Chance (revised edition). University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

A Tolkien issue of *The Chesterton Review* would not be complete without some mention, however inadequate, of some of the many important books on Tolkien that have appeared in the last few years and which have not yet been reviewed in

our pages. Tom Shippey's books receive separate treatment, as do Verlyn Flieger's. Patrick Curry's study *Defending Middle-Earth* (now reissued by HarperCollins) was reviewed a few years ago.

Joseph Pearce's work on Tolkien has received wide attention around the time of the film release. Based partly on research conducted at the Centre for Faith & Culture in Oxford, the two books did a great deal to redress the fact that until then, Tolkien's Catholicism had been largely ignored as somehow irrelevant to an understanding of the great novel. Pearce's "literary life" did not claim to be a definitive biography in competition with the official biography by Humphrey Carpenter, but with lively enthusiasm it evoked the spirit of the man, justified the popular poll that made him the "author of the century" and revealed the central importance of his faith. The companion volume of essays by a wide range of writers (*Tolkien: A Celebration*) supported this work and enabled a multi-faceted exploration of many of the spiritual and other themes in *The Lord of the Rings*.

---

Tolkien was a devout Catholic. He normally went to St. Aloysius Church on Woodstock Road, Oxford.

In comparison, the other biographies under review are much lighter stuff. Michael Coren's book is enjoyably and simply written, in fact many people may find it too simply written, for it reads like a talk, as though transcribed from a series of speeches. It draws on a range of pictures (all black and white) of Tolkien, of places associated with him and of various editions of his books, that would make it an attractive gift for a young person who wants to know more about their literary hero without having to plough through an academic study. For someone who wants then to go further, and takes an interest in the Inklings as a group, *The Inklings Handbook* might make a suitable gift, since it covers a range of basic information about each of these authors and their writings. Again, it is not a book for scholars, but as an introduction it works quite well. Michael White's biography, on the other hand, has few redeeming features and many gross inaccuracies. It seems to contribute little, if anything, to the existing literature.

Tolkien, of course, was a visual artist as well as a writer. Most readers will be aware of the slightly naïve maps and drawings that he made to illustrate *The Hobbit*. He also drew and painted scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. But his illustrated work goes back a long way, to the various children's picture-books he made for the entertainment of his own children and which have since been pub-

lished for a wider audience as his popularity has grown—books such as *Mr Bliss*, *The Father Christmas Letters* and *Roverandom*. He also laboured long and hard over calligraphy (especially Elvish), and even the design of N'menorean tiles and Elvish heraldry. All of this side of his work is beautifully examined and reproduced in a splendid and scholarly coffee-table book by Wayne G. Hammond and Christian Scull. It is a book full of surprises, even for lovers of Tolkien: not least the lovely paintings and drawings from nature that fill the early part of the book. The vivid descriptions of the natural world, of trees and flowers and mountains and storms, which fill *The Lord of the Rings* should have prepared us for these revelations, I suppose, but nevertheless it is a joy to see them receive such respect and attention by both the authors and the producers of this fine book.

Tolkien as a "mythologist" is the subject of the last two books under review. Jane Chance is Professor of English at Rice University, and her book (one of a pair from the University Press of Kentucky, the other of which focuses on the theme of power) is essentially a literary study, now updated in the light of recent publications by and about Tolkien, of his attempt to create a "mythology for England", based on a range of influences and on his study of medieval Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature, including of course *Beowulf*, *The Ancrene Wisse* and *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight*. The book is

## Reviews

valuable for the range of Tolkien's writing it encompasses, including the short stories and the scholarly articles, but it is strange that the influence of the Finnish Kalevala receives no more than the briefest of mentions. For those who want to pursue that particular connection, the expanded edition of *Kalevala Mythology* by Juha Y. Pentiköinen, translated and edited by Ritva Poom (Indiana University Press, 1999) might be a place to start.

David Day's book is of a very different kind. Illustrated by one of the front-line Tolkien artists (who helped to shape the recent film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*), Alan Lee, it explores one particular theme in Tolkien's writing—that of the Ring of Power—through the mythologies of many cultures, some of which at least certainly helped to shape Tolkien's approach to the subject. These include not only the obvious Norse and Germanic, Celtic and Wagnerian analogies to the One Ring, but also the less well-known Ring of Solomon and the magic rings of Chinese and Asian mythology. David Day demonstrates a considerable gift in the vivid retelling of such varied material, along with a profound grasp of Tolkien's genius in producing essentially a "new" but "valid" transformation of an age-old theme. He concludes that Tolkien's achievement was in part to manifest the "essentially new way of thinking" that Einstein believed was required if man is to survive into the coming centuries after the invention

of the Atomic Bomb. The goal of the Quest is no longer to "conquer Sauron with the Ring". "In the end, it is not the power of the mind nor the strength of the body but the instincts of the human heart that save the world. It is the simple capacity for mercy that finally allows evil to be overthrown."

Stratford Caldecott  
Plater College  
Oxford

\* \* \*

*The History of Middle-Earth, Vols 1-12*, by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1980-97.

*Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on The History of Middle-Earth* edited by Verlyn Flieger and Carl F. Hostetter. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.

*A Question of Time: J.R. Tolkien's Road to Faerie* by Verlyn Flieger. Kent State University Press, 1997 (first paperback edition 2001).

Three years after *The Silmarillion* appeared, Christopher Tolkien also produced a volume of his father's *Unfinished Tales*. The first posthumous book had been eagerly awaited by admirers of *The Lord of the Rings*, who had long known that the published novel had been subordinate in Tolkien's own mind and throughout his adult life to a much larger project. But *The Silmarillion* proved a disappointment to many. Rich and fascinating it undoubtedly was, but it was too rich, too dense, too difficult for all but the most dedicated. Part of the reason for this was the sheer number of invented names

—characters, races, places—that the reader had to keep in mind, and the relative lack of dialogue compared with more novelistic, popular works. But *The Unfinished Tales* was different. Here the texture of the stories was closer to that of *The Lord of the Rings*, or at least to its famous Appendices, and they dealt with many familiar names and events (a description of N<sup>o</sup>menor, a History of Galadriel and Celeborn, and so on). The first half of the book also contained a long tale, hardly “unfinished” at all, that was clearly fit to be classed among Tolkien’s very greatest work: the *Tale of the Children of H<sup>o</sup>rin*, modelled on that of the tragic hero Kullervo in the Finnish Kalevala cycle—a kind of tribute by Tolkien to his predecessor L<sup>o</sup>nnrot. Other important pieces in this skillfully edited collection, such as the wistful tale of the mariner Aldarion (heir of the fifth King of N<sup>o</sup>menor) and his stay-at-home wife Erendis, make this an essential volume for admirers of Tolkien’s writing. But it proved to be only the prelude to a long series of posthumous works, as Christopher explored the incredible legacy that lay buried among his father’s untidy and often almost-indecipherable papers.

The series as a whole came to be called *The History of Middle-Earth*. As a work of scholarship it is an achievement of which no one but Christopher Tolkien would have been capable. Not only had he known and shared Tolkien’s love of mythology from childhood, and been

intimately involved in the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* itself, but he had become a scholar in Tolkien’s own chosen field, that of medieval language and literature. Readers will, of course, come to these works with different levels of interest and different levels of attention. To my mind, the volumes of the series which trace the successive drafts of *The Lord of the Rings* are of less interest (except for students of creative writing and perhaps of psychology) than the early *Lost Tales* and some of the later volumes. These I would encourage anyone to read alongside Tolkien’s Letters and major essays.

It would take too long to do more than give a few examples of the contents of these volumes. In Volume 9 (*Sauron Defeated*) we find a very valuable insight into Tolkien’s view of the importance of Samwise Gamgee, in the form of two versions of an Epilogue that was reluctantly (but rightly, for artistic reasons) omitted from *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a domestic scene at Bag End, after the departure of Frodo into the West. Sam is talking with his children about a letter he has received from King Elessar: a letter which Tolkien spent some time writing and drawing, and which is reproduced here. The same volume includes an unfinished dream—and time-travel story reflecting his friendship with the Inklings called the “Notion Club Papers” (about which more below). Volume 10, *Morgoth’s Ring*, includes the heart of Tolkien’s imaginative theology,

## Reviews

along with his abortive but fascinating attempt to reconcile his creation myth with modern astronomical theories. As one studies all these writings, the *legendarium* starts to seem like a living organism, constantly growing and evolving but not yet fully mature, or like the emerging vision of a landscape still partially wrapped in clouds. Right until the end Tolkien was wrestling with the names and histories he had created, trying to discern the answers to a myriad puzzles.

Of all the scholars who have written about this process, Verlyn Flieger is perhaps the most interesting. Tolkien's *Legendarium* is a collection of essays co-edited by her which contains a great deal of interest, from studies of the invented languages of Middle-Earth and their antecedents to critical assessments of the literary value of the History. Tolkien's attempts to revise radically the story of the creation in his own "Silmarillion" come under scrutiny by Wayne G. Hammond, and Charles E. Noad offers an account of what Tolkien himself intended the Silmarillion to look like when published (*The Silmarillion* edited by Christopher Tolkien is necessarily a rather different book). Along the way, John D. Rateliff compares the "Notion Club Papers" with C.S. Lewis's *The Dark Tower*, and disposes of the theory that the latter is some kind of forgery. The book contains a detailed Bibliography of the works of Christopher Tolkien, an essay comparing Gandalf to Odin, and

an insightful piece by Verlyn Flieger which portrays Tolkien as a "bridge between the worlds".

Flieger makes much here of Tolkien's own sense that the *legendarium* was something he was "recording" or "discovering" rather than "inventing". With her wide interest in Celtic and Arthurian mythology, she seems to be particularly sensitive to the spiritual dimensions of Tolkien's work, as she demonstrated with her earlier book, *Splintered Light*. In *A Question of Time* she traces the influence of J.W. Dunne and other early twentieth-century writers (especially George Du Maurier, Charlotte Moberly, James M. Barrie, Olaf Stapleton and perhaps Henry James) on Tolkien's time-travel stories, "The Lost Road" of circa 1936 and "The Notion Club Papers" exactly ten years later, to which she devotes the kind of careful scrutiny they richly deserve. Not only do the "Papers" illuminate Tolkien's use of time and dreams in *The Lord of the Rings* (Frodo's dream in Bombadil's house, for example, which turns out to be prophetic, or the experience of being "outside time" in Lothlórien), but they reflect the character of the conversations and arguments that must have gone on among the Inklings, the fellowship of literary explorers which is portrayed here in vivid fictional form. Both stories centre on Tolkien's own dream of the drowning of Atlantis/N'menor: "the ineluctable Wave, either coming out of the quiet sea, or coming towering in

over the green inlands. It still occurs occasionally, though now exorcised by writing about it. It always ends by surrender, and I awake gasping out of deep water." He took the dream as a race-memory and a family inheritance (indeed his son Michael seems to have "inherited" it), and the intention of the stories was to get back to the event that it recalls or represents. Readers of *The Lord of the Rings* will be aware of the N<sup>o</sup>menor connection: Aragorn and the line of Kings descends from Elendil and the "faithful remnant" of escapees from the lost island.

Dreams provide the "technology" for time-travel in these stories and in *The Lord of the Rings*—although language is perhaps equally important, and receives less attention in Flieger's book. She is more concerned to demonstrate that Tolkien's writing had a purpose that becomes more apparent upon subsequent careful re-readings, especially when illuminated by the unpublished works whose themes were eventually subsumed into *The Lord of the Rings*, and Dunne's concept of "fields of attention". That purpose seems to have been the exploration of time and of consciousness, particularly levels of consciousness beyond the reach of the everyday mind. Flieger speculates that this was not unrelated to his experience of the War, which removed him from the everyday into a realm of heightened consciousness, tragedy and loss. Tolkien was searching for something throughout his life, and it was the Otherworld.

At the boundary of mortal time lies the perilous realm of Faërie, the world of the Imagination, full of "pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold", but nonetheless, Tolkien believed, "as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life. . . ."

Stratford Caldecott  
Plater College  
Oxford

\* \* \*

*On Lying in Bed and Other Essays* by G.K. Chesterton, edited, with an Introduction by Alberto Manguel (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 1999) 518 pages. \$35.

Anthologies of a famous writer's work are a special case for book-reviewing. Usually they are reviewed by admirers of the writer, and so the chances are that new, book-length samples are almost guaranteed a welcome, especially if they contain a goodly representation of the best in their field.

This anthology of Chesterton's prose is in that category, and as I have come to believe that a collection of Chesterton's essays is probably the best introduction to him and his work, I applaud the enthusiasm and initiative that have prompted this venture. For many young readers in particular the tonic effects of the Chestertonian personality and vision are most accessible through the brilliant array of short and pungent journalistic gems which overflowed from the mineral-fresh running stream of



## Reviews

his mind. None of the pieces is dull or without fascination; some are little masterpieces. Therefore, one feels gratitude for the gift of Alberto Manguel in editing this sample with his own appreciative Introduction. It gives added pleasure that the book comes from a press in Alberta, for a time my own-stamping ground. But all this does not preclude some criticisms I have to offer. The pleasure of seeing more Chesterton set before the reading public must not blind one to the fact that such a book is to be judged in the light of how well the selection is made and how wise and accurate the accompanying Introduction may be. As it is, both the Introduction and the selection are flawed.

I began the last paragraph with a deliberate use of the word "prose" instead of the word "essay" for I could not describe the collection as all essays in the sense in which the title-piece "On Lying in Bed" is an essay. In fact the full title, "On Lying in Bed and Other Essays" is quite misleading. It clearly implies, even seems to declare, that here is a 500-page collection of the short pieces, the "essays" in the tradition of both the classic essay of Goldsmith, Hazlitt, Lamb, Stevenson, Birrell, Lucas, Lynd and Menchen, reviving of late, and the rich informality of the best literary journalism. But Manguel offers a compilation which relies fairly heavily on book-length prose works which, though Chesterton's main body of writing, are not the same sort of thing as the periodical journalism, whatever the

essay-like structure of individual chapters. I must confess to sharp disappointment that the volume did not consist entirely of short essays, if only to show the magical variety and wonderful blend of poetic, narrative and comic elements which Chesterton used to play such entertaining and evocative tunes as are able to be wrought from this instrument of the "personal" or reflective essay.

The book offers one editorial contribution highlighting the range of interests in the compilation, namely, the listing of pieces under headings mainly drawn from essay titles such as "The Walking Paradox", "On Writing Badly", "Poor Old Shakespeare", "A Defence of Detective Stories", "A Defence of Nonsense", "Monsters and the Middle Ages" etc., but this is hardly indispensable and of doubtful value, whereas the provision of sources is, one would think, almost a necessity. There are no sources given. The sources would have been of real help to the Chestertonian reader or scholar and, combined with a chronological order, would give the general reader some idea of the topical interests from which Chesterton draws what T.S. Eliot called "the topical excuse for the permanent". The listing of sources would also indicate the multiplicity of outlets in journals, magazines and newspapers for which Chesterton wrote his columns. These are unique in being of perennial interest, not merely to the specialist, but to all who care for healthy humanity and innocent wit, for savour

of the great gusto Chesterton admired in Dickens on whom he wrote so penetratingly.

Of course, people who have special or critical knowledge of a writer's work will differ, sometimes radically, from one another on what to include in a given volume representing an author's work. On the whole, this collection is very good. But remember that it has extracts or whole chapters from books such as *Orthodoxy*, *St. Francis of Assisi*, *A Short History of England*, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, *G.F. Watts* and others. This means a much greater depth and plenitude of thought and scope for full play of Chestertonian reflection. But it gives a taste of the big works while omitting some obvious candidates for inclusion as examples of the art of the essay practised by Chesterton. Among these are such pieces as "The Architect of Spears", "The Shop of Ghosts – a Good Dream", "The Angry Street – a Bad Dream", "The Diabolist", the early "Bookman" (1901) essay on Tennyson which is a freshly original appreciation of Tennyson's great love of beauty but willingness to fight for hope against despair, "The Appetite of Earth" with its perfect illustration of how Chesterton saw the sacramental dimension of material, created things, and "The Prison of Jazz". Now it is true that there are some equally good essays in the volume, but at least the exclusion of "The Architect of Spears" and "The Diabolist" is a sign of limited aware-

ness. The first is extremely well-known and combines comparisons of some Asian art with that of the West (especially the Gothic) with an eloquent exposition of the medieval Catholic spirit prompted by his memorable experience of Lincoln Cathedral. The other is central to understanding of his youthful experience of evil, being a crucial recollection of what Chesterton saw of the dark side of human nature and the potential for devilry. It surely must have a place in a 500-page anthology.

On the other hand, there are some excellent pieces which I had not read or had forgotten until I read this book, such as "Paints in a Paint Box" (celebrating the creative potential of pigments and colours which are not just substances like gold or diamonds formed once and for all), or one titled "Lead" which goes beyond Bassanio in his reasons for choosing the lead casket, perhaps too far from total conviction. One intriguing item is an essay, "On Being Moved" in which Chesterton is moving from Battersea, and is trying to write an essay for deadline as his last remnants of furniture are being removed and this piece briefly illuminates his sadness (laconically expressed) on leaving London for the country. How marvellous London was for him! It was his foster city, nurturer of his happiest journalism, and his poetic vision which was so bound up with chimney-pots, omnibuses and street cabs, whirling presses and taverns like "The

## Reviews

Cheshire Cheese". His long fight for truth and distributism continued from the country, but the lifeline of London persisted. One of the great paradoxes of Chesterton's writing is that he so often wrote with a balance and serenity, a humorous acceptance of inconveniences and a calm profundity amidst all the pressures of daily journalism; while sometimes his full-length works (*Heretics*, *Orthodoxy*, *Robert Browning*) are written excitedly and the "Jongleur de Dieu" becomes so afire with conjuring as to exaggerate, overstating a case, and thus losing some conviction (as in his treatment of *law* in *Orthodoxy*). The fault occurs also in short pieces, but not frequently, and the steady pulse of conversational wisdom is maintained.

One of the pieces in Manguel's selection, longer than the periodical essays but not one I recognise at this moment, is a 13-page exposition on "The Romance of Rhyme". It is a striking explication and defence of rhyme in poetry and applies a recurrent thesis of Chesterton, that the "vulgar" instincts of ordinary people in liking what some elites reject as "childish" are often sound; so that, for instance, obvious melodies and jingly rhymes are popular because they are natural expressions of something intrinsic to sound, just as interest in "penny dreadfuls" is there not because people like rubbish but because they like stories even if they happen to be "bad" literature. From this Chesterton develops a superb clarification and argument in defence

of rhyme. And much of it is equally applicable to metre, for the key to what Chesterton maintains is that poetry, verse, is like song. Chesterton is aware of the way in which the mere seed of the nursery-rhyme or the piece of verse sprouts into the fuller, richer ramifications of the music of words we find in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Browning or Tennyson, just as a peasant tune in a corner of Germany may become the basis of a whole symphonic movement. Contemporary "poets" would do well to take note.

I turn now to some of the ideas or assumptions in Manguel's Introduction. His treatment of Chesterton's life and his style is good, and he brings out main elements in Chesterton's non-conformity, including his anti-aristocratic bias and distrust of the commercial, rich, and sympathy with the popular traditions and interests of the poor. But he does not dwell, as he should, however briefly, on the crucial influence of Dickens who was a central figure in the epoch in which the Chesterton family was shaped. Moreover, the Introduction does not assay an evaluation of the little "essays" as such and might just as well have been written for a general anthology. As I say, the title does not fit. But these points are minor ones compared with the assertions made about what Manguel calls "the darker side of his writings". He refers mainly to supposed anti-Semitism but also to anti-feminism". On the second of these charges, let it be said simply that

Chesterton esteemed and admired woman (he would not use the term “Women”) to the point of reverence, and was correct in the statement he made about being dictated to quoted in the Introduction. However wrong Chesterton may have been about the right to vote, it is unfair to write on this matter without explaining exactly how Chesterton argued against the conventional modern mind which gave far too much value to mere voting (in a highly unrepresentative system dominated by parties) and which condoned exploitation of women in industry. The state of many families caused by many women being forced out to work by the inadequate single-wage, especially in a period of lunatic house and land costs, demonstrates how right Chesterton was on some significant aspects of women’s causes. The case of anti-semitism is me serious. It’s a great pity that Manguel falls into the usual fallacies on this matter. And he compounds the error by suggesting that “it is as if a deeper, uglier side of society’s collective madness suddenly held sway forcing the writer to pay a debt to his time and to those in power in his time, over-powering the language of recollection, making his words superficial, obscene.” Anyone who thinks that Chesterton was, even spasmodically, held in such a grip of psychological conformity, has not really appreciated how free he was from any totalitarian tendency or desire to be consonant with a mass-prejudice exploited by politicians. His constant crusade for the family,

his sympathy with the Boers and rejection of official propaganda on South African policies, and his admiration for Dickens’s examples of those whom society despised, such as Jo the Crossing-sweeper, Dick Swiveller, the Convict Magwitch, Newman Noggs or Micawber, are but some main sources of light on his humane, Christian love of individual persons and their freedom.

It’s hard to be patient with the frequent assertions that Chesterton was anti-Semitic. I have said before and I say it again, as in my review of Race Mathews’ book, *Jobs of Our Own*, in response to Martin Bell’s more elementary errors on this topic in *The Defendant* (August-September, November-December, 1999), or in the response to Kevin Morris *The Chesterton Review* (Feb.-May, 1999) that being critical of Jews, even being unfair to them through exaggeration or because of some bitterness based on grief for his brother, is not the same thing as anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism, as the very word implies, is a racialist thing, a product of a doctrine about Semites or at least about Jewish Semites. In the modern mind, it is ineradicably bound up with Hitlerism. How can critics ignore the life-long Chestertonian ridicule of the Nordic myth, the anti-insular appreciation of other nations, the friendships with Jews, the early attacks on Hitler’s Germany in, for instance, *The Illustrated London News* (April 30, 1933 and August 11, 19, 1934), essays highlighting

## Reviews

Nazism as the chief scourge of the age and the chief threat to the family and freedom, *The Well and the Shallows*, (1935) ? Some, like Mathews, produce strong evidence that Chesterton went too far in both his own anti-Jewish words and in allowing others, more intemperate, to write ugly things for *The New Witness*. But the conclusion that he was anti-Semitic is not warranted. His bias, if bias it was, was one of conviction that there was the danger of dual loyalties with Jews in authority and that plutocracy was often unduly influential and, in turn, influenced by the Jews. Now people may debate the rights and wrongs of this, some saying he was mistaken and unfair about the Jews, others believing that he saw a real problem of undue influence. That there was some excess and lapse into some sentiments unworthy of him is apparently true, as Mathews shows, but by no means did he judge all Jews as harmful or agree with any persecution or hold racialist tenets in a theory of race. It is also true that, especially for the sake of the initiate, particularly young readers, a much better explanation of Chesterton's whole position on Nazism is essential in the context of even mentioning his supposed anti-Semitism. Instead, all that Manguel gives us is "He spoke against Hitler but . . ." After all, if the aim is, as seems implicit in the preparation and release of this new collection, to engage and fascinate new readers, then the dark distortion

of Chesterton's personality and outlook offered here could tend to defeat the purpose. And the question must be asked: "Why not include a few of his anti-racial and anti-Nazi essays?" One must also ask how fair is the association made by Manguel of Chesterton's remarks about women being dictated to and Hitler's rise to power. The whole section of his Introduction to this book dealing with Chesterton's faults is wrong-headed and humourless.

Because the book is Chesterton writing it is like a bird in Spring, ever-fresh and melodious, full of fun, wit and truth, but it is not what I first thought it when I first held it in my hands and read the title. Still, "the more the merrier" as the old saying goes, but not more of the persistent, bilious, sick cloud which is marring even some of the more responsive writing on Chesterton. As I have said in other places, Chesterton's main prejudice was in his low opinion of the capacities of younger nations within the British Empire in the face of Kipling's celebration of them. But we can forgive him that without being at all deceived about his English bias. Others may do likewise.

Apart from its being somewhat different in its choices, and resorting to extracts from complete books it is hard to see that this anthology is any improvement on John Guest's 1939 selection for Colline. At least that old standby consisted entirely of the short essays, a fine contribution to

the legacy of the essay in the belles-lettres tradition, and the instructive entertainment of a multitude of readers, with sixty or so pieces. But let us give at least two cheers for the new anthology.

Peter Hunt  
Franklin, Tasmania  
Australia

\* \* \*

*Chesterton: A Seer of Science* by Stanley L. Jaki. Real View Books, 2001.

It may come as a surprise, even to the most enthusiastic admirer of Chesterton, to find a book devoted to Chesterton's writings on science. Obviously Chesterton was not a scientist, and a superficial reading of some of his works may even suggest that he did no more than poke fun at science and its popularisers. This would, however, do him an injustice, for he had a great respect for genuine science, and his writings on the subject are still relevant today. Professor Jaki's book on Chesterton: *A Seer of Science* was originally published in 1986, and it is good that it is now available to a new generation of readers. Chesterton read very widely, and was familiar with contemporary debates on a wide range of subjects such as paleontology, evolution, relativity and cosmology. Writers such as Spencer and Huxley, Shaw and Wells described the latest scientific advances and their implications for human life, combining genuine science with a range of philosophical views in no way entailed by the

science itself. Many of these views outraged Chesterton and he did not fail to subject them to devastating criticism. In so doing, he made a lasting contribution to the philosophy of science. His writings on science are considered by Jaki under four headings: the philosophy of scientific method, scientism, evolution and cosmology. Underlying all Chesterton's thought is an uncompromising realism, an acceptance of a world distinct from ourselves and owing its being to God. Science is expressed in terms of laws, but are they necessary laws, in the sense that they could not be other than they are? A thousand instances do not prove that a law is necessarily valid, so laws always have a provisional nature. Necessity belongs to logic, not to things. Recognising this, we can maintain the possibility of science while leaving open the possibility of miracles and human freedom.

"Scientism," the belief that all human problems can eventually be solved by science, was rampant in Chesterton's time, and it remains so today. He was one of its most forceful critics, and exposed with devastating clarity the sheer illogicality of the writings of those who proposed science as a universal panacea. The writings of the secularists mentioned above, spread the message that science will make everything possible. This was simply affirmed, with no logical argument. This is still done today, as writers of popular books make confident assertions on subjects far beyond their professional

## Reviews

competence. Chesterton especially opposed the attempts to base religion and even Christian philosophy on the new physics, and the over-optimism of those who claimed that science would soon be complete. Many scientists evoke evolution by chance and the explanation of everything. They treat chance as a causative agent, whereas it simply denotes our ignorance of the causes. While biological evolution provides a convenient overall explanation, and is fully in accord with Christian theism, very little is known about the mechanisms by which it takes place. Of crucial importance is the origin of man, where the evidence points to a decisive break. No animal has ever made symbols and lived by them; art is the signature of man. Materialist evolution not only denies God, it also abolishes man. Every religion implies a view about the universe, and Chesterton held high the universe defined as the totality of consistently-interacting things. Contemporary thought about the proliferation of universes like so many bubbles fails to recognise that by definition any contact with other universes is logically impossible. Likewise it is absurd to talk about universes coming into being from nothing. The universe is most specific and recent research shows that the initial conditions had to be exceedingly finely tuned for the whole evolutionary process to develop in just the way that led to man. The universe does not explain itself; it must have a meaning and therefore someone to

mean it. That meaning is found in its creation by God. Chesterton's writings on scientific method, *scientism*, evolution and cosmology show his uncanny insight into matters relating to science. They show a little known facet of his thought that deserves more attention than it has so far received.

P.E. Hodgson  
Corpus Christi College  
Oxford

\* \* \*

*The Lyttelton Hart-Davis Letters 1955-1962 A Selection* edited by Roger Hudson, London, John Murray (2001) pp. xvi, 368, £22.50

George Lyttelton had taught Rupert Hart-Davis in his famous special class in English literature at Eton. Over the years they became friends, and at a dinner party Lyttelton, now retired, complained of loneliness, that nobody wrote to him. Hart-Davis, by then a publisher with an excellent list chosen by himself, spoke up and said that he would write every week, and so began a correspondence (for the older man also wrote weekly) of seven years that was published in six volumes (1978-84) and is now expertly condensed to one substantial, manageable, and quite delightful book, on the model of a well-chosen *Shorter Pepys* or *Shorter Boswell*.

Both men—one active in retirement, the other in the thick of things—were amiable, curious, great readers and encouragers of reading in others, with discernment, for enjoy-

ment. A protracted exchange of letters, very usual in the French and German literary worlds, is unusual in the English context. The two friends keep the tone friendly, informal, *ex tempore*, with second thoughts rather than revisions. They agree with or question each other's judgments and comment on the passing scene, never running anything into the ground. Each letter has demanded time and effort, and they are clearly intended to be preserved and re-read and even shown to friends, but they never betray the self-regard of the literary letter written for eventual publication as part of one's *oeuvre*.

The range is generous. Lyttelton continued to set and mark university entrance examinations and Hart-Davis was involved in administering the literary prize named for his kinsman Duff Cooper, and so we have frequent glimpses of the routines and upsets thereto attending. Both are well-informed and keen cricketers; there I find myself completely out-classed. Both love jokes and anecdotes, including this, about the very correct and duty-bound King George V. "But much may be forgiven him for (a) when asked what film he would like to see when convalescing, answering 'Anything except that damned Mouse' and (b) when the footman, bringing in the morning royal tea, tripped and fell with his load and heard from the pillow 'That's right, break up the whole bloody palace.' The old autocratic touch." (219)

As good examples of how they take a serious topic and treat it playfully without subverting its seriousness, consider these passages in successive letters. Lyttelton writes (64-5): "I've just finished the [Lyttelton] Strachey-Woolf letters. Not fearfully good are they? Good things here and there of course, but Strachey is often trivial and V.W. often shows off, and on the whole one can see why many people spit at the name of Bloomsbury. Neither had any *humility*, and I am more and more blowed if that isn't the *sine qua non* of all goodness and greatness. The trouble is that if you are very clever and don't believe in God, there is nobody and nothing in the presence of whom or which you can be humble. For instance, Milton and Carlyle, for all their arrogance, were fundamentally humble, don't you think? Here endeth the epistle of George the Apostle."

Hart-Davis replies, "I'm not sure I agree that it's impossible to be humble in spirit unless you believe in God—in fact I'm sure I disagree, and if I weren't so proof-weary would quote examples to prove my point." (65) Lyttelton answers this and ends this line of discussion: "We shan't be able to talk about humility over the spiced beef, but it is exciting to find you disagreeing about it. You will I am sure produce some cogent evidence, but I warn you that an 18-pounder I shall sooner or later bring into action is to maintain blandly, infuriatingly, irrefutably, that a great number of peo-



## Reviews

ple think they don't believe in God, who, in fact, *do!*" (66)

Most of the interest of both men and hence of their book is literary. There is a continuing concern with Henry James, whom Hart-Davis published, with Oscar Wilde, whose voluminous letters he triumphantly edited, and Max Beerbohm, whose literary editor he was. Shared enthusiasms of a more surprising nature keep cropping up—notably Thomas Carlyle and Oliver Wendell Holmes; and even more surprising is the lack of any enjoyment of Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, and (steel yourself, gentle reader) Jane Austen.

It was the time of the great public controversy over the censorship of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. Hart-Davis as a publisher was one of a distinguished panel of literary people ready to testify at the trial in favour of lifting the ban and in effect abolishing all censorship. Lyttelton, not involved in the legal aspect, was sure of his own intense dislike of the book on literary grounds. I could not help recalling, as I read their high praise of Carlyle and dispraise of Lawrence, the close facial resemblance of the two: look at Carlyle in earnest conversation with F.D. Maurice in Ford Madox Brown's famous painting *Work*; and the resemblance is not only physical: they share a prophetic quality, vehemence, sting.

Readers of this journal will be curious to know how Chesterton fares with these great readers of the

mid-twentieth century. Both are on terms of easy familiarity with him as a personality and as a writer. Hart-Davis writes, "A simple man of my acquaintance once met G.K. Chesterton and described him as 'quite all there and very spry'." No need to explain the humour of this or for Lyttelton to elaborate here: ". . . almost everything G.K. Chesterton says of Mr. Pickwick gets me, so to speak, where it tickles. E.G. on the old suggestion that the idea of Mr. P. was really Seymour's. 'To claim to have originated an idea of Dickens is like claiming to have contributed a glass of water to Niagara.'" (113)

Hart-Davis appeared on the BBC quiz programme, the Brains Trust, and Lyttelton made a very short list of people who "could answer immediately and convincingly": they were Chesterton (the first name), Shaw, Cyril Alington, and William Temple. They recall, casually, two of his best quips—how Joseph Chamberlain always "gave the impression of a superb rear-guard fight against enormous odds, when he really had all the big battalions behind him," (167) and his observation that "we all have a profound and manly dislike for the book we have not read." (176) Hart-Davis copies out a passage that he greatly admires and sends it to his friend without identification. Lyttelton admires it in turn, guesses correctly that it is by Justice Holmes: "In his letters there is often that deep bourdon note—he often looks at things *sub specie aeternitatis*. . . . G.K.C.

sometimes strikes this note, e.g. in the account of the Battle of the Marne.” (284) I have read all of Chesterton but can’t place this reference, but the author and recipient of this letter presumably could.

Their knowledge of Chesterton is matched by rapport. After a brief hiatus in the correspondence, Lyttelton writes: “Good! The old rhythm is re-established—systole and diastole don’t they call it? I don’t know exactly what they/it mean(s), and strongly sympathise with the embryo science-student who wrote that in all human affairs could be observed a regular movement of sisterly and disasterly. How G.K. Chesterton would have loved that and brilliantly demonstrated the profound truth of the remark—just as he did of the apparently faulty definition that an optimist was a man who looked after one’s eyes and the pessimist one’s feet.” (205)

I have looked at the index to the unabridged letters and find only one passage to add to the ones cited from the abridgement—an indication that, in the editor’s judgment, the correspondents were at their best when Chesterton came to mind. On 4 April 1957 Lyttelton observes that “the modern note is to be rather sniffy and patronising about G.K.C. Let them! He wrote much that was wise and much that was witty. I wonder if the anthology of him just come out is any good.” Two days later Hart-Davis replies: “I agree that Chesterton is greatly undervalued now, though I am told that his first edi-

tions are much sought by collectors. Certainly time will winnow away a good deal of his minor work, but much will surely remain.”

Certainly, for these two, twenty years and more after Chesterton’s death, a great deal did remain, effortlessly, pleasurably, and to their good.

William Blisset  
University College  
University of Toronto  
Toronto, Canada

\* \* \*

*Leisure, the Basis of Culture (including The Philosophical Act); In Tune With the World; Enthusiasm and Divine Madness; Death and Immortality; The Concept of Sin; The Silence of St. Thomas* by Josef Pieper, St. Augustine’s Press, P.O. Box 2285, South Bend, Indiana 46680.

One of those stories that is supposed to illustrate the different temperaments of different nations goes something like this. Five men from five different countries were to write something on elephants. The Englishman wrote a short book about hunting elephants in Africa, the Frenchman observed elephants in the zoo in Paris and wrote an essay about their love lives, the Russian sat in his room in Moscow and thought and pondered and wrote a thick book called, *The Elephant: Does It Exit?*, the American wrote a series of newspaper articles called “Bigger and Better Elephants,” and the German wrote a two volume work called, *On the Philosophy of the Elephant*. But while many German philosophical

## Reviews

tomes may be long, one German philosopher, Josef Pieper, is well-known for the conciseness of his works, rarely much over a hundred pages, works that Hans Urs von Balthasar nevertheless termed “thick little books.” And St. Augustine’s Press is to be commended for bringing back into print, in some cases in new translations or translated for the first time, many of Pieper’s works. They project to publish about twenty of his books in the next few years, including his autobiography.

Although Pieper wrote many short works, they were not occasional pieces. Rather, he shows himself in nearly everything he wrote preoccupied with a few themes, themes that constantly recur, but because of their profundity, are never exhausted. Pieper returns to these again and again, from different angles, bringing out their different aspects, like someone holding up a diamond to the light and admiring it from different sides.

For example, in what is probably his best known work, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, Pieper is at pains to point out how totalitarian regimes, be they Marxist or National Socialist, desire to mobilize intellectuals, writers, scholars, in service to the regime’s goals, and that this involves a necessary corruption of the liberal arts and their subjection to modern ideas of utility and work. Thus a human activity which is ordered toward contemplation becomes simply another form of mundane work. We are perhaps most

familiar with this point of view in Francis Bacon’s remark, quoted so often that it has attained the status of a self-evident truth, “Knowledge is power.” But Pieper teaches us that knowledge is not power. At least knowledge of the most important things is not power as we usually understand it. Contemplation requires leisure and is not oriented toward the kind of power that Bacon and most of us care about.

One meets with this same question, *mutatis mutandis*, in another of Pieper’s books, *In Tune With the World*. In this latter work Pieper has a long discussion, full of interesting historical details, of the state-sponsored holidays of the French Revolution, of the Soviet state and of Nazi Germany, in which again, what was meant to be a free activity of the human person, festivity, was forced to support the official program of the regime, and even became an occasion for more work — this time, though, for “voluntary, unpaid work.” As Maxim Gorky, at the time cultural minister in the new Soviet government, wrote in 1920, “It is a wonderful idea to make the spring festival of the workers a holiday of voluntary work.” And those who declined to take part in such “festivity” soon began to be called by the ominous title, “labor deserter.”

Like true leisure and true intellectual activity, real festivity necessarily includes an openness to the Divine. “There can be no festivity when man, imagining himself self-sufficient, refuses to recognize that

Goodness of things which goes far beyond any conceivable utility. . . .” And in *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness*, a subtle discussion of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Pieper looks at this theme again, as he contrasts the sophists’ exaltation of efficiency—in this case a misuse of rhetoric in service to essentially utilitarian aims—with “*theoria* . . . that mode of approaching the world which aims solely or chiefly at one single thing: to find out the nature of reality. Philosophical *theoria* aims at truth and nothing else. Cicero and Seneca translated the word *theoria* into Latin; and the word they chose to render it was *contemplatio*.”

We might note too, that the Baconian ideal of knowledge as in service to power, power that can be touched, quantified, used, is not limited to the world of Nazis or Communists. From the frequency with which Bacon’s aphorism is quoted in the United States one ought to be able to see that capitalism, in its usually more gentle but equally ruthless way, has corrupted leisure, the intellectual life and festivity to suit its own ends, as much as any totalitarian regime ever did. America generally goes more slowly but is usually more thorough and successful in her remaking of the world. Some words of John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* about the alternatives to Communism that the West proposed after World War II are apposite here.

“Another kind of response, practical in nature, is represented by the affluent society or the consumer

society. It seeks to defeat Marxism on the level of pure materialism by showing how a free-market society can achieve a greater satisfaction of material human needs than Communism, while equally excluding spiritual values. In reality, while on the one hand it is true that this social model shows the failure of Marxism to contribute to a humane and better society, on the other hand, insofar as it denies an autonomous existence and value to morality, law, culture and religion, it agrees with Marxism, in the sense that it totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs.” (no. 19)

It is possible to more or less successfully subordinate all activities within a society to efficiency and (in this case) moneymaking without the use of terror or a secret police. And in such cases, it is even more necessary to hold fast to what Pieper teaches about these matters, things that in fact he is passing down to us from his own teachers, St. Thomas, Plato, Goethe, and many others.

Another theme that Pieper takes up in more than one of his works is that of man’s status as a creature. In fact, in *The Silence of St. Thomas*, Pieper quotes Chesterton’s remark in his own book on St. Thomas to the effect that Thomas ought to be called “Thomas of the Creator.” For as all three writers point out, it is God who has created us and his creation, for all that it is wounded by sin, is still good. “In his *Commentary on St. John’s Epistle*, St. Thomas remarks

## Reviews

that we can find in Sacred Scripture three different meanings for the term 'the world': first, 'the world' as the creation of God, and second, as the creation perfected in Christ; last, as the material perversion of the order of creation. To 'the world' in this last-named sense, and to this world only, may one apply the saying of St. John: 'The world is seated in wickedness' (I John 5:19). It is precisely the claim of St. Thomas that the first meaning of 'world' (as creation) may not be identified nor interchanged with the third—('world' as material perversion of the order of creation); the world as creation is not seated in wickedness." This from *The Silence of St. Thomas*.

Pieper is at pains more than once to vindicate man's status as a creature of both body and soul, again, because this comes from God's creative act. God did not make us pure spirits, angels, and we do wrong to try to behave as such. In fact, in *Death and Immortality*, Pieper notes that St. Thomas refutes the argument that says "After death, in the state of bliss, the soul will finally be liberated from the body, and thereby will be similar to God, the Pure Spirit." What does Thomas say to this? "The soul united with the body is more like God than the soul separated from the body"—and why?—"because it possesses its nature more perfectly."

In *The Concept of Sin* Pieper takes up this theme once again with regard to the question of Christian ethics. He observes that with some

theologians, such as the Protestant Jurgen Moltmann, there is a notion of man as severed from his own created nature. "According to [this] interpretation, human existence now comes across to theology above all as man's liberation from his own nature, effected by the grace of Christ!" But if man is "liberated from his own nature," then the law of God and man's sin are ultimately reduced simply to positive law, the will of God, which perhaps becomes the whim of God. In fact, however, "'guilt before God' simultaneously concretizes itself as a violation against what world and man are 'because of creation'—which is why it is completely legitimate to say that every sin is 'against nature.'"

As a philosopher, Pieper naturally has much to say about philosophy in his writings. But for one who could be considered a scholastic, his remarks on the subject might seem entirely too romantic: the philosopher is like the lover, philosophy has a special affinity with dying—in *Death and Immortality* he quotes Epictetus, "Let others study cases at law, let others practice recitations and syllogisms. You learn to die." But he bases such statements, not in the musings of the German romantic philosophers, but above all in St. Thomas himself, whom he is always trying to rescue from an overdry and rationalistic interpretation.

All traditions have a tendency to dry up, and the great classical-medieval tradition is no different in that respect. One might say that all



Grisedale Beck, Westmoreland

## Reviews

of Pieper's "thick little books" are efforts to keep that tradition alive, to show it in its many-sided richness, as well as to deal fairly with modern thought and, wherever possible, point out the congruence of modernity with tradition, a congruence often hidden under widely different terminologies and concerns.

In one sense Pieper is a popularizer. That is, he takes the thought of St. Thomas, of Plato, in fact, of practically the entire tradition and explains it, makes it accessible to the man of today. But while a popularizer he is never a simplifier, for he always insists on the full rigor and complexity of tradition, on its nuances, its paradoxes, its unexpected reconciliations. He wants to make sure that his readers do not merely pass over the classical or medieval texts without stopping, without being troubled, without having their secure attitudes challenged, in short, without opening themselves, even if just a little, to the Ground of being, to the Divine.

Thomas Storck  
Greenbelt, Maryland

\* \* \*

*Political Apocalypse: A Study of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor*, by Ellis Sandoz. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001. \$24.95.

In its general outline, the author's thesis is altogether reasonable: the story of the Grand Inquisitor in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* adumbrates "messianic socialism" and "atheistic humanism" upon which "totalitarian-

ism" is bound to follow. The substitution of pleasant and peaceful living for freedom of spiritual choice ends in totalitarianism; the Grand Inquisitor rejects the option of free submission to God choosing instead his own grief, resentment, and a sense of bitter righteousness. Dostoevsky's narrative is compelling, and it leaves a lasting impression. This is what novels do: they suggest motivations and solutions, but in such a way as to invite interpretations that are never complete and always in need of another commentary or clarification. This is also why writers usually are reluctant to answer questions about the meaning of their works. When Leo Tolstoy was asked about the meaning of *Anna Karenina*, he answered curtly that the meaning is contained in the totality of words in the text, no more and no less.

But Sandoz goes further, and suggests that the Grand Inquisitor episode conveys a mystical insight into the nature of the political order and of human sinfulness, and that this insight is somehow connected with Dostoevsky's profession of a Russian model of Christianity. And here the problem begins. Literary texts cannot be approached as if they were voices from heaven conveying Christian eschatology. Sandoz treats *The Brothers Karamazov* as if it had been written by someone so pure of heart and so enlightened by the Holy Spirit that the reader can approach it with total trust, the way Holy Scriptures or at least the writings of the Church Fathers have been ap-

proached. No work of modern fiction can ever be so treated. In Dostoevsky's narrative, his choice of characters and employment of their fates were inspired by a talent at the service of many causes, of which Christianity was not the only and perhaps not even the principal one. In other words, the Christian inspiration of *The Brothers Karamazov* goes hand in hand with other inspirations whose foundation is, to put it mildly, human imperfection.

*The Brothers Karamazov* is a work of art written by an individual who, in his artistic intuitions was only "human, all too human"—in Dostoevsky's case, ideological to the core, resentful and not infrequently slanderous with regard to the numerous *Others* who make their appearances in his novels. To treat this magnificent work of art (and I agree that *The Brothers Karamazov* is possibly the greatest novel ever written) on par with the theological works by those who penned their desert agonies for the benefit of future generations—is a misunderstanding. Works of art are just that, works of art: they can suggest attitudes and adumbrate insights, but they cannot be treated as holy texts written under divine inspiration. Zosima's teachings are among the most beautiful literary passages ever written, but even Zosima's gentle exhortations are a bit contaminated by Dostoevsky's insistence that he was a *Russian* monk. Have you ever seen a Catholic text insisting that St. Francis was an *Italian* monk? Both Ital-

ians and non-Italians have had the good sense to avoid mentioning nationality in St. Francis' case, as well as in the case of numerous other holy persons whom we remember but whose nationality we have forgotten. In this context, Dostoevsky's tasteless reminder that Zosima was a Russian is an instance of that ideologization which is so subtly and poisonously embedded in his novels and which has brought so many innocents to the belief that Russian Orthodoxy is the finest possible embodiment of Christian life and mysticism.

In other words, I do not consider it legitimate to treat a novel as if it were a theological text written by a saint. I say this as an admirer of Dostoevsky's novels who has incorporated Dostoevsky's insights into her own treasury of wisdom. So why do I object to Professor Sandoz's doing the same? I insist that there is a difference; it may seem small at first, but the difference is there. It is illegitimate, I repeat, to treat a literary text as if it were inspired by motives comparable to the motives of those who penned the early Christian treatises or the New Testament. Sandoz however credits Dostoevsky with an unmatched understanding of Christian politics, with superb knowledge of modern and ancient philosophers, with "higher realism" (more on that later) and with a purity of thought and design equal to that of the angels. Nothing is attributed to mere chance in the Grand Inquisitor segment, and no artistic or moral flaws



## Reviews

have been observed; all is pure perfection as an artistic work and as a Christian text. In some ways, Sandoz's book is a giant "explication de texte" in the fashion of the New Criticism. What Cleanth Brooks did to short poems, Sandoz does to Dostoevsky's "tale within a tale." Except that while Brooks took no position as to whether the various implications of the poem were intentional or not, Sandoz maintains that Dostoevsky's tale is a consciously crafted outline and prophesy of a possible future state where human beings will live in nearly perfect harmony and happiness but without freedom.

Yet even without a specific knowledge of Dostoevsky's deep prejudices one cannot treat his novels as if they were voices from heaven. At the time Sandoz's book was written (the turn of the twentieth century), it was already impossible not to take into account what Paul Ricoeur has called "the school of suspicion" (*Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, 28). The art of *secular* interpretation has been invented, and there is no way back to the innocence of medieval hermeneutics that is appropriate for the Holy Scriptures but inappropriate for secular texts. True, the old hermeneutics which derives from the orthodox Scriptural interpretations and which consists in deciphering and making things clear has to be used to some extent, but secular interpretation also needs to be employed in discussing literary works, for all of them contain illusions that

disintegrate when "the philosophers of suspicion" are applied to them. If we do not employ this second mode of interpretation, we are bound to treat secular texts, such as novels, poems, and plays, as God's revelations to humanity, rather than as works that may be leading us astray because their authors' talent obscures the resentments and worldly loves skillfully concealed in the text.

I do not presume to say that Professor Sandoz was ignorant of these caveats. Rather, I think that for reasons best known to himself he chose to ignore them, opting rather for the kind of trust that should be reserved for the writings of the saints. Perhaps he was influenced by the many laudatory works on Russian culture and on Dostoevsky himself that an imperial culture invariably produces. Many Russian and non-Russian authors treat Russian reality as if it consisted of gentle peasants, of highly civilized nobility and of world class mystics; as if it were permeated with the ideas so eloquently expressed in the books of Fedotov, Lossky and Solovev, rather than being a culture hospitable to the Gulag and to the kind of land kleptomania that makes even the present-day Russian Federation (much diminished by the disintegration of the Soviet Union) unable to let go of the victims of Russian aggression (I am speaking of the genocidal war in Chechnya that is going on with broad approval of Russian society).

What allows Sandoz to proceed with his hermeneutics is his apparent

acceptance of the methods and tenets of the New Criticism, or the school of literary analysis that proclaimed autonomy of the literary work and placed that work beyond the confines of time, space and the historical process from which it sprang. The New Critics were also inclined to believe that literature contains the kind of knowledge that is otherwise inexpressible, neither rational nor scientific nor emotive, a knowledge *sui generis*. This last tenet, expressed among others by John Crowe Ransom, allows Sandoz to credit Dostoevsky with a profoundly Christian understanding of human existence and of world politics. According to this interpretation, Dostoevsky structured his novels in such a way as to invite the reader to partake of a knowledge (generated in the Russian Orthodox context) of how to organize societies and now *not* to organize them. But Professor Sandoz stretches a bit the New Critical assumption that literature brings knowledge. Knowledge about the human condition, yes; but purely religious and eschatological religious knowledge, no. Readers of literature do sometimes treat the works of Dostoevsky, or Herman Hesse, or some other "spiritual" novelist, as religious knowledge. But in doing so, they invariably take in a great deal of what is irreligious. On p. 108, Sandoz compares Ivan's story to the experiences of the mystics. But in literature, what matters is the artistic effect, whereas in spiritual writings, if they are rightly motivated, what

matters is truth. To achieve artistic effects, an admixture of falsehood may be useful. One of Dostoevsky's characters said: truth is always improbable, and to make it probable, one has to add to it a bit of the lie. As an artist, Dostoevsky availed himself amply of this insight. In other words, an orthodox Christian mystic is one thing, and a work of a genius seeking to influence people and make a certain kind of impression on society is another.

While Sandoz thus stretches the New Critical tenets about literature providing knowledge, he follows to a tee the New Critical precepts concerning autonomy of the work of art. Dostoevsky's own idiosyncrasies, the tangled history of his family, the economic and ideological insecurities of his father, the mysterious violation of an underage girl that crops up in his family history and in all of his great novels, psychological problems of coping with the humiliation and injustice of slave labor in Siberia—all of these are disregarded. Nor is Sandoz interested in another element of the historical process within which Dostoevsky's Christianity has to be placed: that of the sorry theological state of the Russian Orthodox Church at that time (see A.P. Lebedev, *Sobranie tserkovno-istoricheskikh sochinenii*, 1898). I am not bringing this up to badmouth Russian Orthodoxy: all Christian denominations have ugly things hidden in their closets. But perhaps because of that, one should be a bit more cau-

## Reviews

tious in proclaiming full sympathy, as Professor Sandoz does, with Dostoevsky's assertion that attachment to Russianness and to the accompanying Russian Orthodoxy are the best-yet exemplars of Christian living. Sandoz suggests that Dostoevsky was essentially right in maintaining that "the Russian people" and "the [Russian] people's truth" are closest to a true realization of the Gospel spirit (pp. 261-2). This is of course the core of Dostoevsky's message which his powerful literary imagination was intended to serve. But this kind of chauvinism diverges from the Christian message of the saints.

There is more. Dostoevsky's brilliant blow to the reputation of Catholicism, not only in Russia, but also beyond its borders, has to be described as having sinister undertones. The blow is directed at the very core of Catholic identity: its claim to follow the teachings of Christ. I am speaking of the character of the Grand Inquisitor (pinched from Schiller's *Don Carlos* where the Inquisitor plays a tragic but not an evil role), of Prince Myshkin's outburst at the end of *The Idiot* (true, Myshkin is mentally unbalanced, but in Dostoevsky's novels idiots express the most profound insights), of Alyosha Karamazov's "condemning with faint praise," and of virulent denunciations of both Catholicism and Protestantism in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*. Such outbursts of hatred make Dostoevsky's novels

unreliably Christian. I do not know of any Catholic writer of fiction who has ever deliberately set out to discredit Eastern Orthodoxy at its core by suggesting that its doctrine and practice are totally corrupt. It takes resentment beyond measure to accomplish this and, if that resentment is accompanied by an unmatched talent, the results are devastating. Maybe that is why Dostoevsky has never been able to create a truly virtuous character: his evil heroes are engaging, but his saccharine-sweet Alyosha and his personality-free Myshkin are too passive to enthral. Dostoevsky was too concerned with dealing a blow to Russia's real or imagined competitors; he wanted to obscure the indescribably destructive role Russia has played in inhibiting the normalcy of societies in Europe and Asia. In his efforts to provide a positive spin on Russianness in his novels, he forfeited the possibility of creating truly engaging characters. Alyosha with his *Russian* boys was rightly caricatured in Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, whereas Myshkin's love affair with Russia further weakened this already artistically unconvincing character. In my own practice of teaching courses on Dostoevsky, I have never learned to approach the Grand Inquisitor scene from a unified point of view. One part of me rolls her eyes in delight and tries to explain to students the intricacies of the speech: Ivan's seemingly incontestable accusations hurled against God (Ivan is a believer, of course, atheism is for the

small fry like Smerdyakov), while the other part continues to marvel at the perversion of the writer who not-so-subtly suggested that during the period of the Inquisition, “almost a hundred heretics” would be burned daily, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. In thus presenting Catholicism Dostoevsky was fully aware that the Russian reading public would take his statements to be historical truth, and that this would further complicate the status of Ruthenian Catholics in the country. The sorry record of Russian Orthodoxy in forcible conversions of the Ukrainian and Belarussian Uniates, the hundreds and ultimately thousands of people executed for refusing to convert from Eastern Catholicism to Russian Orthodoxy found their justification *via* literary works such as Dostoevsky’s novels, and not only through government decrees (as a result of the partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century, Russia acquired Ukrainian and Belarussian lands whose inhabitants were largely Eastern-rite Catholics). The Inquisition episode is strongly reminiscent of the hate literature about Catholicism that one occasionally receives in junk mail. If Dostoevsky were a lesser writer, William Donaghue of the Catholic League would probably have written a letter to the publisher demanding retraction of slander. But Dostoevsky’s perverse imagery was put at the service of one of the most powerful literary visions ever created. What could be more damning of Catholicism, for the Eastern Ortho-

dox and Protestant readers of Dostoevsky’s masterpiece, than endowing the most evil hero of *The Brothers Karamazov* with an all-powerful place in the Catholic hierarchy?

If one is giving so detailed an explication to a section of a novel and if one is, as Sandoz declares himself to be, attentive and faithful to Dostoevsky’s intentions (127), one cannot gloss over—as he does—the issue of Dostoevsky’s presenting the Catholic Church as pure evil (not a heresy, and not a schism, as Sandoz sometimes says interchangeably). There is no escaping from the conclusion that the Grand Inquisitor *is* the Catholic Church: the passage in which the Inquisitor speaks of the “800 years” of serving “the wise and dread spirit” (Satan) makes it perfectly clear that Dostoevsky intended this to be a real *j’accuse*, a total condemnation. The 800 years, as Sandoz rightly explains, refers to the period of time that elapsed between the Council of Ephesus (recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church) and the Renaissance with its concomitant Spanish Inquisition. To put dots over i’s, Dostoevsky builds into *The Brothers Karamazov* a powerful suggestion that “the whore of Babylon” theory is correct, and that the Western Church is not in schism but at the service of Satan. This kind of ideological perversity—for perversity it must be called, since Dostoevsky cannot be excused by unlettered ignorance—raises interesting questions about the Russian writer’s motivation, as well as about the official

## Reviews

stance of the Russian Orthodox Church on the issue. Coincidentally, Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* was published within a few years after the publication of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880 vs. 1891), thus indirectly invalidating Dostoevsky's argument that the Grand Inquisitor (a.k.a. the Catholic Church) led humanity toward socialism and totalitarianism.

Since Sandoz is engaged in putting the Inquisitor's speech under a microscope, there is no reason to take this one issue and slide over it, as he does. The fact that Dostoevsky engaged his tremendous talent to deal a rhetorical blow to the Catholic Church says eloquently that the writer's motivation has been mixed, and what masquerades as defense of Christianity is sometimes grounded in motives that are inimical to Christianity. Surely a study that politicizes Dostoevsky's novel—as Professor Sandoz's does, and legitimately so—should have grappled with these uncomfortable issues. Skirting them, while overinterpreting some of the novel's statements as if they were the words of a divinely inspired prophet rather than those of a resentment-filled literary genius, is inappropriate.

Let us also consider the author's statement that Russian intellectual life (such as it was at that time) was permeated by Hegelianism. True, Hegel's ideas found sympathetic ground in Russia, but only via osmosis: Dostoevsky for one did not know German well enough to read Hegel,

and Belinsky (that famous "Hegelian" critic) learned Hegel's ideas second-hand, without ever having read Hegel's texts. Furthermore, Russia's literate society learned about Hegel on an empty stomach, as it were—and just as drinking vodka on an empty stomach has a different effect than when consuming it when one is full, so did Hegelian ideas assume different shapes and interpretations in Russia as opposed to Western and Central Europe, where they fell on the ground conditioned by centuries of training in syllogistic thinking. Russia did not participate in European intellectual life during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, not to speak of the Middle Ages. In *The Russian Idea and the Origin of Russian Communism*, Nikolai Berdiaev remarked that the enthusiasm with which the Russian educated classes accepted the philosophy of Hegel was related to the Russian tradition of perceiving truth and morality as belonging to a level of reality inaccessible to reason. This context provides a hospitable environment for Winston Smith's acquiescence to the statement that freedom is slavery. Please note that in contrast to Dostoevsky, Berdiaev credits Russian culture with propensities toward totalitarianism, rather than promoting the fiction that Russian totalitarianism was a Western European import.

While he quotes the authors Dostoevsky knew only indirectly, Sandoz omits a commonly identified Russian source for the figure of the

Grand Inquisitor: Konstantin Pobedonostsev. Sandoz mentions him only as Dostoevsky's confidant. Pobedonostsev was the Procurator of the Holy Synod (a.k.a. the Ministry of Culture to which Orthodox bishops and tsar-appointed civilians belonged and which administered the Russian Orthodox Church). He was famous for having had a very unfavorable view of the Russian people, thus sharing the contempt for humanity which Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor displays. The perfidy of Dostoevsky consists in lifting a grim but not criminal character from Schiller's *Don Carlos*, attaching to this character a label lifted from the history of the Spanish Inquisition, using a real Russian character as a model to blend in with Schiller's creation, and blaming Catholicism for the resulting mess. By quoting only those sources that are sympathetic to Dostoevsky's point of view, Sandoz skewed his presentation heavily in favor of Russian Orthodoxy and in disfavor of Catholicism, thereby following Dostoevsky's own prejudices.

Dostoevsky's hatred of Catholicism had several possible sources. His grandfather was a Uniate Catholic priest with a Lithuanian-Polish connection (the name comes from a family estate in Lithuania named Dostoevo). Dostoevsky's father ran away from home (this suggests that family life was not idyllic), converted to Russian Orthodoxy, and put himself through medical school. Sources indicate that he was a man

of many demons. While Dostoevsky's relation to his father was ambivalent (the older Dostoevsky was killed by his own peasants, and the family never pressed charges), he might have shared his father's aversion to what his grandfather represented. Second, during his incarceration in the Siberian gulag, Dostoevsky came across several Polish political convicts who were, like himself, educated and, unlike himself, Catholic. These convicts looked down on the Russian "barbarians" and held themselves aloof. This might have galled Dostoevsky as he came to believe that humiliation and mistreatment are to be accepted rather than opposed. The uppity Poles who visibly despised their Russian masters awoke Dostoevsky's deep antipathy, an antipathy which is conveyed in *The House of the Dead*. Finally, as Dostoevsky swallowed the ideological fiction of Moscow being the third Rome and the center of Christianity on earth, he might have felt a particular aversion to a denomination whose existence put such claims in doubt.

While these historical circumstances do not make their appearance in Sandoz's book, he does posit an existence of a less compelling intellectual context for the novel. In his opinion, Dostoevsky's early immersion in leftist Hegelianism gave him an insight into the fatal mistakes of nineteenth-century revolutionaries. But how that relates to the Inquisition or to the Grand Inquisitor as a literary figure Sandoz does not say.

## Reviews

He also invokes Plato, St. Anselm, pagan religiosity and “King” (Prince, actually) Vladimir, who Ukrainians claim was the founder of Ukraine and whom the Muscovites appropriated after they began to claim, in the seventeenth century and against historical evidence, that Ukraine was their patrimony waiting for “re-unification.” Sandoz also brings to bear Eric Voegelin’s writings on the Gnostic heresy, skillfully pointing out Ivan’s (and the other great apostates’) Gnostic proclivities. There is hardly a significant nineteenth-century philosopher who is not invoked as a possible parallel or source to Dostoevsky’s thought. Altogether, Sandoz’s book extends far beyond its title, not only because the author alludes to so many thinkers, but also because he often refers to Dostoevsky’s entire *opus* and not just to *The Brothers Karamazov*. But there are too many credits in Sandoz’s text, too many mentions of widely disparate philosophers, most of whom Dostoevsky never read in the original. People like Descartes, Feuerbach, Sartre, Marx and Aquinas all have their own universes of discourse that are not easily translatable into one another, not within a few paragraphs, anyway.

I really do not see how Descartes fits into this argument (p. 111). Not only wasn’t Dostoevsky well read in Western philosophy, but I do not see that the Grand Inquisitor’s sin has anything to do with “the French sin,” to use Jacques Maritain’s characterization of Descartes’s

stance. Sandoz cites the names of several nineteenth-century philosophers who possibly influenced Dostoevsky but the invocations do not illuminate the novelistic text. Nor can Dostoevsky’s story be easily equated with a philosophical argument which Sandoz presents on p. 112: since human beings are aware of participation “in a reality ontologically superior” to that of their own, the only way to make them accept absolutely a human leader is to “obliterate the idea of God” in their minds, to commit a “swindle.” So far so good. But then, Sandoz goes on to say that “the critical task [is] to anesthetize “the spiritual consciousness with the propaganda of atheism, scientism, and political activism.” Wow! Where does Dostoevsky (or the Grand Inquisitor or Ivan) suggest all this? That sounds like a right wing talk show rather than a scholarly argument.

I find the Grand Inquisitor to be a magnificent creation, in contrast to Dostoevsky’s Christ whom I find to be a rather unsuccessful rendition of the Gospel figure. God’s overtures to men are highly individualized, and they occur in that mysterious and secret space called the human soul. The kiss that the Prisoner plants on the lips of the Grand Inquisitor is not a particularly successful metaphor, in my opinion. I agree with a great many critics who have said that in the Grand Inquisitor’s encounter with the Prisoner, the Grand Inquisitor wins hands down. I also agree with Czeslaw Milosz who analyzed

Svidrigailov (*Crime and Punishment*) and came to the conclusion that Dostoevsky personally identifies most strongly with this character. It is only through Zosima's musings that an indirect answer to the Grand Inquisitor is given. Splitting the novel into pieces and concerning oneself with one small segment of it is a dangerous game; the novel is a whole, and the Grand Inquisitor section proclaims the victory of the "wise and dread spirit" and not that of the Spirit of Christ. Thus I think that in addition to sliding over Dostoevsky's ideological battles against Western Christianity, Sandoz executes too rigidly the self-imposed task of interpreting a small segment of the novel that was meant to be read *in toto*.

At some points in reading Sandoz's book, I felt that he read into Dostoevsky his own reflections on God and the human condition. For example, he says (p. 112) that Ivan tries to obliterate the idea of God from the minds of men, for then one can "swindle with impunity." I do not read the Grand Inquisitor speech in that way. Ivan seizes on what is and on what remains one of the great mysteries of Christianity: the permanence of suffering on earth, and the suffering of the innocent, i.e., children. Ivan is not one to disbelieve in God: on the contrary, his famous phrase about "returning the ticket" is a statement of someone who does not disbelieve, but of someone who cannot accept his inferior knowledge, or his lack of knowledge about

suffering, his lack of understanding about why suffering exists.

Dostoevsky's diatribes against Catholicism were expressions of extreme chauvinism which was the other side of Dostoevsky's Christian convictions. The inseparability of Russian chauvinism and Russian Orthodoxy, fostered by the Russian colonial state and resented throughout the Russian empire by non-Russians, has to be kept in mind while studying Dostoevsky or Russian affairs in general. To read Dostoevsky as if he were yet another European influenced by Hegelianism is to make a major, if common, mistake.

Dostoevsky's "truth" was very anti-Thomistic, in the sense that Dostoevsky rejected the unity of God's creation and chose to believe that while on one level,  $2 + 2 = 4$ , on another level this ain't so. His famous saying, that "if Christ proved to be outside the truth [he] would rather go with Christ than with the truth" is an attractive tip of an iceberg of mendacities that this kind of attitude engenders. As St. Thomas pointed out, there is no separation between intuitive truth and rational truth. The end result of a refusal to accept truth's universality is the phenomenon of Grigorii Rasputin, a holy fool and a debauched pseudo-monk who played a large role at the court of the last emperor and empress of Russia. Rasputin was a man capable of utter self-abasement and of resentful pride, and he managed to exercise both simultaneously.



## Reviews

Some years ago, I tried to deal with this baneful paradox of Russian culture (of refusing to accept the universality of truth) in a book on the phenomenon of holy foolishness in Russia. While there have been a few holy fools who deserved admiration and praise (at its best, the entire tradition goes back to the early Church and the abnegation practiced by some zealous monks and nuns), a much larger number had little to do with saintliness. For a lack of a better methodology, I formulated in that book a set of dichotomies which the holy fool admirers in Russia considered in some way equivalent, such as wisdom-foolishness, purity-impurity, tradition-rootlessness, meekness-aggression, veneration-derision. These dichotomies are the fountainhead of that "higher realism" which Russian thinkers sometimes invoke. They also represent a fundamental denial of the principles of identity and non-contradiction on which Western societies have been built. It is that denial that I find amply present in Dostoevsky, and it is on that basis that I find *The Brothers Karamazov* to be fascinating, instructive and at the same time deeply troubling. The malevolence with regard to things Western woven into this *programmatically* Russian novel make me look with scepticism at Professor Sandoz's trustful ventures into Dostoevsky's theology.

Russian Orthodoxy has had some tremendous saints, but that does not mean that *The Brothers Karamazov*, taken as a whole, is a

Christian novel. It is a novel that shows several possible choices, each of them persuasively argued and none made to prevail. Truly, as Dmitrii Karamazov says, "God and the Devil fight a battle, and the battleground is the heart of men." Both sides of the battle are alluringly presented, and the credibility of both is undermined by Dostoevsky's ideological dishonesties. The novel leaves us impressed and upset, and ready to think further, as well as ready to admire Dostoevsky's "cruel talent;" but it does not make us better Christians just by impressing itself on our memory. While Sandoz does quote from Dostoevsky's translated *Notebooks*, it is clear that he knows no Russian and has no existential experience of Russian realities. While I do not maintain that "whoever wants to understand a poet must visit his homeland," I do think that so categorical an interpretation of Dostoevsky and his alleged eschatological insights cannot be offered in total separation from a historical knowledge of what Dostoevsky stood for and of what fruits have issued from that tree. Somehow the English-speaking admirers of things Russian never ask themselves why this country of alleged saints and mystics produced the Gulag, and why Russians have never staged an uprising against tsarist or Soviet tyranny. If the cultural codes of totalitarianism are built into the Grand Inquisitor figure as Sandoz suggests, then surely somewhere deeply hidden in *The Brothers Karamazov* are

the cultural codes of Dostoevsky-style “Russianness” that actually produced in real life the political apocalypse which Sandoz invokes in his title.

Ewa M. Thompson  
Department of Slavic Studies,  
Rice University

\* \* \*

*The Faber Book of Utopias*, John Carey, ed., London: Faber and Faber, 1999. 531 pp., Canada, \$22.99.

This book comes with commendations on it, front and back, from the London *Daily Telegraph*. On the front we read, “John Carey . . . shimmers Jeeves-like—courteous, unflappable and discreet—through the most lurid and improbable of imaginary worlds. This is a fascinating anthology.” On the back Alain de Botton writes that Carey “has gathered together a vast range of texts from Ancient Egypt to modern California, the authors of which, in different ways, attempt to describe a better world than our own.” The anthology does contain a great deal of fascinating material, but the problem it raises is why Carey was not satisfied with employing the traditional interpretation of utopias as an attempt to describe a better world than our own, an ideal commonwealth in which justice and social harmony are to be found. In his introduction he writes that utopia means “nowhere” or “no place,” but through confusion about the meaning of the first syllable, it has often been taken to mean

“good place”—though, “strictly speaking, imaginary good places and imaginary bad places are alike utopias, or nowheres. Both are represented in this book.”

Carey goes so far as to say that “a dystopia is merely a utopia from another point of view. Orwell’s *Big Brother* or the directors of Huxley’s *Brave New World* . . . are utopians in their own eyes.” He is probably right about *Brave New World*, but hardly so about *Nineteen Eighty-four*: *Big Brother* has no illusions about human betterment, and gives Winston Smith as cruel a forecast of the human condition as one could imagine—a boot stomping on a human face forever and ever. In his Introduction Carey says that he has extended the definition of utopia “beyond the strictly formal,” and has done so knowingly. As a result he has included works which could not possibly come under the definition of utopias—John Donne’s “To His Mistress, On Going to Bed”; Edward Lear’s poem about the Jumblies who went to sea in a sieve; Kipling’s story “The Law of the Jungle,” in which Mowgli is brought up among animals who apparently have a great deal to teach humans about civility; Conrad’s *Youth*, in which Marlow comes under the spell of the East in unlikely circumstances—he is in a lifeboat, after the *Judea*’s cargo of coal has caught fire and she sinks in the Indian Ocean, and the central character seeing the East for the first time from a lifeboat; and an extract from Richard Jefferies’ novel *After*

## Reviews

*London*, in which the place where London formerly stood has become a “vast, stagnant swamp.” In fact Carey has included such a wide and disparate selection of entries that he has deprived the term utopia of any possible signification. “Utopia” has become a smorgasbord. The book even includes a summary of “the largest social audit of women’s opinions ever conducted in the United Kingdom, “a survey undertaken in 1955.”

But my bill of complaints goes much farther than this. In a selection entitled “More’s Conundrum,” Carey is puzzled by the fact that Thomas More depicts utopian practices which a devout Catholic would have found unacceptable. For example, priests may be either men or women, and prospective brides and grooms are shown to each other stark naked. Carey is puzzled, but More wasn’t. The society he describes is governed by reason, but knows almost nothing of revelation. The implication is that if a pagan society can be so well run, it is a sin and a shame for a Christian society to suffer from all the ills described in the first part of *Utopia*. Dealing with William Morris’s *Erewhon*, Carey writes that the work “displays, in its inadequacies, the confusion and hypocrisy which have dogged the course of English Socialism.” Is the work hypocritical? It is too facile and simplistic in its description of how the government of the nation changed overnight, but its main point emerges clearly enough:

England was once a garden, the Industrial Revolution has blighted it, but it could again become a decent country in which to live. A major problem also arises out of Carey’s discussion of Plato’s Republic, in which life is “tough, austere and communist,” reflecting Plato’s admiration for Sparta, which had defeated Athens when he was twenty-three. When he comes to deal with *Mein Kampf*, Carey writes that Hitler “can be seen as the culmination of the great utopian tradition that starts with Plato, and he terminated that tradition. After the holocaust, utopianism could never be the same.” The great utopian tradition which leads to Hitler does not exist. It is grotesque to put him in the same sentence as Plato. For Plato, the exaltation of the will is never the ultimate goal as it is for Hitler. Instead justice in the State comes through justice in the individual; the man who is fit to be a Guardian is the one who has advanced farthest in the knowledge of the good, and therefore his reason governs his will and his passions.

A strange book is this anthology. Carey includes many interesting and unusual selections, but somehow he found room in a purported anthology of utopias for selections from John Donne, Edward Lear, George Orwell—and Adolf Hitler!

David Dooley  
St. Michael’s College  
Toronto, Ontario

\* \* \*

*Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church* by Philip Yancey. New York: Doubleday, 2001. \$21.95 cloth.

Several years ago, in his book *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Sven Birkerts wrote that good books have a “shadow life.” What this phrase means is that a good book continues to influence its readers, even when they take a walk or a drive, or go on a simple errand to the store. What Birkerts celebrates is that strange and mysterious way in which reading a book helps one find a new way of interpreting experience. “If we have been deeply engaged by the book,” he writes, “we carry its resonance as a kind of echo, thinking again and again of a character, an episode, or, less concretely, about some thematic preoccupation of the author’s” (103). When one turns to Philip Yancey’s latest book, *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church*, one finds that Yancey has recorded, deftly, the “resonance and the echo” he keeps hearing from a few writers (and thinkers) whose faithful witnessing to the truth has awakened in him a fresh awareness of the incalculable mystery and grace of the Christian life. His “baker’s dozen” is comprised of a diverse group of people, most of whom are writers: Martin Luther King Jr., G. K. Chesterton, Paul Brand, Robert Coles, Leo Tolstoy, Feodor Dostoevsky, Mahatma Gandhi, C. Everett Koop, John Donne, Annie Dillard, Frederick Buechner, Shusako Endo, and Henri Nouwen.

All of them have changed, modified, or established new categories for Yancey to grow in the Christian faith. He readily acknowledges that not all of them are orthodox Christians, but all of them share one important experience: “all were permanently changed by their contact with Jesus” (9). Such diversity among these “mentors”—as he often calls them—further underscores for him the richly compelling reality of the Christian faith, its different blends and hues, its miraculous incongruities and its paradoxes.

Early in the book, he confesses that his formative Christian experiences were during his years in Georgia of the 1960s, in a church the identity of which was “hermetically sealed” in the words “‘New Testament,’ ‘Blood bought,’ ‘Born-again,’ ‘Pre-millennial,’ ‘Dispensational,’ ‘fundamental’” (1). Yancey describes the church of his youth in this way: “I could never escape the enveloping cloud that blocked my vision and marked the borders of my world” (1). He explores, with refreshing candor, how the church of his early years “mixed lies with the truth” (1). His pastor, so he explains, “preached blatant racism from the pulpit.” Dark races are “cursed by God,” he said, citing an obscure passage in Genesis. They function well as servants, “but never as leaders” (1-2). Yancey says that he was “armed with such doctrines,” ready to penetrate the culture he so wanted to change, with the rest of the social activists of his generation. In his

## Reviews

book, however, he records how Martin Luther King, Jr. radically altered his view of racial equality. "We have only our bodies," he recalls King saying. Yancey was struck by the willingness of King and of many of his followers to lay down their lives in non-violent protest for what they believed was right.

Not just Martin Luther King, Jr. but Mahatma Gandhi, Paul Brand, Robert Coles, C. Everett Koop and Henri Nouwen have helped Yancey, each in his own way, understood the Incarnational imperative set forth by Chesterton that "Every man must descend into the flesh to meet mankind." Whether it was Gandhi's commitment to peace and brotherhood, Paul Brand's ministry to lepers in India and Louisiana, Robert Coles's healing through story, C. Everett Koop's moral courage in opposing abortion, or Henri Nouwen's decision to leave a prestigious position in academic life in order to care for the handicapped at the Daybreak community, Yancey has discovered that these were people who understood the truth that "in serving the weak and the poor we are privileged to serve God himself" (157). These mentors awakened in him a sense of the wonder of other human beings. Through their example, Yancey has come to learn a valuable lesson, especially for a journalist: that human persons and their stories matter. But it does not end there. One needs to know how to pay attention, and Yancey thanks his mentors for providing lessons about how to do so:

"He [Robert Coles] learned, in short, to pay attention, actively and aggressively. Each life has its own mystery, its own tale to be told. He determined to discover that tale and attempt to 'translate' it for others" (95).

Yancey also dedicates a chapter to G. K. Chesterton, another writer who helped him learn to "pay attention." He describes how Chesterton turned his attention to the little things of a God-bathed world. In Yancey's view, Chesterton was not merely a jolly journalist, but a journalist with a poet's eye, who was alert to God's mystery and grace in the world. He writes, "For Chesterton, and also for me, the riddles of God proved more satisfying than the answers proposed without God. I too came to believe in the good things of this world, first revealed to me in music, romantic love, and nature, as relics of a wreck, and as bright clues into the nature of a reality shrouded in darkness. God had answered Job's questions with more questions, as if to say the truths of existence lie far beyond the range of our comprehension. We are left with remnants of God's original design and the freedom, always the freedom, to cast our lots with such a God, or against him." (53) Yancey does more than simply "explain" Chesterton's thought. He writes convincingly as one who has allowed Chesterton to help him "see" beyond the terrors of his early fundamentalism and to find joy. He describes Chesterton's novel *The Man Who Was Thursday*, for in-

stance, as a book that enlarges rather than diminishes one's understanding of the "incalculable mysteries of suffering and free will" (52). Through Chesterton's life and writings, Yancey learned to celebrate the fact that God's understanding is unsearchable.

Annie Dilliard and Frederick Buechner also taught Yancey to see other aspects of God's sacramental world. Dillard, "though less optimistic than Chesterton," as Yancey explains, is a writer "who sees God's smile even among the shadows" (233). And Buechner, who has also written a chapter on Chesterton in his new book (*Speak What We Feel: Reflections on Literature and Faith*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002), possesses a Chestertonian ability for finding truth in experience by "his deliberate mining of subterranean strata for the hidden message of God. Like a beachcomber, he goes over and over the same patch of sand, seeking buried treasure" (257). In this description of Buechner's literary achievement, one hears an echo of the truth Chesterton found in the parable of Robinson Crusoe, the discovery that the world is "a sort of cosmic shipwreck" (51). Here Yancey assents to a sacramental understanding of life: the holiness of the ordinary, the splendor of the created order and of everything that is in it.

Throughout the book it is made clear that Yancey has learned that the Christian faith is much larger and much more remarkable than the fun-

damentalism of his youth seemed to imply. A religious fundamentalist, particularly of the kind Yancey describes, often believes it is necessary to wall in certain beliefs in order to "protect" them from persons who want to ask critical questions about them. What one needs instead, as Stratford Caldecott observes, is to permit dogma "to sink its roots deep into the earth" and allow it to "grow above its fence into the sky" ("Speaking the Truths Only the Imagination May Grasp" in *The Pilgrim's Guide*, ed. David Mills, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). Fundamentalism almost always tends to deal with difficult questions by seeking easy answers to them. It is equally true, though not universally realized, that easy answers are usually as shallow as the people who provide them.

The real work of Christian faith requires that one learns how to live with certain tensions. Yancey identifies the poet John Donne, for instance, as one who challenged him to look more deeply into the problem of pain. He praises Dostoevsky as a novelist whose profound sense of grace, expressed especially well in his character Aloysha, comforts him in the face of Tolstoy's "unremitting moralism and self-scorn." Yancey adds, "His novels communicate grace and forgiveness, the heart of the Christian Gospel, with a Tolstoyan force. Dostoevsky taught me the remedy for the relentless failures exposed by Tolstoy" (134). To the Japanese novelist Shusako Endo,

## Reviews

Yancey credits his readiness to ask such candid questions as these: "For what had I sacrificed my pride and prepared for martyrdom? A religion of racists, anti-intellectuals, and social misfits?" (278). Yancey goes on to say, "How ironic, I thought, that a Japanese man rejected by the Christian West was introducing me to this Jesus. I began to read Shusaku Endo in search of the Suffering Servant, who understood rejection as well as anyone who has ever lived. As a young person in a fundamentalist church, I had known rejection and shame from the broader culture. As a struggling Christian I had received rejection from the church itself: it wanted me to conform and not quibble, to believe and not question. Now, in Jesus, I met someone whose message centered on the rejects." (280)

These and other, sometimes painful, observations are part of the "shadow life" of the lives and works of the thirteen people Yancey has made a lifetime of studying. It is part of a larger devotional practice, one that puts him in touch more robustly with the Christian faith. This faith requires a sense of wonder, of ambi-

guity and of mystery. It involves suffering, as well as the grace of being fully alive in each moment of one's life. Christian history attests to the need to learn from the lives of faith-filled people. Unfortunately, there are many forces seeking to make such an education difficult. But Yancey's book is a good reminder that a life in which there is no one left to admire or thank is a life scarcely worth living. More than an intellectual exercise in biography, his book tells a deeply personal story. It is a story in which Yancey invites the reader to take part. In the "Epilogue," he writes, "From these mentors, I have learned to sense longings as intimations of something more, worthy of my ceaseless even if futile pursuit, and to resist the temptation to settle for less." This is a far cry from fundamentalism. Yancey's hope is that Christians who long to know more about their Christian faith will have the courage to move beyond the borders of their own personal worlds, if only to see them for the first time.

Daniel H. Strait  
Asbury College  
Wilmore, Kentucky

\* \* \*



Tolkien in his garden with Priscilla, Michael, John and Christopher in 1936





# News and Comments

## A Tribute to Tolkien

— *The following tribute to Tolkien, written by Robert Murray, S.J., a close personal friend of the author, appeared in the September 15, 1973 issue of the London Tablet:*

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in South Africa in 1892 and received into the Catholic Church at the age of eight with his mother. His lifelong love for the English language, its history and connections, led him to a career in scholarship which, but for the years of the first world war and a distinguished sojourn in Leeds in the twenties, was entirely spent in Oxford. It must be for others, among the many whom Tolkien fired with his love for Old English, Norse and all the other influences which have enriched our language, to appreciate him as an English scholar and teacher or to recall such scenes (to my generation only a legend) as when he spent two whole lecture hours declaiming *Beowulf* from beginning to end. Here I speak of him as a friend and of his “Middle Earth” books as they reveal the mind and character of their maker.

I do not know how early Tolkien began to conceive the world of Middle Earth with its peoples, languages and history, but guess that it was already in his boyhood. The vision was taking shape during the nightmare years in the trenches and his creative power gained wings from the love which was sealed by marriage in 1916. As is well known, *The Hobbit* grew from stories told to Tolkien’s children and, after its publication in the thirties, enjoyed a moderate success; few then either knew, or could have guessed, the extent, grandeur or detail of the fantasy world which had been drawn on at one corner. Between 1944, when my intimacy with the family began, and 1954, when *The Lord of the Rings* was published, I read the work in manuscript and proof, and knew well how much of Ronald was

---

The Two Towers in Birmingham. Just around the corner in Waterworks Road was a building that must have left an impression on the young Tolkien, an extraordinary 96 ft. (29 m) tower known as Perrott’s Folly. It was built in 1758 by John Perrott and is Birmingham’s oddest architectural feature. Near it stands a later Victorian tower, part of the Edgbaston Waterworks, and the pair are said to have suggested Minas Morgul and Minas Tirith, the Two Towers after which the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings* is named.

invested in it: "I have exposed my heart to be shot at," he wrote to me in 1953 in a letter quoted further below. He was conscious of a double risk, both that a work in the epic genre, executed in such dimensions and enshrining such ideals, would fall flat, and that it would be interpreted as a cheap allegory of the contemporary world and the atomic bomb. How the former fear was belied is now part of literary history, but the allegory issue continued to trouble Tolkien, both as *The Lord of the Rings* began to be devoured by thesis-hunters and as he reacted with increasing dislike to the incursions into allegorical fiction by his closest friend, C.S. Lewis. It is true that the "Inklings," that brilliant circle which met in "The Bird and Baby" in St. Giles' and Lewis's rooms in Magdalen, brought Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis and Tolkien together in a way fruitful for them all, but these mutual influences are misinterpreted to the point of irony when critical and theological studies (such as Gunnar Urang's otherwise excellent *Shadows of Heaven*) interpret *The Lord of the Rings* almost in function of the moral allegories of Williams and Lewis. In fact Tolkien was so insistent that tales of "Faërie" should be told for their own sake and not for any "message" that he could say (when handing me *Smith of Wootton Major* as a Christmas present) "Here is a little counterblast to Lewis which I've written." In his foreword to the 1968 one-volume edition of *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien explicitly disavowed any "message" and expressed his dislike of allegory and his preference for "history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers."

For those who knew and loved Ronald Tolkien, there was no need to look for any other "meaning" in *The Lord of the Rings* than its revelation of one of the richest minds of the century and its alchemical processes. This is true of things small and homely as much as of grand and noble. The things that hobbits love are an index of their creator's own delights in the world and the life he loved so fully: a circle of friends, sitting or walking, making stories or intricate poems, giving and receiving presents, good food and drink, tobacco and all the mysteries of pipe-lore. Conversely, what Saruman and his creatures began to do to the Shire accurately expresses Ronald's feelings about what he saw happening in England. To turn to the wider world of Middle Earth, it is almost an "alternative Europe"; its peoples, languages and history are a reflection, in a mirror which does not reproduce an image but admits to a new, alternative world, of the heroic ages of almost all the Indo-European peoples, transmuted by an alchemy which for Tolkien (as for so many) was first set going by Homer, and which to the end found its keenest stimulus in the sheer beauty of words—their sounds, their forms, their relationships and mutations, and above all their power. Tolkien is a supreme example of what T.S. Eliot in

his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" described as "a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; . . . a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." For example, all Celtic languages and literature, the magic of their word-weaving and the unsatisfiable yearning expressed in that incomparable word *hiraeth*, are distilled for the creation of Tolkien's Elves, and somehow developed further in the conception of the Ents (in which, as almost all critics agree, Tolkien's inventive powers appear at their greatest height).

The siege of Minas Tirith comes to us from a mind which has trembled on the walls of Troy and has shared the pride of the Varangian guard who came from the far north to win glory defending Miklagardr (Constantinople) against the Saracen; and hidden in the mixture, but perhaps binding it all together, are the courage and comradeship of the Lancashire Fusiliers in the trenches of Flanders. If that bit about the Varangian Guard seems like a gratuitous purple patch, let me say that only a few weeks ago, one of the last times we met, Ronald was maintaining with great vigour over the luncheon table that one of the greatest disasters of European history was the fact that the Goths turned Arian: but for that, their language, just ready to become classical, would have been enriched not only with a great bible version but also, on Byzantine principles, with a vernacular liturgy, which would have served as a model for all the Germanic peoples and would have given them a native Catholicism which would never break apart. And with that he rose and in splendidly sonorous tones declaimed the Our Father in Gothic.

And so we come to what should have come first, Ronald Tolkien's faith. Where is it in *The Lord of the Rings*? Middle Earth has no named God, no religious rites, no faith except the good faith of true men to one another. True, it is full of sacraments, but they are never named as such. The whole drama is profoundly ethical, not as allegory but as an exploration of how goodness and wickedness work and strive in human hearts and society. In 1953, at Tolkien's request, I had expressed to him my reactions to what I had read so far, and remarked how, without a word about religion, the book is all about grace. On this he replied: "I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of grace; and of course by your references to Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded. *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like "religion," to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed

into the story and the symbolism. However that is very clumsily put, and sounds more self-important than I feel. For as a matter of fact, I have consciously planned very little; and should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up (since I was eight) in a faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know; and that I owe to my mother, who clung to her conversion and died young, largely through the hardships of poverty resulting from it.”

To this testimony I add my own, that it was the attraction unconsciously exercised by Ronald Tolkien and his family which, under God, did most to draw me to the Catholic Church in 1946. From many conversations I know the depth of Ronald’s faith and of the spiritual suffering through which it sustained him. He was proud to serve my first mass in 1959 (in full academic dress, excitement making him clumsy as a small boy) and I had the solemn joy of reciprocating on 6 September, by standing beside his priest son at the requiem in the Headington church where Ronald worshipped in his last years, and at the grave in Wolvercote cemetery where, after twenty lonely months, his body has rejoined that of his beloved wife Edith, resting in a hope which, for me at least, is the stronger for having known him and the power of his creative mind.

---

**The Hidden Presence of Catholicism  
and the Virgin Mary in *The Lord of the Rings***

— *This article by Stratford Caldecott was first published in Touchstone magazine’s Tolkien special issue (January/February 2002) under the title “The Lord & Lady of the Ring: The Hidden Presence of Tolkien’s Catholicism in The Lord of the Rings”. What follows is an abridged version of the article:*

Pope John Paul II once famously said, “A faith that does not become culture is a faith that has not been accepted in its fullness, which has not been totally reflected upon, or faithfully lived.” Tolkien may not have been a professional theologian, may not even have seen himself as a religious thinker, but in him we see faith becoming culture. *The Lord of the Rings* is not a book about religion, but it is the expression of a religious soul working under God. It is an act of “sub-creation,” as Tolkien put it in his famous essay “On Fairy-stories”: it involves the creation of an imaginary world as much as possible along the lines God might have used, had he decided to create it. He did not want to invent something entirely original, but to discover and explore a possible world; and he knew that for a world to be possible it has to reflect in its own substance and design, under what-

ever marvelous and unexpected forms, the same divine Wisdom and Goodness that we find in this one.

The creation myth he constructed is extremely beautiful. It is more elaborate than the Biblical account, but not in conflict with it. I suppose even the central importance he gives to song and music (as does C.S. Lewis, if you recall Aslan singing Narnia into existence in *The Magician's Nephew*) may have been suggested to him by those famous lines in the Book of Job: "Where were you . . . when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7), in the Authorized Version, or "when the morning stars praised me together, and all the sons of God made a joyful melody" in the Douay-Rheims.

But one important divergence from the Christian description of reality should be noted here, for it may appear to undermine the novel's implicit orthodoxy. Writing in 1954 (Letter 156), Tolkien himself is not sure whether or not it could be construed as heretical. It is the idea that death is not a punishment for sin, but a great gift and an inherent part of the nature of Man. In *The Silmarillion* Tolkien gives an account of the Creator's thoughts as he plans the destiny of Men and Elves. He wills "that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else." "Death is their fate, the gift of Il'vatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy."

By 1958 (in Letter 212) he had come up with this justification for his apparent departure from the traditional interpretation of the Genesis account of the origin of death: "But it must be remembered that mythically these tales are Elf-centred, not anthropocentric, and Men only appear in them, at what must be a point long after their Coming. This is therefore an 'Elvish' view, and does not necessarily have anything to say for or against such beliefs as the Christian that 'death' is not part of human nature, but a punishment for sin (rebellion), a result of the 'Fall'."

But then he goes on to make a deeper point, which for me illustrates the way his fiction, though not consciously constructed according to a theological template, becomes a medium for the uncovering of theological and spiritual truth. He writes: "It should be regarded as an Elvish perception of what death—not being tied to the 'circles of the world'—should now become for Men, however it arose. A divine 'punishment' is also a divine 'gift' if accepted, since its object is ultimate blessing, and the supreme inventiveness of the Creator will make 'punishments' (that is changes of design) produce a good not otherwise to be attained: a 'mortal' Man has probably (an Elf would say) a higher if unrevealed destiny than a longeval one."

*The Lord of the Rings* is fundamentally orthodox in intention and spirit. It is permeated with a sense of eternity, of the objective order of good and evil, and of an all-wise Providence: this is all part of that “forgotten sunlight” which serves to awaken us from the sleep of materialism. The spirit of courtesy that we see in Aragorn and Faramir, the respect for women and the determination to protect the weak, the virtues of courage and fortitude and prudence and justice that shine in these noble characters, are patterns of goodness that were learned from the Gospel. But Tolkien was a Roman Catholic, as well as a Christian. In 1953 (Letter 142) he writes: “I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of Grace, and of course by your references to Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded.” If this statement be accurate, it is somewhat remarkable. The novel is permeated with beauty, from the natural beauties of landscape and forest, mountains and streams, to the moral beauty of heroism and integrity, friendship and honesty. In what sense could “Our Lady” (to use her Catholic title) be the foundation of Tolkien’s perceptions and understanding of these things?

We must first recall some words Our Lady sings in the Gospel of Luke (1:46-55): “He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.” Tolkien’s novel is about many things—including, as we have seen, the fearful mystery of death, about nostalgia for paradise and about the temptations associated with power. But he himself states (Letter 181) that it is particularly about “the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble”. The Hobbits are the representatives of this humility, and they are raised through adventure and self-sacrifice into the company of princes. In his essay “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien cites with approval Andrew Lang’s comment: “He who would enter into the Kingdom of Faerie should have the heart of a little child.” This quality of innocence and childlikeness, which was reintroduced into the world by Christ and taught in the Sermon on the Mount, is one of the most marked characteristics of the good Hobbits in Tolkien’s tale. It is perhaps one of the main reasons for their universal appeal, and for the wholesomeness and gentleness that makes the book so continually refreshing to the spirit—so much so that many of us return to it year after year, to wash away the encrusted grime of an older, wearier, and more cynical Age. In the Catholic tradition, the spirit of childlikeness and innocence is associated particularly with the Blessed Virgin Mary.

This is not because she was its Source, since innocence (like existence itself) clearly comes from God, and even the human possibility of it has to be won back for us by Christ on the Cross. It is associated with her because she is its primary Vessel: the human container, the sacred “chalice” as it were, into which the waters of grace were poured, once they had been

released by the sacrificial Passion of Our Lord. She is thus more than a symbol or Biblical “type” of the Church; she is its first member, and indeed its most perfect member, having been preserved (by anticipation of her freely-accepted role in the Incarnation) from all stain and damage of sin, in order to become a suitable Mother to the divine Child and all the subsequent sons and daughters of the Church. Her freedom to consent to the Incarnation would have been flawed and weakened if she had not first been exempted from the inheritance of sin.

There is a second way in which Our Lady is present, and that is through her reflections in certain feminine characters, specifically Galadriel and Elbereth (as, one might argue, Our Lady is present in other, non-Catholic works of fantasy literature, such as George MacDonald’s *Princess and the Goblin* (as the figure of the great-great-great-great grandmother). Galadriel is one of the pivotal Elvish characters: bearer of one of the three Rings and preserver of the land of Lothlorien, Tolkien himself wrote: “I think it is true that I owe much of this character to Christian and Catholic teaching and imagination about Mary” (Letter 320). Yet the workings and reworkings of his manuscript reveal an ambiguity, or an evolution, for in early drafts she was a leader in the rebellion of the Elves against the Valar, the world’s angelic guardians. From this rebellion Tolkien obviously later felt the need to absolve her. In the *Unfinished Tales*, we find a chapter containing the “History of Galadriel and Celeborn,” in which Christopher Tolkien records the “late and partly illegible note” which is “the last writing of my father’s on the subject . . . , set down in the last month of his life.” In this revised history, Galadriel is not at all involved in the rebellion of the Elves but indeed opposed it, and was caught up in the departure from Aman to Middle-Earth through no fault of her own. In a letter around this time Tolkien in fact calls her “unstained” (a word that Catholics normally only use of Our Lady), adding that “she had committed no evil deeds.” Thus she was morally as well as “physically” equipped to be the Elvish leader in Middle-Earth of resistance to Sauron. We see here, I think, the pressure of the Marian archetype in Tolkien’s imagination on the development of the character of Galadriel.

Not quite “Immaculate” (without sin), then, in the official version, but to the Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, and even to the Dwarf Gimli (who asks for the parting gift of a hair from her head, which he intends to enshrine within imperishable crystal—a gift she had once refused to Fānor), Galadriel is nevertheless a vision of wisdom, beauty, and grace, of light untarnished. Galadriel, however, remains an earthly figure. In Roman Catholic devotion and dogma, Our Lady, having been assumed into heaven at the end of her earthly life, has long been venerated as Queen of Heaven and “Star of the Sea”. We find this more cosmic aspect of the Marian

archetype expressed in the person of Galadriel's own heavenly patroness, Elbereth, Queen of the Stars, who plays the role in Tolkien's legendarium of transmitting light from the heavenly places.

There is a third way in which Our Lady's presence would be clearly felt by Catholics in *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is under the symbol of Light. Galadriel's parting gift to Frodo is a phial containing light from the Morning Star. As one might expect, from the key role this gift is to play in the story, it is a highly symbolic gesture. Not only does it create a further link between Galadriel and Elbereth the "Star-Kindler", but it establishes another important connection to the great saga of the Silmarils. For the Morning Star, in Tolkien's cosmos, is the light shining from the Silmaril bound upon the brow of Earendil, the father of Elrond, after he is sent by the Valar to sail the heavens and "keep watch upon the ramparts of the sky" following the defeat and exile of Morgoth. It is this light, from an age before the Sun and Moon, that shines in the phial that Frodo carries away from Lothlorien, and which aids him in the conflict with the giant spider Shelob, a creature of darkness who is herself a descendant of Ungoliant, the destroyer of the Two Trees in Valinor.

Light shining in darkness, representing the life, grace, and creative action of God, is a theme we find in the Prologue of St. John's Gospel, and it is at the very heart of Tolkien's writing. To a Catholic such as Tolkien, who believes Mary to be the universal mediatrix of that grace, she is present implicitly wherever her Son is present; that is, wherever grace is present in the world. For Tolkien, then, the light of the Silmaril, which beautifies whoever wears it, and which is carried by Frodo into the darkness of Mordor, is a reminder of the beauty of the "first creation" before the Fall, and a symbolic anticipation of the new creation that would begin with the Incarnation. For Catholics, the Virgin Mary has all the beauty that Eve lost, and is the Mother of the world to come.

To a puzzled non-Christian, who tells him that he has created a world "in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp" (Letter 328), Tolkien replies: "Of his own sanity no man can securely judge. If sanctity inhabits his work or as a pervading light illumines it then it does not come from him but through him. And neither of you would perceive it in these terms unless it was with you also. Otherwise you would see and feel nothing, or (if some other spirit was present) you would be filled with contempt, nausea, hatred. 'Leaves out of the elf-country, gah!' 'Lembas—dust and ashes, we don't eat that.'"

In the National Gallery in London is a small panel painting known as the Wilton Diptych. Commissioned by Richard II, it is one of the most pre-



cious and mysterious works of art in England. It shows the king kneeling, surrounded by saints, offering the nation to the Virgin Mary, or perhaps to the baby Jesus who is in her arms, reaching out to receive it. The king is surrounded by a barren and forbidding landscape; but at the feet of Mary the ground is green with grass and bright with flowers, just as the air around her is thronged with angels.

This is the Mary who is ever-present to Tolkien, at the center of his imagination, mantled by all natural beauty, the most perfect of God's creatures, the treasury of all earthly and spiritual gifts. What Elbereth, Galadriel, and other characters such as Luthien and Arwen, surely express is precisely what Tolkien said he had found in Our Lady: beauty both in majesty and simplicity. Majesty, for here we see beauty crowned with all the honours that chivalry can bestow; and as for simplicity, well, what is more simple than starlight?

The way the fragrance of the Beatitudes and the Magnificat permeates Tolkien's great work of fiction is typical of the authentic products of a Christian civilization. Works of the imagination are works of the spirit as well as the hand of the artist, and they are "true" to the extent that they convey a sense of the realities of virtue and of grace that determine the pattern of our lives. This is something that *The Lord of the Rings* achieves, by the literary device of filtering the sagas and epics of the Northmen and the Celts through a Christian consciousness. No human work of art is perfect, but it can reach for perfection, and it may be worthy of being assumed into the Kingdom when God raises us up and completes our labour. I have no doubt that Tolkien's great tale will be one of those we will hear told, or sung, by the golden fireside in that longed-for Kingdom.

---

### **The Moral and Spiritual Depth of *The Lord of the Rings***

— *The December 23, 2001 issue of Our Sunday Visitor contains an interview with David Mills. Mr. Mills is one of the Editors of Touchstone, an excellent journal which devoted its January/February 2002 issue to the subject of Tolkien and the Christian Imagination. What follows is the text of the Our Sunday Visitor interview:*

**OUR SUNDAY VISITOR:** What makes *The Lord of the Rings* so appealing that it can still create a craze almost fifty years after its first appearance?

**MILLS:** For one thing, it's a great story. But I think it still sells millions of copies not just because it has got a great plot and great characters and all that, but because it is a wise story. It has a moral and spiritual depth that

very,very few modern works have, and people respond to that. It makes you think, and it teaches you something important about the world. That's the sort of book people keep reading over and over.

*VISITOR:* *The Lord of the Rings* is such a powerful moral work that it seems odd among Hollywood's run of amoral comedies and anti-heroes. Do you expect it to succeed at the box office?

*MILLS:* I am sure it will be a huge hit—partly because it's such a powerful moral work. People always want to see stories of good and evil, and they really want them after September 11th. Even the amoral comedies you mention have good guys and bad guys. The problem with them is that the good guys aren't actually good. They're always sexually immoral, but they're often also mean and vindictive as well. Look at Jim Carrey's Grinch. In contrast, *The Lord of the Rings* gives a picture of good that's both convincing and appealing. The good guys win, but they don't win easily or cheaply. They aren't perfect, but they grow in virtue as the story goes on. Even though the good guys win, evil has done its damage, and some of them have to sacrifice themselves for everyone else. In other words, the book gives us a realistic morality. It takes morality more seriously than the average movie does but it doesn't have a simple happy ending. It's hopeful and realistic at the same time. This is what the normal person wants even if he isn't religious. We have a need for reality that Tolkien's book satisfies. The movie seems to have been very well done, too, of course. That will help a lot.

*VISITOR:* How did Tolkien's faith affect his art and his imaginative development?

*MILLS:* I said that *The Lord of the Rings* is a wise story. It is a wise story mainly because it is a Christian story. We could talk about this for hours, but let me give you just one example. Hidden in the plot of the book is a study in Providence. It isn't the typical simple battle of good against evil, in which the heroes just keep fighting till they win. Tolkien's book puts the heroes' story in a deeper context. It shows how God turns even evil to his own purposes and how our obedience to his laws is rewarded in ways we couldn't possibly predict. The best example is the effect of mercy. In the story, a lot of characters show mercy to the villain Gollum, several times being kind to him when killing him was perfectly justified. They are merciful to an extent everyone but Christians will think insane. And yet those acts of mercy eventually save the world from evil in a way no one, but no one, could have expected. This sort of thing happens over and over in the book. The book has all sorts of Catholic touches, by the way. The Elf queen Galadriel is a Marian figure, for example, who tests the purity of the heroes' intentions. The Elves give the heroes a bread that is clearly

## News and Comments

eucharistic. A Catholic might guess a Catholic wrote it just from these little hints.

*VISITOR:* How did Tolkien live his faith in a place and a profession that were benignly anti-Catholic?

*MILLS:* Being a Catholic didn't really affect his work at Oxford. He was a world-class expert in his field—early English literature—who did his job very well, and with his colleagues that counted for more than his religion.

*VISITOR:* Pope John Paul II has called on artists and writers to evangelize culture. Do you think Tolkien's book works toward that end?

*MILLS:* The answer is, yes, but we have to be careful what we mean by this. The Holy Father has called writers and artists to evangelize by being good at their work, not by being propagandists. A deeply Christian work might not look Christian at all on the surface, because a good story evangelizes by being a good story, even if you can't get a Christian lesson out of it. In other words, the artist and writer evangelize by helping everyone else see the truth about the world and the human heart more clearly. Tolkien certainly believed this. He said that a good story of the sort he was writing would make a "secondary world" that would obey the laws of the "primary world," by which he meant this one. By putting the truth in an imaginary world, the writer is helping people see it better.

*VISITOR:* And *The Lord of the Rings*?

*MILLS:* *The Lord of the Rings* is a sort of stealth evangelization. It doesn't mention God or religion, and I'm sure that's why some of its fans like it. It doesn't look like a religious work at all, but the world it imagines is the one Christianity tells us exists. In it the reader sees something about reality—real reality, if you see what I mean—which should make him a little more open to an explicit offering of the Gospel. It will train him to see what it is really there, not what his secular mind has always told him is there. For example, his secular mind will tell him that you do what you have to do to survive, but the book tells him that mercy works to the good even when it seems foolish, because the world is governed by Someone who loves mercy. In fact, I think a love of *The Lord of the Rings* is a good sign that someone's mind and heart are a good ways open to the Faith. If he loves the story, he must love the Christian story whether he knows it or not.

*VISITOR:* Do you see the release of this movie as an opportunity for further evangelization? If so, how can Catholics seize the opportunity?

*MILLS:* We're assuming the movie stays very close to the books. The filmmakers say they haven't changed it much, but I am worried that they will have changed it just enough to lose the distinctively Christian ele-

ments. There are some key words and ideas in the book the average secular Hollywood type won't know are crucial to its meaning. If they leave these out, it'll be harder to use the movie for evangelization. I'm afraid you can never trust Hollywood to get religion right. But to answer your question: to be honest, the real meaning of the book isn't on the surface and so you have to get your friends to look beneath the surface, and that's very hard to do. To really use the movie to help others come closer to Christ and his Church, you have to have read the books closely, have understood the faith behind them, and be able to help someone who liked the movie to see that he ought to give himself to the faith it expresses. As I said, that's very hard to do. What I'd suggest to most Catholics is that they use the movie to raise questions for their unbelieving friends. Ask them why they think one of the characters did what he did, or why something happened the way it did. In this way you help them begin to see that the great story depends upon its moral and spiritual depth, and then you can ask them where they find this morality and spirituality today. We know that the only place you find them in their full strength is the Catholic church, but your unbelieving friends don't yet know that. At this point, you have to switch to a different appeal. You have to help your friends see that this is true in real life, not just in the story. So if you can, find parallels in your own life to the crucial events in the book and tell your friends how your faith changed your life.

---

### **An Interview with a Tolkien Biographer**

— *The following article, "Finding Frodo's Faith," was first published in The National Catholic Register. (January, 2002). It was written by Joseph Pearce, writer-in-residence at Ave Maria College in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Mr. Pearce is the author of Tolkien: Man and Myth and Tolkien: A Celebration. He writes:*

What is the secret of J.R.R. Tolkien's success with *The Lord of the Rings*? How did such a strange story, full of imaginary creatures such as hobbits, elves, ents and orcs, emerge as a powerful literary force? How did its author, a quiet and unassuming professor of philology at Merton College, Oxford, become the creator of a mythological world that continues to fascinate and captivate new generations of readers a half-century after its introduction? These questions are intriguing enough, but even more surprising, perhaps, is the fact that Tolkien was a devout Catholic who often went out of his way to point out that his Christianity was the most important ingredient in *The Lord of the Rings*. Who exactly was J.R.R. Tolkien?

Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, in 1892, of English parents, and christened John Ronald Reuel in the local Anglican cathedral.

Shortly after his third birthday, his mother returned to England, taking John Ronald Reuel and his younger brother, Hillary, with her. His father, unable to vacate his post as manager of a local bank, was forced temporarily to remain behind. He died suddenly, after suffering a severe hemorrhage, before he could join his wife and children in England. Her husband's death left Mabel Tolkien in relative poverty, reliant upon her family for financial assistance. In 1900, when J.R.R. was eight, she was received into the Catholic Church—a decision which outraged her family and resulted in the withdrawal of the financial support. So it was that the young Tolkien became a child convert. Thereafter, he always remained a resolute Catholic, a fact which profoundly affected the direction of his life. The realization that the Catholic faith might not have been the faith of his father, but was the faith of his father's fathers, ignited and nurtured his love for medievalism. This, in turn, led to his disdain for the humanistic "progress" that followed in the wake of the Reformation.

#### Martyr Mother

Mabel Tolkien was diagnosed as diabetic and, in November 1904, she sank into a coma and died. Tolkien was twelve. For the rest of his life, Tolkien would remain convinced that his mother's untimely death was the result of the persecution that had followed her conversion. Sixty years later, he compared her sacrifices for the faith with the lukewarm complacency of some of his children toward the faith they had inherited from her." When I think of my mother's death," he wrote, "worn out with persecution, poverty, and, largely consequent, disease, in the effort to hand on to us small boys the Faith, and remember the tiny bedroom she shared with us in rented rooms in a postman's cottage at Rednal, where she died alone, too ill for viaticum, I find it very hard and bitter, that my children stray away." Indeed, Tolkien always considered his mother a martyr for the faith. Nine years after her death, he wrote: "My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it was not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to His great gifts as He did to Hillary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the Faith."

Tolkien and his brother were now orphans. Father Francis Morgan, a priest at the Oratory in Birmingham (founded by Cardinal John Henry Newman), became their legal guardian. Each morning, Tolkien and his brother would serve Mass for Father Francis before going to school. Tolkien remained grateful to the priest all his life, describing him as "a guardian who has been a father to me, more than most real fathers."

So much for Tolkien's Catholic faith. But what of the myth he created? Is *The Lord of the Rings* as Catholic as its author? Tolkien certainly believed so. "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious

and Catholic work,” he wrote to his friend, Father Robert Murray, “unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.” In another letter, written shortly after *The Lord of the Rings* was published, Tolkien outlined a “scale of significance” of those factors in his life that had influenced his writing of the book. He divided these into three distinct categories, namely the “insignificant,” the “more significant” and the “really significant.” “Basic facts, which, however dryly expressed, are really significant,” he wrote. “For instance I was born in 1892 and lived for my early years in ‘the Shire’ in a pre-mechanical age. Or more important, I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic.”

In what ways is Tolkien’s mythological epic imbued with the faith of its author? First, as is clear from Tolkien’s account of the creation of Middle Earth in *The Silmarillion*, his imaginary world is under the omnipotent guidance of the same God he worshipped each Sunday at holy Mass. In fact, Tolkien’s creation myth parallels the creation narrative in Genesis. The world is loved into existence by the One, who invites the Ainur, the archangels, to cooperate in the creative process, much as the musicians in an orchestra cooperate with the conductor. One of these archangels, Melkor, refuses to play in harmony with the others and is intent on “playing his own tune” in defiance of the will of the one God. Taking his inspiration, no doubt, from the Book of Isaiah, Tolkien says of Melkor:

“From splendour he fell through arrogance to contempt for all things save himself, a spirit wasteful and pitiless. Understanding he turned to subtlety in perverting to his own will all that he would use, until he became a liar without shame. He began with the desire of Light, but when he could not possess it for himself alone, he descended through fire and wrath into a great burning, down into Darkness. And darkness he used most upon Arda [earth], and filled it with fear for all living things.” Shortly after this description of Melkor, Tolkien introduces Sauron, the Dark Enemy in *The Lord of the Rings*. Sauron he describes as a spirit and the greatest of Melkor’s servants.

#### No Fear of the Dark

If the evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is specifically satanic, the actions of the virtuous characters are so rooted in sanctity that they almost appear to be metaphors for the truth of the Gospel. In the unassuming humility of the hobbits, we see the exaltation of the humble. In their reluctant heroism, we see a courage ennobled by modesty. In the immortality of the elves, and the sadness and melancholic wisdom it evokes in them, we can read their dissatisfaction with the incompleteness of the fallen world. Man’s sojourn in the “vale of tears” of the natural realm is likewise marked by a desire for something more—the mystical union with the divine beyond the

reach of time. Gandalf beholds a vision of the Kingdom beyond the understanding of men. At times he is almost Christlike. He lays down his life for his friends and his mysterious “resurrection” results in his transfiguration. Before his self-sacrificial “death,” he is Gandalf the Grey; after his “resurrection” he reappears as Gandalf the White, armed with greater powers and deeper wisdom.

In the true, though exiled, kingship of Aragorn we see glimmers of the hope for a restoration of truly ordained, i.e., Catholic, authority. The person of Aragorn represents the embodiment of the Arthurian and Jacobite yearning—the visionary desire for the “return of the king” after eons of exile. The “sword that is broken,” the symbol of Aragorn’s kingship, is reforged at the anointed time—a potent reminder of Excalibur’s union with the Christendom it is ordained to serve. Significantly, the role of men in *The Lord of the Rings* reflects their divine, though fallen, nature. They are to be found among the enemy’s servants, though usually beguiled by deception into the ways of evil and always capable of repentance and, in consequence, redemption. Boromir, who represents man in the Fellowship of the Ring, succumbs to the temptation to use the ring, i.e., the forces of evil, in the naive belief that it could be wielded as a powerful weapon against Sauron. He finally recognizes the error of seeking to use evil against evil. He dies heroically, laying down his life for his friends in a spirit of repentance. Ultimately, *The Lord of the Rings* is a sublimely mystical passion play. The carrying of the ring—the emblem of sin—is the carrying of the cross. The mythological quest is a veritable *Via Dolorosa*. In short, *The Lord of the Rings* is every bit as Catholic as its author. It is not only written by a Catholic, it is so Catholic that only a Catholic could have written it.

This article is reprinted with permission from *National Catholic Register*. To subscribe to the *National Catholic Register* call 1-800-421-3230.

---

### **Marian Echoes in *The Lord of the Rings***

— *Christopher Howse wrote the following note for the London Daily Telegraph (date):*

The film of *The Lord of the Rings* is upon us. Some critics of the book hated its occasional use of the elevated archaic register of the King James Bible. But the book is merely one realisation of a myth, so anyone is free to retell it in a suitable language, such as Serbian or Middle Welsh.

For his part, Tolkien disliked literary critics and more readily answered strangers’ philological inquiries. In 1958, Rhona Beare asked him

why, in the chapter of *The Two Towers* called “The Choices of Master Samwise”, he explains “O Elbereth Gilthoniel” when elsewhere the O is A Tolkien replied that O is an error for A (corrected in later editions). Sam was inspired to declaim in a language he did not know, Elvish: *A Elbereth Gilthoniel/ o menel palan-diriell/ le nallon si di’ngùruthos!/ A tiro nin, Fanuilos!* Tolkien translated it: “O Elbereth Starkindler from heaven gazing-afar, to thee I cry now in the shadow of (the fear of) death. O look towards me Everwhite.”

Tolkien, an orphan, was brought up by priests of the Birmingham Oratory. Among the anthems he would have heard, in a language not at first intelligible to him, were the *Ave Stella Maris* and the *Salve Regina*, which contains the phrases, “*ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle*” and “*illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte*”. *Lacrimarum valle* is a variant of “the shadow of death”, as in Psalm 22 (23): “*in medio umbrae mortis*” or “*in valle tenebrosa*”, as it is also rendered. I am not saying that Elbereth is the Blessed Virgin Mary; but they are mythic analogues.

---

### Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien

- *These “Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien,” were written by his friend George Sayer and published in Tolkien: A Celebration, edited by Joseph Pearce and published in London by HarperCollins in 1999. George Sayer was head of the English Department at Malvern College from 1949 until 1974 and, as an undergraduate many years earlier, was a pupil of C.S. Lewis at Magdalen College, Oxford. He became one of Lewis’s closest friends and is author of Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times. These reminiscences, first delivered and subsequently published as part of the Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference in 1992, represent a celebration of that friendship.*

On earth Ronald Tolkien loved parties, so I think he’ll be there among the immortals enjoying this imaginative and beautifully organized centenary party. One or two items on the menu may surprise him—for instance why should mushrooms or morels, homely English things, be translated into French, not at all his favourite language? But that’s a detail. I hope nothing I say will offend him if he bothers to listen, that all I say about him will be worthy of the great courtesy and kindness he always showed me.

I got to know him through C.S. Lewis, who was my tutor when I read English at Magdalen. Lewis took a low view of the standard of lecturing



## *News and Comments*

in Oxford—a view that was, I think, correct. He advised me to go only to two-and-a-half series of lectures in first year. The two were his own lectures and those of Nevill Coghill. The half was Tolkien's. "I don't know what to say about Tolkien," was how he put it.

He is scholarly, and he can be brilliant though perhaps rather recondite for most undergraduates. But unfortunately you may not be able to hear what he says. He is a bad lecturer. All the same I advise you to go. If you do, arrive early, sit near the front and pay particular attention to the extempore remarks and comments he often makes. These are usually the best things in the lecture. In fact one could call him an inspired speaker of footnotes.

"An inspired speaker of footnotes." INSPIRED. The word stuck in my mind, but it was not until many years later that I realized that Lewis was saying something profoundly true about Tolkien's writing as well as his lecturing. He really is an inspired writer. The general level of his work is high and every now and then one comes across passages and whole incidents of real inspiration. The Ents are an example. They are a wonderful invention that owes, as far as I know, nothing to previous writing. They are like nothing else that has ever been. They are charming and lovable with, also, the sadness characteristic of the author, a sadness that underlies much of his humour. Another example is the ride to Gondor where the prose narrative rises to the truly heroic, the rarest thing in modern literature and perhaps the literary quality that its author admired most. What one could call very good footnotes sometimes occurred in his private conversation. If he was with several other people and not very interested in what they were talking about, he might mutter to whoever sat nearest him a comment that was, as far as one could hear it, of real interest.

But in spite of the footnotes, I was disappointed in Tolkien's lectures. Unlike Lewis, who had a fine resonant voice, he had a poor voice and made things worse by mumbling, I did try arriving early and sitting in the front. I then found myself sitting in the midst of a small group of young women who knew each other rather well. At least some of them must have gone to him for tutorials. I think that in the early days the women's colleges sent him pupils because he was a married man. If he had not been, a woman undergraduate would not have been allowed to go to a tutorial with him alone. She would have had to be chaperoned by another woman. I think he retained this connection with women's colleges after the demise or neglect of the chaperoning rule.

I noticed that some of them spoke of him with affection, as "rather sweet". The more homely enjoyed going to his north Oxford house and meeting the little Tolkiens, as I heard them called, presumably Christopher

and Priscilla. I followed the good example of those around me and tried to take notes. This wasn't easy for he went quite fast. The footnotes were for me certainly the best part but there were not enough of them and I enjoyed them for wrong or quite unintellectual reasons, because in them Tolkien showed a rather pleasant sense of humour. But in spite of these I foolishly soon gave up going. Since this may shock those of you who do not know Oxford and Cambridge, I had better explain that going to lectures was entirely voluntary at these ancient universities. It still is, and is unnecessary too for success in Schools. My stepdaughter, Sheena, who was recently up at St. John's, never went to a single lecture all the time she was up. Yet she got a first.

My real relationship with Tolkien did not begin until about thirteen years later. It was during the school holidays at Malvern where I was teaching. Quite near the college I came across C.S. Lewis and his brother Warren apparently setting out for a hike. They were wearing open-neck shirts, very old clothes, had stout walking sticks, and one of them was carrying a very ancient looking rucksack. It was the fact that they were doing it in Malvern that surprised me because I know that C.S. Lewis was certainly not the old-boy type, even though his brother was. They explained that they had swapped houses with Maureen, Mrs. Moore's daughter, who had married Leonard Blake, the Director of Music at Malvern College. She had gone to Lewis's house, The Kilns, to be with her mother, who was ill. With them was Tolkien and a man whom they introduced to me as Humphrey Havard, "our friend and doctor". Lewis invited me to have some beer with them at the pub called The Unicorn. There he asked me which were the best walks in the area, and then if I could join them for the next few days, acting as their guide. Lewis then drew me on one side and said that they would be extremely grateful if I would be willing to walk much of the time with Tolkien, while they went on ahead.

He's a great man, but not our sort of walker. He doesn't seem able to talk and walk at the same time. He dawdles and then stops completely when he has something interesting to say. Warnie finds this particularly irritating.

I soon found that the brothers liked to walk hard and fast for half an hour, a period which Warnie would time, for Jack never wore or, as far as I know, owned a watch. Then they would have what they called a "soak". This meant sitting or lying down for the time it took to have a cigarette. Then the other man would shoulder the pack, which was their name for the rucksack, and they would go on walking hard for another half-hour. Humphrey Havard had been most kind in walking some of the time with Tolkien but he had to go back to Oxford the following day.

## News and Comments

It worked really well. Tolkien seemed glad to be left behind by the Lewis brothers, whom he described to me as “ruthless walkers, very ruthless indeed”. Certainly he was not used to their sort of walking, and got quickly out of breath when we walked uphill. Just as C.S. Lewis said, he tended to stop walking, certainly walking fast, whenever he had something interesting to say. He also liked to stop to look at the trees, flowers, birds and insects that we passed. He would not have suited anyone who, like the Lewis brothers, walked partly for health, in order to get vigorous exercise. But it delighted me. He talked so well that I was happy to do nothing but listen, though even if one was by his side, it was not always easy to hear all that he said. He talked faster than anyone of his age that I have known, and in a curious fluttering way. Then he would often spring from one topic to another, or interpolate remarks that didn’t seem to have much connection with what we were talking about. He knew more natural history than I did, certainly far more than the Lewises, and kept coming out with pieces of curious information about the plants that we came across. I can remember one or two examples. Thus on the common wood avens:

This is Herb Bennet, in Latin *Herba Benedicta*. What do you think that means?

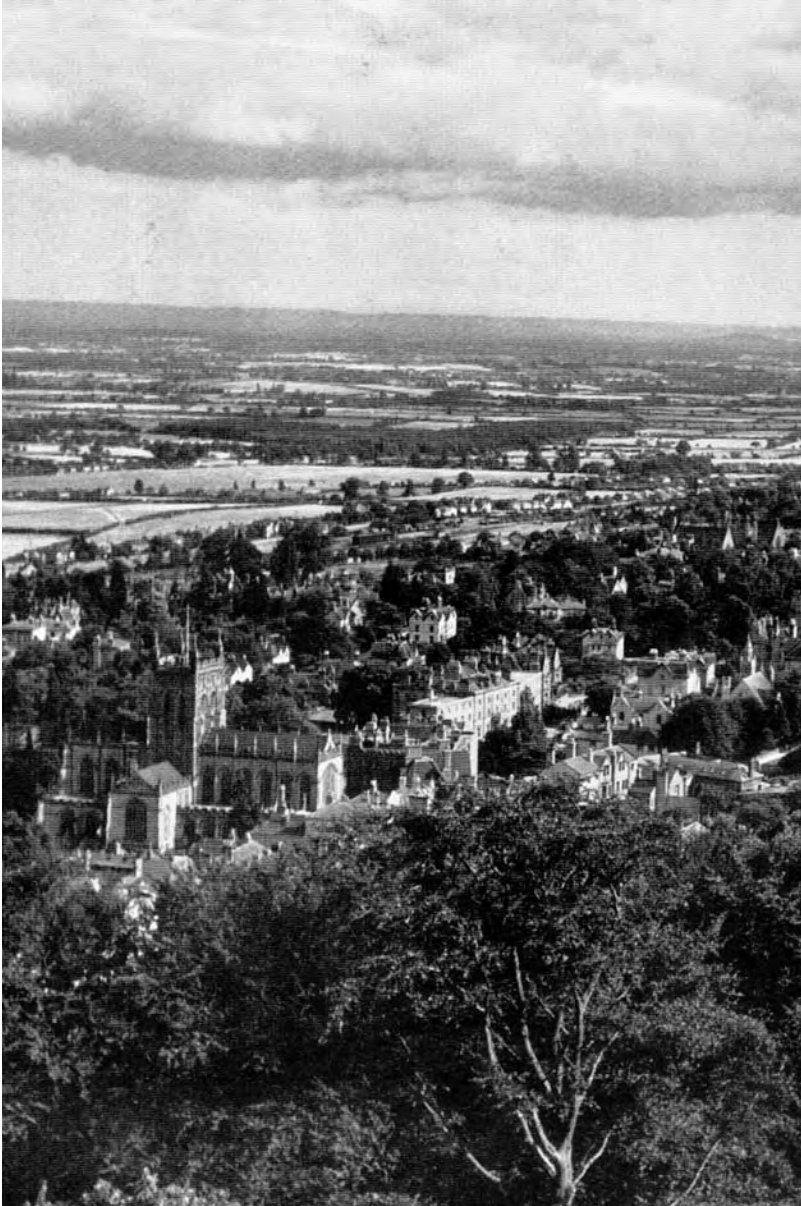
The Blessed Plant.

Yes, though the English form wants it to be *St. Benedict’s Herb*. It is blessed because it is a protection from the devil. If it is put into a house “the devil can do nothing, and if a man carries it about with him no venomous beast will come within scent of it.”

And upon the celandine:

Did you know that when picking celandine various combinations of *Aves* and *Paternosters* have to be said? This was one of the many cases of Christian prayers supplanting pagan ones, for in ancient times there were runes to be spoken before it was picked.

Though he was generally interested in birds and insects, his greatest love seemed to be for trees. He had loved trees ever since childhood. He would often place his hand on the trunks of ones that we passed. He felt their wanton or unnecessary felling almost as murder. The first time I heard him say “ORCS” was when he heard not far off the savage sound of a petrol-driven chainsaw. “That machine,” he said, “is one of the greatest horrors of our age.” He said that he had sometimes imagined an uprising of the trees against their human tormentors. “Think of the power of a forest on the march. Of what it would be like if Birnam Wood really came to Dunsinane.”



Malvern, from North Hill, Worcestershire

## News and Comments

I had the impression that he had never walked the hills before though he had often admired the distant view of them from the Avon valley near Evesham. Some of the names of the places we saw from the hills produced philological or etymological footnotes. *Malvern* was a corruption of two Welsh words, “moel” meaning *bear*, and “vern” derived from *bryn* or *fryn* meaning *hill*. This of course told us that the area was in early times heavily wooded, though the ten-mile ridge of the hills was not. The main pass over the hills is called the Wyche. This gave him an opportunity of talking about the various meanings of the word “Wyc”.

It was the custom of the Lewis brothers to eat the bread and cheese they brought with them in a pub and to drink it with a couple of pints of beer, always bitter. They liked the beer to be drawn from the wood and the pub to be simple, primitive and above all without a radio. Tolkien agreed strongly with this taste. I can think of a pub he wouldn't enter because there was a radio on. But he was happy drinking beer, or smoking his pipe in a pub among friends. Usually he was genial and relaxed, as if liberated from the worries of ordinary life. As I sat with him and the Lewis brothers in the pub, I remember being fascinated by the expressions on his face, the way they changed to suit what he was saying. Often he was smiling, genial, or wore a pixy look. A few seconds later he might burst into savage scathing criticism, looking fierce and menacing. Then he might soon become genial again. There was an element of acting about this gesturing, but much that he said was extremely serious.

Except at Inklings meetings I saw nothing of Tolkien for perhaps two years after this. Lewis gave me bulletins about him, and talked quite a lot about *The Lord of the Rings*, its greatness and the difficulty of getting it published. He thought this was largely Tolkien's fault because he insisted that it should be published with a lengthy appendix of largely philological interest. In negotiation with Collins he had even gone so far as to insist that it should be published with the earlier book, *The Silmarillion*, a book that Lewis had tried to read in typescript, but found very heavy going. The two together would make a volume of over a million words. Even alone *The Lord of the Rings* would, Lewis thought, be the better for pruning. There was a large section that in his opinion weakened the book.

Of course Lewis's enthusiasm made my wife and me most eager to read the book. Lewis said that he would try and get a copy for us, but he did not see how. Then on one of my visits to Magdalen he told me that Tolkien had given up hope of ever having it published. This was a real calamity, but it brought great good to me. “Look,” he said, “at what I have here for you!” There on his table was the typescript of *The Lord of the Rings*. Of course I must take the greatest care of it, read it in a month or

less, and return it personally to the author, phoning him first to make sure that he would be there to receive it. It was far too precious to be entrusted even to the more reliable post of forty years ago.

Of course my wife and I had the thrilling experience that all of you remember vividly. Well before the month was up, I turned up with it at Tolkien's house, then in Holywell. I found him obviously unhappy and dishevelled. He explained that his wife had gone to Bournemouth and that all his friends were out of Oxford. He eagerly accepted my invitation to come to Malvern for a few days. "But what shall I do with the other book? I can't leave it here." So I drove Tolkien to Malvern with the typescripts of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* on the back seat. What a precious cargo!

His talk now was mainly of his books. He had worked for fourteen years on *The Lord of the Rings* and before that for many years on *The Silmarillion*. They really were his life work. He had in a sense planned them before he went to school, and actually written one or two of the poems while he was still at school, I think the Tom Bombadil poems. He had now nothing to look forward to except a life of broken health, making do on an inadequate pension. He was so miserable and so little interested in anything except his own troubles that we were seriously worried. What could we do to alleviate his depression? I could walk with him and drive him around during the day, but how were we to get through the evenings? Then I had an idea. I would take the risk of introducing him to a new machine that I had in the house and was trying out because it seemed that it should have some valuable education applications. It was a large black box, a Ferrograph, and early-model tape recorder. To confront him with it was a risk because he had made it clear that he disliked all machinery. He might curse it and curse me with it, but there was a chance that he would be interested in recording on it, in hearing his own voice.

He was certainly interested. First he recorded the Lord's Prayer in Gothic to cast out the devil that was sure to be in it since it was a machine. This was not just whimsy. All of life for him was part of a cosmic conflict between the forces of good and evil, God and the devil. I played it back to him. He was surprised and very pleased. He sounded much better than he had expected. He went on to record some of the poems in *The Lord of the Rings*. Some he sang to the tunes that were in his head when writing them. He was delighted with the result. It was striking how much better his voice sounded recorded and amplified. The more he recorded, and the more often he played back the recordings, the more his confidence grew. He asked to record the great riddle scene from *The Hobbit*. He read it magnificently and was especially pleased with his impersonation of Gollum. Then

## *News and Comments*

I suggested he should read one or two of the best prose passages from *The Lord of the Rings*, say, the “Ride of the Rohirrim”, and part of the account of the events on Mount Doom. He listened carefully and, I thought, nervously, to the play-back. “You know,” he said, “they are all wrong. The publishers are wrong, and I am wrong to have lost my faith in my own work. I am sure this is good, really good. But how am I to get it published?”

Of course I had no idea. But I had to say something, so I said, “Haven’t you an old pupil in the publishing business?” After a pause he said: “There’s only Rayner.” “Then send it to him and ask for his help.”

I won’t tell you what happened after that because you would have heard it from Rayner Unwin himself. He went on recording until I ran out of tape. Of course compared with this nothing in my relationship with Tolkien is of much importance, but I will tell you a few other things. I don’t think he much liked the food he had while staying with us, because my wife was then working through a French cookery book, and he seemed to detest everything French—I don’t know why. We thought he had a bad appetite. Nevertheless he thanked her with a charming bread-and-butter letter written in Elvish and complete with English translation.

While with us he asked if he could do something to help in the house or garden. He was quite domesticated, not at all an impractical academic. We thought, in the garden, for our garden has never been a tidy or weed-free one. He chose an area of about two square yards, part flower border and part lawn and cultivated it perfectly: the border meticulously weeded and the soil made level and exceedingly fine; the grass cut with scissors closely and evenly. It took him quite a long time to do the job, but it was beautifully done. He was in all things a perfectionist. I think his training in domesticity, in housework, gardening, and looking after chickens and other creatures gave to his writing a homely and earthy quality. On Sunday we took him to Mass at the church to which we always go ourselves. Before we left the house he asked if confessions were heard before Mass. I told him they were. He said he always liked to go to confession before receiving communion. I do not think this was because he had on his conscience any sin that most people would regard as serious. True, he was what spiritual directors call “scrupulous”, that is, inclined to exaggerate the evil of the undisciplined and erring thoughts that plague most of us. But he was above all a devout and strict old-fashioned Catholic, who had been brought up to think that if possible one should go to confession first. This was the usual nineteenth-century attitude. It lingered in backward parts. Thus my wife tells me that in her village in County Kerry in the 1930s, no one would have thought of going to communion without going to confes-

sion first. In the pew in front of us there were two or three children who were trying to follow the service in a simple picture-book missal. He seemed to be more interested in them than in events at the altar. He lent over and helped them. When we came out of the church we found that he was not with us. I went back and found him kneeling in front of the Lady Altar with the young children and their mother, talking happily and I think telling stories about Our Lady. I knew the mother and found out later that they were enthralled. This again was typical; he loved children and had the gift of getting on well with them. "Mummy, can we always go to church with that nice man?" The story also illustrates one of the most important things about him, his great devotion to Our Lady. He wrote to me years later a letter in which he stated that he attributed anything that was good or beautiful in his writing to the influence of Our Lady, "the greatest influence in my life". He meant it. An obvious example is the character of Galadriel.

The few days he spent in Malvern with that early-model Ferrograph tape recorder at a time when he was "in the doldrums" as he put it in a letter, made me one of his friends. He invited me to call on him whenever I was in Oxford and with remarkable frankness talked to me not merely about *The Lord of the Rings* and his other writings but about his private worries about things such as money, religion and family. In the spring of 1953 he moved to Sandfield Road, a turning on Headington Hill off the London Road. I think that when I called, it was always Mrs. Tolkien who answered the door. One of her jobs was to protect her husband from people who would interfere with his work. She would then go upstairs to tell him that I, an admissible visitor, was there. I always found him seated at a large desk or table with many papers in front of him in a room full of books and piles of papers. I was told that there was also a bookstore and a sort of office in what would have been the garage if he had had a car. Until *The Lord of the Rings* was a success he talked a good deal about his misfortunes. He had much to complain about. The expenses of the move had made him rather short of money, and yet he would have to contribute more than he could afford towards publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps the best way of conveying his state of mind will be to read a few sentences about his anxieties from a letter he wrote to me at the end of August, 1953. It also shows that he had taken with enthusiasm to the use of a tape recorder:

When I got your letter I was altogether played out. Not that I have been able to relax, beyond one morning's long sleep. Life has been most complicated and laborious with domestic comings and goings and difficulties arranging for Father John and anxieties about my daughter lost in France. Amidst all this I have had to



## *News and Comments*

work day and (especially) night at the seemingly endless galleys of the Great Work that had piled up during Vivas, at drawings and runes and maps, and now at the copy of Vol. II. Also at Sir Gawain.

Immediately after Vivas Newby of the Talks Department descended on me. The upshot is that my translation is being taken in toto, uncut, as the basis of six broadcasts at Christmas. But they do not take equally kindly to me as the actual performer. However I go to London tomorrow for an audition. This is where the tape-recorder would have been so helpful. I had to hire a horrid old sound Mirror, the best I could get locally, but it was very helpful in matters of timing and speed. With the help of Christopher and Faith, I made some three voice experiments and recordings of the temptation scenes. An enormous improvement—and assistance to the listener. Chris was making an extremely good (if slightly Oxonian) Gawain, before we had to break off.

I got as near to Malvern as Evesham on August 23rd. The wedding of my nephew Gabriel Tolkien, at which John officiated. I thought not without longing of the Dark Hills in the distance, but I had to rush straight back.

He doubted if many people would buy the book at the high price of 25 shillings a volume. He feared too that the few people who read it would treat it as an allegory or morality about the nuclear bomb or the horrors of the machine age. He insisted over and over again that his book was essentially a story, without any further meaning. "Tales of Faerie," he said, "should be told only for their own sake."

One of the advantages of the house in Sandfield Road was that Tolkien's doctor, Humphrey Havard, lived in the same street, only a few doors away. He sometimes took him to church. I once asked him how he was and had the answer:

All right now, but I've been in a very bad state. Humphrey came here and told me that I must go to confession and that he would come early on Sunday morning to take me to confession and communion. That's the sort of doctor to have.

This story shows his humility. He had a very low opinion of his own merits, and fairly easily got into a depressed state when thinking of his faults and deficiencies. Life was a war between good and evil. He thought the sacraments freed one from enthrallment to Sauron. Once he spoke to me of Ireland after he had spent part of a summer vacation working there as an examiner. "It is as if the earth there is cursed. It exudes on evil that is held in check only by Christian practice and the power of prayer." Even the

soil, the earth, played a part in the cosmic struggle between forces of good and evil.

He thought hatred of Catholics was common in Britain. His mother, to whom he was most deeply devoted, was a martyr because of her loyalty to the Catholic faith, and his wife, Edith, was turned out of her guardian's house when she was received into the Church. In 1963 he wrote in a letter:

And it still goes on. I have a friend who walked in procession in the Eucharistic Congress in Edinburgh, and who reached the end with a face drenched with spittle of the populace which lined the road and were only restrained by mounted police from tearing the garments and faces of the Catholics.

He found little or nothing wrong with the pre-Vatican II Church, and therefore thought the reforms of the 1960s misguided and unnecessary. He frequently complained about the new English translations of the Latin texts used in Catholic services, because they were inaccurate or in bad or clumsy English. Lewis told Tolkien that of all his friends he was "the only one impervious to influence". This was largely true. It was no defect. Combined with his belief in all the traditional virtues such as courage, loyalty, chastity, integrity and kindness, it gave him as a man and to *The Lord of the Rings* tremendous moral strength. He was unswervingly loyal to the Christian faith as taught him by his guardian and benefactor, Father Francis Morgan.

Our mutual friend, C.S. Lewis, was a frequent topic of conversation. Their relationship before the war had been very close, so close that Edith Tolkien had resented the time that her husband spent with him. Lewis, who was aware of this, for his part found it impossible to see as much as he would have liked of Tolkien, whom he described as "the most married man he knew". But apart from the fact that one of them was married, the two had different concepts of friendship. Tolkien wanted to be first among Lewis's friends. Lewis may have loved Tolkien as much but he wanted him to be one among several friends. Tolkien was jealous of the position that Charles Williams, of whom he did not entirely approve, occupied in Lewis's affections. They were separated also by the success of the Narnia stories, the first of which appeared when he was struggling to get *The Lord of the Rings* through the press. He described it to be "about as bad as can be". It was written superficially and far too quickly (I think that perhaps he envied Lewis his fluency), had an obvious message, but above all was a mix-up of characters from dissimilar and incompatible imaginative worlds. Dr. Cornelius, Father Time, the White Witch, Father Christmas and Dryads should not be included in the same story. I never saw the force of this criticism.

## *News and Comments*

At long last, after the three volumes were successfully launched, he became what Lewis called “cock-a-hoop” and talked with great enthusiasm of the fate of the pirated paperback version and the astonishing growth of the Tolkien cult. He enjoyed receiving letters in Elvish from boys at Winchester and from knowing that they were using it as a secret language. He was overwhelmed by his fan mail and would-be visitors. It was wonderful to have at long last plenty of money, more than he knew what to do with. He once began a meeting with me by saying: “I’ve been a poor man all my life, but now for the first time I’ve a lot of money. Would you like some?”

In my later visits he was nominally hard at work getting *The Silmarillion* into a form suitable for publication. But after a time I began to wonder how much he really did. I can think of two visits at an interval of a month. On the second I am almost sure that he had the same page open as on the first. I have been told that he spent much of his time reading detective stories. I don’t blame him. His life work was complete. I once asked him about the origin of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It seemed to be more than anything else philological. Then just as I was leaving to go on a walk with C.S. Lewis he handed me a pile of papers. “If you’re interested, have a look at these.” Lewis and I took them to a pub and looked at them over bread and cheese. “Good Heavens!” he exclaimed, “he seems to have invented not one but three languages complete with their dialects. He must be the cleverest man in Oxford. But we can’t keep them. Take them straight back to him while I have another pint.”

If I was there at the right time in the afternoon he would take me to have tea in the drawing room on the floor below, Edith Tolkien’s room. The atmosphere was quite different, with hardly any papers and few books. She did most of the talking and it was not at all literary. Frequent subjects were the doings of the children, especially Christopher, the grandchildren, the garden in which I think Ronald enjoyed working, the iniquities of the Labour Party, the rising price of food, the changes for the worse in the Oxford shops and the difficulty of buying certain groceries. The road had deteriorated since they had moved there. It used to be a quiet cul-de-sac. Now the lower end had been opened up and lorries and cars rushed through on their way to a building site or to Oxford United’s football ground. There were also some very noisy people in the road. They even had as near neighbours an aspiring pop group.

Ronald (I call him Ronald in talking to you, but I always addressed him by his Inklings nickname, “Tollers”) told me that when she was younger Edith had been a fine pianist. Some of the conversation was about music. On one occasion she played to us on a very simple old-fashioned

gramophone a record that she had just bought. Her husband was relaxed and happy with this domesticity. Anyway, it was an important part of his life. Without a liking for the homely and domestic, he could not have written *The Hobbit*, or invented Frodo and Sam Gamgee, characters that sustain quite convincingly the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, and link the high romance to the everyday and the ordinary.

He told me that he was moving to Bournemouth because the house was too big and too much work for Edith, and in order to escape the fan mail and the fans. I did not go there. The last time I met him was after his return to Oxford. He was with children (perhaps great-grandchildren), playing trains: "I'm Thomas the Tank Engine. Puff. Puff. Puff." That sort of thing. I was conscripted as a signal. This love for children and delight in childlike play and simple pleasures was yet another thing that contributed to his wholeness as a man and the success of his books.

---

### **Kazakhstan Crackdown on Human Hobbits**

— *The following piece appeared in the August 2001 issue of the London Sunday Telegraph under the heading "Middle Earth and Former Soviet Republic in Collision of Cultures." Craig Nelson writes:*

Devotees of J.R.R. Tolkien and his hairy-footed hobbits in the central Asian state of Kazakhstan have encountered a real-life threat to match the evil Dark Lord Sauron: a police crackdown on "counter-cultural groups." The peaks of the Tian Shen Mountains which tower over Almaty, the main city in the former Soviet republic, offer an impressive representation of Middle Earth, the world created by Tolkien. An estimated 1,000 local aficionados of the British author, who call themselves Tolkienisti, trek regularly to forts they have built in the foothills, dress up as their favourite characters and re-enact adventures based on *The Hobbit* and the subsequent trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*.

"I find city life so crude and gloomy. I want to get away from it and create a different world," one seventeen-year-old said of Tolkien's allure. "When I look at other kids who hang out with nothing to do and no interests in life, I feel sad. Their lives seem so empty."

The pastime, however, is viewed as subversive by Almaty police, whose ranks include veterans of the old communist security forces and rural Kazakhs who have never heard of the Oxford professor and his creations. They have launched a campaign against the Tolkienisti, and any group that they believe exhibits undesirably "Bohemian" traits, including street musicians, "alternative" artists and homosexuals. Victims of the

crackdown have been beaten and detained for up to three days without charge, according to a report by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. One victim, the leader of a well-known punk rock band was forced to squat in a jail cell less than five feet high and half-filled with water.

The most frequent form of harassment is less severe, said the seventeen-year-old Tolkienist, who spoke on condition of anonymity. She said Tolkien enthusiasts were stopped in the street and ordered to remove their costumes and surrender their rubber axes and home-made wooden swords. The threat of a three-day detention on charges of carrying a concealed weapon is used to extract a bribe of up to £2.80—a large sum by the standards of Kazakhstan. The young woman, an art student, denied that the Tolkienisti posed any criminal or political threat. “The police and soldiers stop us because we are different. They believe if you are different from everyone else you are against everyone else,” she said.

Erbol Jumagulov, an Almaty journalist and a co-author of the *IWPR* report, blames the wave of harassment on a clash of cultures. The junior ranks of the police and army are burgeoning with non-Russian speaking, ethnic Kazakhs who have flocked to urban centres. They have little experience of people who dress and act differently to what they are accustomed. Furthermore, Mr. Jumagulov said, the police and soldiers are products of Kazakhstan’s rigidly conformist police and military academies, where hazing (brutal initiation rites) is routine. The resulting mixture is volatile. “They hit the streets and see people dressed in an eccentric way and they want revenge. Or, they’re simply envious,” he said. The Kazakh embassy in Moscow refused to comment on allegations of brutality by Kazakh security forces. Tolkien’s world of elves, dwarves, goblins and hobbits comprises one of the most treasured series of books ever written. It has sold more than ninety million copies worldwide since the first appeared in 1937. The books were translated into Russian in 1976, quickly becoming enormously popular throughout the Soviet Union.

---

### **An Evangelical Christian Reviewer Looks at Tolkien**

— *In the Evangelical Christian journal Books & Culture (January/February 2002), Aaron Belz reviews the book J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century by Tom Shippey. Mr. Belz writes:*

Growing up in the Middle-earth of American evangelicalism, I received the full Tolkien treatment. My parents read *The Hobbit* to me before bedtime, and I read it again many times on my own. I ventured

through *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy as a teenager, studied it in college, and read it again as an adult. I made a handful of abortive efforts to read the saga's dense prequel, *The Silmarillion*. A similar tale is told by multitudes of American Christians who grew up in the seventies and eighties, as it is by millions of British readers who are as hooked on Tolkien as they are on *The Archers*. But Tolkienism cuts an even wider swath. The trilogy has sold over fifty million copies worldwide, putting it well beyond the designation "cult classic," and the first installment of the movie version is introducing Middle-earth to an even wider circle. Until recently it hadn't dawned on me that Tolkien's books are not considered *literature* in the academic sense. I shouldn't have been surprised, not only because they're "fantasy" and suspiciously popular fantasy at that, but because none of the Inklings authors are much studied academically. Although they are cornerstones of my personal canon, they merit all of a single mention in Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (on page 77, in connection with Dante). A Google web search for "20th Century British Novel," the generic and historical classification in which we'd have to put Tolkien, yields college syllabi full of familiar names: Forster, Joyce, Beckett, Orwell, Woolf, Huxley. Recent additions include Kazuo Ishiguro (*Remains of the Day*) and the newly Nobel-christened V.S. Naipaul. Tolkien is never listed.

In *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Saint Louis University professor Tom Shippey aims to change that, and he is well qualified to try. His credits include among other things an excellent work of Tolkien criticism, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (1983), and editorship of *The Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories* (1944) and *Magill's Guide to Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* (1996). More important, perhaps, his professional trajectory has closely followed Tolkien's: "I attended the same school as Tolkien, King Edward's, Birmingham, and followed something like the same curriculum. In 1979 I succeeded to the chair of English Language and Medieval Literature at Leeds which Tolkien had vacated in 1925." Shippey was also a fellow at Oxford from 1972 to 1979, where Tolkien had taught until his retirement in 1959; the two were acquainted from 1970 until Tolkien's death three years later. In short, Shippey knows Tolkien's world firsthand as few critics can.

Above all, Shippey shares with his subject a deep, abiding passion for *philology*: "the study of historical forms of a language or languages . . . [and] the texts in which these old forms of the language survive." In his own writing Tolkien declared the importance of a "growing neighborliness of linguistic and literary studies" and designed his curriculum at Oxford to reflect that belief. He taught such texts as *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (which Shippey also teaches) with a strong emphasis on the dynamic growth of the English language from its Anglo-Saxon roots. It's a

commonplace that Tolkien's philological expertise informed his creation of Middle-earth, but Shippey goes further, suggesting that in no small part it was this knowledge that made Tolkien's imaginative creations not merely believable but eerily resonant with the modern imagination. There is evidence for this, for example, in an appendix entry at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* in which Tolkien parses "hobbit" as *hol* ("hole") plus the Old English *bytilian*, which means "to dwell," arriving at the invented word *holbytila* or "hole-dweller." In the same vein Shippey convincingly parses names such as Frodo, Ringwraith, Saruman, Bree, and Witherwindle, revealing their implications for the overall design of Tolkien's work. Whether or not Tolkien had all of these etymologies consciously in mind as he wrote (and it's clear that in many cases he did), he was so familiar with the ancestral tongues that he couldn't help but make Middle-earth a place of names and languages that really existed, or might have, in an unrecorded past. And all this works its magic on readers who have never conjugated an Anglo-Saxon verb. They feel in their bones the authenticity and coherence of Tolkien's language.

But philological analysis does not dominate this study (as it did *Road to Middle Earth*). If *The Lord of the Rings* and its satellites are rooted in antiquity, they also are grounded in the modern world. Indeed, Shippey begins his book with the provocative assertion that "the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic." He cites as examples, in addition to Tolkien, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, William Goldring's *Lord of the Flies*, and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, among others. Like Tolkien, Shippey observes, all of these writers "are combat veterans present at or at least deeply involved in the most traumatic events of the century." And far from turning to fantasy as an escape from reality, they found in this literary mode a means of communicating what they had experienced, for which the tools of "realism" proved inadequate.

Tolkien's works reflect the distinctive character of his time in other ways as well. When Shippey reveals Bilbo Baggins as a reluctant and desperately bourgeois adventurer, embodying Britain's postwar malaise, most readers will wonder how they could have failed to see that all along. Precisely because he is quintessentially modern, Bilbo enables contemporary readers to connect with a legendary past: he is their stand-in, anti-heroic, bemused by the vast forces unleashed in the quest for the Ring. Indeed, Shippey notes, anachronism, or "a superficial clash of styles," is a primary tactic in *The Hobbit*: battle scenes transposed from World War I, dwarves spouting business jargon, and a dragon who can be sarcastic and colloquial one moment, archaically fierce the next. Tolkien's intent, argues Shippey, is not only to bring a fantastic world within reach but also to show a funda-

mental unity between the present civilization and its heroic ancestry. Tolkien was also modern in his portrayal of evil. Obvious representations of external evil forces—Sauron, the Ringwraiths, and the Orcs, for example—have led some critics to dismiss Tolkien’s moral universe as simplistic. Well, Tolkien did believe in good and evil, the one sharply distinguished from the other, but his depiction of moral conflict is inescapably modern. Many of the characters in Tolkien’s works are “eaten up inside”; the work of destroying the Ring nearly undoes Frodo, the ostensible hero. He is not a pure victor, then, but a kinsman of Charlie Marlow (*Heart of Darkness*), coming to grips not only with a foreign horror but with the evil in himself. As the trilogy’s unforgettable image of addictive evil, the Ring is “part psychic amplifier, part malign power.”

To acknowledge Tolkien’s overlooked “modernity,” Shippey insists, is not to deny that in other respects he was resolutely anti-modern. Tolkien was steeped in the English tradition to a degree almost unrecoverable today; he felt a special affinity with the *Pearl*-poet (whose poems he famously translated) and the *Beowulf*-poet. The *Pearl*-poet’s extensive descriptions of humans laboring in an enchanted natural landscape suggested a setting for modern inner turmoil: “Tolkien’s myth of stars and trees presents life as a confusion in which we all too easily lose our bearings and forget that there is a world outside our immediate surroundings.” Like the *Beowulf*-poet (and like the novelist John Gardner, another student and translator of Anglo-Saxon poetry), Tolkien excels in the technique of “narrative interlace,” a technique in which “adventures are never told for long in strict chronological order, and continually ‘leapfrog’ each other.” Interlace creates a “strong sense of reality, of that being *the way things are*.” And when it serves the author’s purposes to do so, this technique also reinforces a sense of confusion, befuddlement; as Gandalf says, “Even the very wise cannot see all ends.” This notion is captured in a quotation from *Fellowship of the Ring*, currently a favorite bumper-sticker on college campuses: “Not all who wander are lost.” It was Tolkien’s purpose to show characters who don’t know where they are going, but who from an omniscient perspective are part of a grand narrative.

Much more is contained in the pages of Tom Shippey’s book, which is a thorough and highly readable study of an author whose powers clearly have been underestimated. Consider Tolkien explained and promoted. But does Shippey achieve the goal stated at the outset, to insert Tolkien into the canon as “the author of the century”? Perhaps not. The claim implied in the subtitle and expounded in the introduction rests on three factors: Tolkien’s immense popularity, his status as the inventor of an entire genre, and the literary value of his work. Shippey makes a case for the third of these, as well he must since it is the most contested. Still, in the end it is



not clear that popularity and generic considerations push Tolkien to the top of the century's impressive roll. Never mind. Isn't it time for another reading of *The Hobbit*?

---

### **Two Recent Tolkien Biographies**

— *Caroline Moore reviews two Tolkien biographies, Tolkien: A Biography by Michael White, Little, Brown & Co. and J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography by Humphrey Carpenter, HarperCollins, for The Sunday Telegraph (London) of December 23, 2001. What follows is the text of the review:*

I am a child of my generation: Tolkien entered the “leafmould” of my imagination. I kept school rough-books in fluent Dwarvish runes. Huge tracts of his writing I found tedious or aesthetically embarrassing; yet my devotion hardly faltered. Three years ago, rather reluctantly, I read every word of the whole trilogy, aloud, to my eight-year-old twins. No skipping was tolerated (they were reading ahead each night). What I dreaded was that the parts that I had loved so deeply might crumble to dust in the harsh light of adult scrutiny. Actually, the reverse was true. The Ringwraiths, Old Man Willow, Gollum, the drums in the mines of Moria and Shelob all retained their darkly pristine imaginative frisson, relieved through the reactions of my children. More surprisingly, the bits that I hardly remembered—those endless subplots set in Gondor and Rohan—were better than I expected. Reading aloud reveals the immeasurable imaginative, intellectual and linguistic superiority of Tolkien over the maggot-hordes of his imitators. The twins were gripped, as I had never been, by the madness of Denethor and the doomed love of Eowyn; while I was forced to realise that Tolkien's archaic and often horribly arch “high” style may be sonorous, but it is never flabby. It convinces because it has a strange, almost mad, totally consistent and thoroughly intelligent internal precision. You may well not like it; but the “orc-gricers” who respond to the language of *The Lord of the Rings* are reacting as Professor Tolkien in his youth did to the thrill of Greek: “The fluidity of Greek, punctuated by hardness, with its surface glitter captivated me. But part of its attraction was antiquity and alien remoteness (from me): it did not touch home.”

“Not touching home” is the wish of many a teenager. Just why it fuelled Tolkien's fiction, however, is the meat of any biographer. Here, dead on cue, is a new life by Michael White, while in the new year there will be a re-issue of Humphrey Carpenter's workmanlike biography from 1977. It is often said that Tolkien's life was “dull”; but as these accounts

prove, his first twenty-six years contain enough raw trauma to fuel a dozen creative neuroses. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein in 1892. His father, Arthur, was a hard-working bank-clerk from Birmingham who had taken promotion in the Bank of Africa; his mother, Mabel, was the daughter of a jovial travelling salesman. In April 1895, when Tolkien was three and his brother only fifteen months, his mother took them on an extended visit to relations in England. Tolkien remembered watching his father paint "A.R. Tolkien" on the lid of a trunk: it was his first and only memory of him. Arthur died of rheumatic fever while his family was away. His wife and two young sons were left with only thirty shillings a week, eked out by a small supplement from a brother-in-law. Mabel's first attempts at finding cheap lodgings were her luckiest: she rented a cottage in Sarehole—a village near Birmingham, whose surrounding countryside became for Tolkien the lost Eden of his childhood. Loss came quickly. His mother, Mabel, converted to Roman Catholicism. She was ostracised by her horrified family; and her brother-in-law cut his small but vital financial contribution. The widow and her sons were forced to move to what Tolkien remembered as "dreadful", dark and poky lodgings in Birmingham. At eleven, Tolkien won a scholarship to St. Edward's School. But triumph was dwarfed by tragedy: a year later, his mother collapsed and died, aged only thirty-four, from a diabetic coma. She had been, so Tolkien felt, martyred by the prejudices of her family.

The local priest, Father Francis Morgan—flamboyant, kind, dutifully domineering—did his generous best to fill an unfillable void. He arranged for the orphaned brothers to lodge first with an unsympathetic aunt (who burnt bundles of their mother's letters); and then with a local wine merchant and his voluble wife. Another emotional waif was lodging in the same house: Edith Bratt, the illegitimate child of a dead mother. At nineteen, she was three years older than Tolkien; but the teenagers were brought together, as Tolkien later said, by "the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods, from which we rescued one another"—though he also hinted that the psychological "wounds" had been so deep that the rescue could never be complete. Perhaps if Father Francis had let well alone this scarred adolescent relationship would have fizzled out. As it was, he banned the young lovers from further communication, which naturally made the whole thing far more romantic. Separated from Edith, Tolkien threw himself into school life. A debating club which met for tea brought together some of the brightest boys in the school, who became Tolkien's closest friends. It was a fellowship brutally shattered by war.

Tolkien became an Exhibitioner at Exeter College, took his First in 1915, and married Edith in 1916—though in growing up, as Humphrey

Carpenter remarks, the couple had grown apart. Three months later, he embarked for the horrors of the front line. He survived the Somme, but two of his dearest friends were killed. Lice-borne trench fever—"pyrexia of unknown origin"—saved Tolkien, and he was shipped home. From then on, Tolkien's life does become superficially "duller": a don's life, enlivened only by donnish eccentricity, such as his refusal to acknowledge traffic lights ("Charge 'em and they scatter!"). Throughout it, however, he was working, obsessively, meticulously and neverendingly upon *The Silmarillion*—that account of the languages and history of a complete alternative reality, which underpins the whole world of his "subcreation". *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were just foam upon the deep subcurrents of complete obsession—which is why they are so gripping, and *The Silmarillion*, except to a fit audience of true fans, so horribly dull.

Both biographies give a fair outline of Tolkien's life. He would have approved of neither of them: "investigation of an author's biography", he asserted, "is an entirely vain and false approach to his works." But as a passionate pedant, he would especially have disliked White's version: it abuses the humble comma; twice uses "disinterested" to mean "bored by"; and adds misshapen padding: "What sort of world could they offer the child that was starting to grow in Edith's womb? It was a thought shared by many that chill season. Carpenter wins through his strategic deployment of direct quotation, which is three-quarters of the art of a biographer. And his version contains just that bit more lively detail: evoking the horrors of the Somme, White quotes a rather well-worn passage from Wilfred Owen; Carpenter gives us Tolkien's own recollection of how a field mouse suddenly ran over his fingers while he was operating the field-telephone. Detail carries the day.

---

### Sir Ian McKellen's Film Diary

— *Sir Ian McKellen played the part of "Gandalf the Grey" in the film version of The Lord of the Rings. What follows are some excerpts from a diary written by Sir Ian during the filming of the movie:*

**August 20, 1999. London.** I am aware of the high expectations of Tolkien's fans—like myself. But I am ill-prepared. I shall have to come to understand the nature of Gandalf's energy—what keeps him going. What keeps any of us going?

**October 14, 1999. Toronto.** [Shooting has started in New Zealand—but Sir Ian is working on another film and starts later.] Tolkien aficionados

are mailing to the “Grey Book”. From teenagers and readers old as wizards comes the advice, the demands, the warnings. Yet how can I satisfy everyone’s imagined Gandalf? Simply, I can’t. I must discover Gandalf somewhere inside myself. Now, still three months away from shooting—for me—my Gandalf doesn’t exist, not even in my mind. He will only come to life as the camera turns and discoveries are made in the very moment. Even when I am in the thick of it, in costume and make-up and speaking Tolkien’s words, I’m not sure I will be able to describe the character to you. Actors don’t describe—they inhabit.

**January 25, 2000. New Zealand.** We are on location an hour’s flight north of the Three Foot Six studios in Wellington. Hobbiton looks itself, settled-in and cosy . . . surrounded by green low peaks and gentle valleys. The lone poplars on the horizon look as if placed by the art department but I’m told were not. You can never be sure. The smoke rising from the domesticated holes where the hobbits live is provided by an oil-burning machine. On film I am spending my opening days shooting on board the cart laden with fireworks for Bilbo’s “long expected party”. Fun as it is guiding the friendly brown thirteen-hand horse and bantering with Elijah Wood (Frodo), most of the time I am nowhere near the camera.

Peter Jackson [director] has ensured that Tolkien rules the enterprise. So, in working out Gandalf’s appearance we went back to the novel. At the first screen-test the beard was too long and cumbersome for Gandalf the man of action—he is forever tramping and riding and on the move. I didn’t want a beard that hampered me, with a life of its own once the winds blew. Alien visages stared back at me from the mirror—hirsute offbeats like Shylock, Fagin and Ben Gunn. Even Rasputin for a moment. For the second test, the beard was carefreely slashed by Peter Owen [wigs], who hadn’t had much confidence in it nor in the whiskers that hid my cheeks. Once he had trimmed it all back, I saw a glimmer of the old wizard’s sternness. I smiled and tried a Gandalf twinkle, the friend of the hobbits who admires their spirit and sociability. Peter Jackson suggested a droopier moustache. I suddenly looked like a double for the Beatles’ Maharishi. So the eyebrows, over-faithful to Tolkien’s description, were plucked thinner and shorter. The old guru was still there but you couldn’t put a name to him.

They had been filming without me for three months and I felt like the new boy at school as they regrouped two weeks into the year. Term started with a rough cut of the action so far—those that didn’t need major special effects added. The audience began by cheering their hard work like a home movie until the story took over and through the silence they watched Boromir die and the hobbits weep as they lose Gandalf to the Balrog

I'm off the alcohol and had some candyfloss and popcorn. Then a party . . . at the end of the evening Billy Boyd (Pippin) persuaded me to follow him down the fireman's pole that falls twenty feet to the hall. And I wasn't even drunk.

**March 12, 2000.** Confusingly there are two Bag Ends [Bilbo Baggins's home]. And here's why. Hobbits must appear smaller than the other characters in the film. When I, as Gandalf, meet Bilbo or Frodo at home, I bump my head on the rafters. (Tolkien didn't think to mention it!) So there is a small Bag End set with small props to match. As Ian Holm (Bilbo) and Elijah Wood (Frodo) would be too big within it, they have "scale doubles" who are of a matching size with the scenery and its miniature furniture. In the small set both Bilbo and Frodo are played by Kiran Shah who is in hobbit proportion to my Gandalf.

Of course, there has to be a big Bag End, where the scale is human-sized and all the objects of the small set are duplicated but bigger. There the "hero actors" can play the hobbits but the camera expects a giant Gandalf and gets him in Paul Webster (a 7 ft. 4 in. Wellingtonian), who substitutes for me. It is not easy acting, as you try to feed off your colleagues' reactions during a scene; but we manage.

The Bag End designs could not be bettered. Their colours are warm, with lots of wood and signs of industry, writing and cooking and over-eating. Simply, they are hobbit and to me very familiar. The kitchen table where Frodo pours the tea is akin to the family kitchen of my childhood. Yet it is all with a difference, because Bag End feels like a hole in the ground. Why are subterranean books popular with children? Besides *The Hobbit*, there is *The Wind in the Willows* and, of course, the *Alice* books.

Through the circular latticed windows there is a backcloth of the Shire and entwined in the structure are the polished roots from the tree above, on which Gandalf parks his cloak and pointed hat. His staff is always at the ready leaning by the fireplace. A fireplace means a fire. Real fires produce heat. So here we all are—twenty or more dotty enthusiasts crouching on the smaller set in which only Kiran is laughing. We are blasted by the heat of the fire and the lights. It feels like madness. The second the camera rolls, I forget the discomfort, just as on stage ailing actors are temporarily cured by the intensity of "Doctor Theatre". Last week I worked with Christopher Lee for the first time. Gandalf visits his fellow Istar [wizard] at the Orthanc Tower where Saruman consults his seeing stone, the palantir. I don't feel face to face with Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, Fu Man Chu all at once, because Christopher looks saintly in his robes. And there is work to be done.

For instance, I have to learn a new pronunciation. All this time we have been saying “palanTIR” instead of the Old English stress on the first syllable. Just as the word was about to be committed to soundtrack, a correction came from Andrew Jack, the dialect coach. “Palantir”, being strictly of elvish origin should follow Tolkien’s rule that the syllable before a double consonant should be stressed—“paLANtir”—making a sound which is close to “lantern”. Christopher Lee proves that a distinctive voice is an asset in the movies. When he speaks, all I see and hear is Saruman, my old associate gone wrong. Except once when he rounded off a speech, with a snarl. To be within four feet of a Lee snarl is unsettling. I was glad he wasn’t wearing his fangs. He loves stories about actors and I amused him last week with one he didn’t know. “Noël Coward reads a poster: ‘Michael Redgrave and Dirk Bogarde in *The Sea Shall Not Have Them!* I don’t see why not—everyone else has.’” I like making Saruman laugh.

**August 8, 2000.** When the other Sir Ian (Holm, that is, who plays Bilbo) arrived from London in March, he was jet-lagged but that didn’t stop his schedule of costume fittings and make-up tests from taking over straight-away. He was wandering round the workshops in hobbit feet and a curly wig. “What’s it like here?” he asked me dolefully. I told him he was in for a treat and within twenty-four hours he agreed. Peter Jackson was alert to the need to get both Ians on screen together, rather than using the big or small double too much. By placing Gandalf closer to the camera, Bilbo could be shrunk and the two of us could see each other’s eyes. Ian’s twinkle and pierce you through—he is so observant and yet he looks at you as the character. And this illusion that Bilbo is present is achieved each time the camera rolls. Ian never repeats himself on film—in each take he is different and yet always in character. It is a daring approach to film acting, dicing with spontaneity.

**July 24, 2000.** I asked Dan Hennah [art director] if I could one day take home a couple of the fake-metal lizards which served as door handles in Orthanc (Saruman’s stronghold). He smiled quizzically and as I left last week, Peter and the co-screenwriter Frances Walsh presented me with a hefty wooden box containing the lizards, which are now settled in at their new home in London. Among a few further precious mementoes are an Alan Lee original pencil drawing of Gandalf (another gift from the Jacksons) plus, I confess now hanging in my study, the large keys to Bag End’s round front door which, if anyone asks, I shall swear were given me by Bilbo Baggins before he left Hobbiton forever.

### **An Argentinian Reading of Tolkien**

— *Ricardo Irigaray, a Catholic priest living in Argentina, formerly head of the Tolkien Society there, has written a fine book entitled Tolkien y la Fe Cristiana (Pamplona, 1996), based on his doctoral thesis at the University of Navarre in Spain. The book has not been translated into English, but the author has given permission for us to reproduce the conclusions of his study.*

1. The fact that a theological dimension is present in J.R.R. Tolkien's work does not imply that there is any ideological intention in this author. Tolkien had a dislike for allegory, and never wrote with a didactic aim. His aim was strictly literary and artistic. However, as any author with a certain depth would do, and without making a point of it, he endows his work with all the plenitude of his interior life: not only with his artistic criteria and his aesthetic inclinations, but also with his moral and religious convictions. Since Tolkien is both a Christian and an intellectual, a theological dimension is present in the "history" he creates. The theologian's task, then, consists in showing explicitly and making an object of analysis what in Tolkien is only implicit.

2. Tolkien likes to describe his narrations as myths. The Tolkienian myths do not claim to be inscribed within the mythical dimension as described by modern anthropology; they bear, concretely, no esoteric pretension not any strictly religious one; they are not a revelation, nor, of course, are they expected to inspire new forms of religious practice. The expression myth, in Tolkien, carries one back to its strictest etymology, i.e. "word", "narrative". Myth is therefore, for him, precisely a literary myth; an imaginary tale situated during primeval times, in which paradigmatic events are told. Tolkien's intentions are directed towards the building of a literary mythology which could account for the specific character of English culture.

3. The dramatic and literary structure of legends narrated by Tolkien illustrates the reality of a [providential] design directed towards salvation or sanctification—and already present in the divine act of creation—which guides the history of man. Such a design is vaguely perceived by rational creatures in the form of mysterious teleological dynamism which [apparently] ordains events, and which is [commonly] referred to by terms such as doom or fate.

4. Men are created as free beings, and the maximal achievement of this liberty takes place in the form of the existential attitude they adopt before God. Tolkien points out that the response of the creature to God may translate either as fidelity to providential design and to its Author (in the

case of the good), or as a fall in the face of temptation (in others). The radical historical importance of moral decisions taken by the protagonists of his narratives is stressed throughout the Tolkienian sub-creation.

5. Tolkien does in no way fall into the temptation of conceiving his literary world in manichaeistic terms. All created beings are ontologically good; but none of his characters is devoid of the possibility of corrupting himself. For years he continued trying to perfect an adequate theoretical foundation for what I have called “the problem of the Orcs”; that is, of free beings who are apparently always evil.

6. Tolkien’s work graphically throws light on how the ambition of a Prometheus leads to the slavery of a Sisyphus, ending in the ruin of a Daedalus and Icarus—especially in the figures of Morgoth, Sauron and Saruman. The corrupting quality of excessive pride, represented in the form of will for power and dominion, is clearly set forth in the confrontation of personalities and their trajectories. Excessive pride corrupts the person, dragging him towards a peculiar miserliness that Tolkien calls possessiveness. This is characterized by the inordinate appeal that material things, persons or his own personal projects have for the individual. Extreme pride and possessiveness are perceived as the eternal temptation for every rational creature.

7. In his books Tolkien highlights the whole beauty of the complex process which consists in the “ennoblement or sanctification of the humble” (Letters 274, 278); that is to say, of those who confidently abandon themselves to the wisdom and the love of God, in what Tolkien calls a “fidelity to the Unique” (Letter 243). Sanctification is a maturing process that takes place especially through the service of the most arduous divine designs, by means of personal sacrifice and the acknowledgment of a real goodness that exists even in repugnant or perverse beings and situations.

8. Human loyalty and faithfulness—illustrated in their different forms—are offered as a sign of the irrevocable faithfulness of a God who is not only the object of faith, but also its main reference. In this way they constitute a privileged propaedeutics of the confidence in divine faithfulness which is proper to religious faith.

9. Symmetrically, humility appears as the creature’s fundamental attitude, enabling it to receive grace and salvation from the hands of God. Just like other great principles, this one is not expressed propositionally; it becomes evident in the “existential flow” of the characters.

10. Tolkien’s social convictions cannot in any way be termed conservative or elitist. On the contrary, his work displays immense confidence in the fact that greatness often lies—though sometimes in a latent manner—in ordinary people, in socially marginal citizens who seem unworthy of the historian’s attention.



11. Another characteristic of the Tolkienian “secondary world” consists in what could be referred to as the “atmosphere of faith”. Within his stories the implicit but constant presence of the transcendent may be intuitively discerned.

12. The Tolkienian perspective of faith enhances the importance of a subjective disposition in the genesis and growth of the work. Essential to this disposition, and stressed throughout Tolkien’s work, is an openness of the soul towards mystery and the sense of transcendence. Tolkien’s work manifests one way of expressing the beauty and goodness of the transcendent vision of the world. It therefore fosters a favourable disposition towards the attitude of faith in the intellect, will and affections of the reader.

---

### Illustrating C.S. Lewis

— *The following article by Charlotte Cory was first published on the Internet:*

Although I was only seven years old at the time, I can remember exactly where I was when I heard the news of President Kennedy’s assassination. I was standing by the kitchen sink, already weeping at the—for me—more terrible news that day: C.S. Lewis, author of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, had died. Having braved the mothballs of many an elderly relative’s musty wardrobe in hope of finding the snowy realms of Narnia, I knew that the only way to get there was through the books. Now there would never be any more.

If Narnia was more real to me on November 22, 1963, than some distant place called the U-ess-ay, C.S. Lewis’s illustrator, Pauline Baynes, was partly responsible. The chronicles of Narnia were vividly told, but it was her drawings that brought the magic to life. This November marks the centenary of Clive Staples Lewis’s birth, an occasion that will be celebrated by various new editions of the Narnia chronicles, an exhibition at the London Toy and Model Museum about Narnia and Lewis’s life, and a stage adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Almost half a century after she drew the original Narnia pictures, Pauline has worked on them again, tinting them with watercolour for a sumptuous full-colour commemorative edition. There cannot be many artists who have been asked to rework their own pictures after so long but Pauline’s career in book illustration has been truly remarkable. Authors whose books have benefited from her talents include J.R.R. Tolkien, Alison Uttley, Rumer Godden and Mary Norton of *The Borrowers* fame, to mention but a few. I was put off the books a long time ago when I dis-

covered that they were deliberately designed as a Christian allegory. Aslan was Christ, the “lion of Judah”. His killing by the witch and miraculous return to life parallel the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Even the Turkish delight was a stand-in for the apple in the Garden of Eden. I felt conned—and, although my admiration for the pictures remains undiminished, I felt a bit sheepish going to meet Pauline since I now regarded them as part of an elaborate trick.

“Then you can imagine how I felt when I realised,” she laughed as I expressed my unease. She was so warm and welcoming, I had found myself blurring out the truth even before the coffee was on the table. “Didn’t you realise either?” I asked incredulously. “Not till long afterwards. At the time, I just thought they were marvellous stories.” She was in her mid-twenties when she started work on the Narnia books. She had already delighted J.R.R. Tolkien with her illustrations for *Farmer Giles of Ham*, so when C.S. Lewis told her that he had asked an assistant in a bookshop to recommend an illustrator and they had given him Pauline’s name, she was a bit disconcerted. He had obviously heard about her through his Hobbit-creating colleague, but for some reason preferred this story. Lewis did not take a great deal of interest in the illustrations.

“I think he saw them as just a necessary part of a children’s book.” Although he always praised her work to her face, Pauline later discovered that he had been openly critical about it to others. He told his biographer, George Sayer, that she could not draw lions. Considering how much her pictures (especially the lions) have contributed to Narnia’s popularity, this was ironic as well as hypocritical. Single copies of first editions now fetch far more than she was paid to do the work. She receives mail from all round the world, from people who are largely unaware that she has ever done anything else. “I think it’s the fate of the illustrator,” she shrugs philosophically. “Look at Ernest Shepherd. He was so brilliant and did so much fine work, but people only associate him with Pooh and Piglet, and Toad of Toad Hall. It’s the penalty of hitching your wagon to a star.”

Pauline Baynes and C.S. Lewis met only twice. The first time was in December 1949, after she had completed the illustrations for *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. He invited her to Oxford along with some eminent guests and laid on a lunch at his college. Tolkien had heard she was coming and sent her a note asking her to call and see him afterwards. When the day dawned foggy, her father declared it was too dangerous to make the journey from Farnham in Surrey. Her mother, knowing how disappointed Pauline would be, promptly ordered a taxi and dropped her daughter off at the college, arranging a time to collect her later. She remembers Lewis’s brother doing his best to make her feel at ease in the

## *News and Comments*

intimidating company. There was a note from Tolkien waiting beside her plate saying that she would probably not have time to visit. She recalls watching C.S. Lewis pass round the food and, when nobody wanted any more sprouts, gleefully picking out the remaining walnuts. She was the first to leave because she had to meet her mother.

When the taxi arrived at Tolkien's house, she found the great man about to go out to play squash. "I am often asked about that lunch, but the reality is the day was completely overshadowed by worrying about my mother and the taxi, my awkwardness over whether or not to call on Tolkien—and my chief memory of Lewis was seeing him picking out those walnuts." Their other encounter was when they had tea at Waterloo station. "He spent the whole time looking at his watch." Her diary entry for the day reads: "Met C.S. Lewis. Came home. Made rock cakes." Now she thinks she probably made him nervous. Apparently, he once told George Sayer that "Pauline is far too pretty." "One doesn't need to have liked him to admire him. He never became a friend the way Tolkien did. I just thought of it as work." After he died she gave his letters to his brother, Warnie, including one she now wishes she had kept. This was a note thanking her for some Turkish delight, which she had not sent. She has lived in the same cottage for more than 40 years: a stability that is in marked contrast to her itinerant youth.

Her first five years were spent in India, where her father was commissioner in Agra. When Pauline and her elder sister came back to England for schooling, their mother opted to come with them, writing to her husband that he was "free to do as he pleased". Years of living in other people's houses, punctuated by holidays in Swiss hotels when her father came home on leave, eventually ended when he retired from India. Although her parents were virtual strangers to each other, they kept up the formal pretence of their marriage and settled near Farnham. Pauline, as the dutiful unmarried daughter, found herself looking after them, and trying to illustrate in the small hours. When her mother died, Pauline encouraged her father to marry the mistress who had followed him back from India and who was by then living nearby.

After a spell at the Slade, where her art training was curtailed because of the war, and a job as a hydrographic draughtsman, Pauline moved into the cottage near her parents. Here, she devoted herself to her drawing until—in 1961—her solitude was interrupted by a knock on the door from the local dog-meat man, an ex-German prisoner-of-war called Fritz Otto Gasch. Within weeks of meeting, he and Pauline married. She and her husband befriended the Tolkiens, whose Christianity she felt to be more rooted and unobtrusive than Lewis's. They often used to motor down to

Bournemouth after Tolkien retired from Oxford. When Fritz died suddenly in 1988, the shock made her lose large chunks of her memory. “I can hardly remember anything about our time together. Fortunately, I had my work to keep me busy.” Two years after Fritz’s death she received a telephone call from his daughter by his first marriage. Only after the Eastern bloc opened up had she been able to discover that her father had stayed in England after the war and remarried. She never met him but was delighted to find the woman who had loved him.

They are in constant contact and Pauline receives videos of the grandchildren. It is as if Fritz had sent her back something of himself. Meanwhile, the work-table in her study is covered with pages from her latest project. Fantastical beasts in vibrant colours leap from a new medieval bestiary. There cannot be many artists producing such fresh work 50 years on—but then, there is something curiously timeless about her cottage. When I drove away in the evening, a fox followed me down the lane. I felt as if I had revisited the Narnia I loved as a child, but without the mothballs.

---



Moseley Bog near Birmingham

### **Insights About Evil**

— *Under the title “Insights about Evil in The Lord of the Rings,” Peter Kreeft of Boston College wrote the following article for Star magazine’s Tolkien special issue (January 2002):*

Evil. For almost half a century our culture has been embarrassed at words like “wickedness,” “sin,” “judgment,” “punishment,” and “Hell,” like a teenager embarrassed at being seen with her parents in a mall. Some of our Deep Thinkers say evil is a temporary stage of evolution, a hang-over from ancient barbarisms, or provincialisms of race, class and gender that we will just grow out of as we grow out of diapers. Others say evil is ignorance, thus curable by education. We are still waiting for the cure to take. A study of which Nazis were the most willing to kill Jews in the death camps showed that this willingness was indeed related to education but not in the way expected: the more educated they were, the more they were willing. The same is true now about approval of America’s death camps for unborn babies. (By the way, RU 486 is being manufactured by a derivative of the same company that manufactured Zyklon-B, Roussel-Uclaf, a subsidiary of Hoechst, which was a spinoff of I.G. Farben. Divine providence is darkly ironic. Some say that evil against others is only the acting out of a lack of positive self-esteem; that Hitler was not *enough* in love with himself. Some are more philosophically sophisticated and realize that evil is not a thing or a substance, as the Manichees thought, but disordered good. They often rush from this insight to the illogical but comforting conclusion that evil is not really real and not, therefore, really terrible, for it is only a lack of perfection.

Most of us (who are not nihilists, neo-Nazis, or pseudo-Islamic terrorists) believe that good is stronger than evil and therefore that evil is less mighty and terrible than good. We tend to conclude from this (also illogically) that we fear it too much, not too little. We even admire FDR’s famous nonsense that “we have nothing to fear but fear itself.” This strikes us as somewhat psychologically healthy and even pious, and its denial unhealthy and even impious. But then we saw the spectacular evils of September 11th. In the chorus of voices that filled our media for the next two months, one voice was conspicuously silent from the babble: psychobabble. What became of our prophets, the pop psychologists? Where have all the gurus gone? They went where dreams go when the alarm clock goes off, when our Towers of Babble crashed to the ground. We have seen the limitations of “the power of positive thinking.” Norman Vincent Peale’s religious version of pop psychology. We used to find Peale appealing and St. Paul appalling for his “negativism” and “judgmentalism” and “polemics.” Now we’re beginning to find Peale appalling and Paul appeal-

ing. As of December 19th we have been able to see the movie version of the book that everyone *but* our experts, the critics, chose as the greatest book of the twentieth century. (Of course, some truths are so obvious that only experts can deny them.) The timing of this movie is a patently Providential coincidence, for this movie is a story about evil. We need this story because we have been overgrown adolescents playing with paper airplanes and catching butterflies, and then suddenly our airplanes caught fire and our butterflies caught anthrax. We need this story because we need a wizard like Gandalf, or Tolkien, to remind us of forgotten wisdom. We need this story because when we have embraced a hundred heresies as the orthodoxy of the future, *The Lord of the Rings* offers us the only possible radicalism left: tradition. Some say there are only twelve basic plots, some say seven, and some say three. I say one: jihad, spiritual warfare between good and evil in some form. Every story worth telling has three stages: a situation is first set up, then upset, then reset, either happily or unhappily. First there is good, then evil, then warfare, with some resolution (always some, never none, never all). Theologians know this threefold scheme of the greatest story ever told as Creation, Fall, and Redemption. Bilbo called it "There and Back Again": home, the Road away from home, and the Road back home again. For Frodo, it is the Shire, Mordor, and the Shire (or rather, the Grey Havens).

My purpose here is not to throw some philosophical abstractions onto Tolkien's text to muffle it like snow on a bell, but to let that text ring, to do some bell-ringing in the temple of Tolkien; to call your attention, like a tour guide, to some of his great words that remind us of forgotten wisdom about evil and how to fight it.

My primary purpose is philosophical rather than literary. This sets me at cross purposes (or, better, angled purposes) with Tolkien, for he told us in his Foreword, that his "prime motive was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them." (I, ix; all references to Ballentine paperback edition). So I enter Tolkien's literary store as a thief because I think his words also have great selling power in another store, philosophy. I believe that both literature and philosophy can be legitimate as ends or as means. When Tolkien created his story he used his philosophy (Christianity) as a means to grow the story; I now use his literature as a means to grow some philosophy. The ten forgotten points of wisdom are: 1. that we are at war, not at peace; that our enemy, evil, is real; 2. that evil is very big; in fact, immortal; 3. that knowing the difference between good and evil is very easy and clear; 4. that knowledge is not always a good; 5. that what defeats evil is evil itself; 6 that evil works for good; and that four of the most powerful

## *News and Comments*

weapons against it are 7. sacrifice, 8. humility, 9. friendship, and 10. words.

### 1. Evil is real

Think of the first time you saw the spectacular images on your TV screen, September 11th. Now remember not the images but the feelings; not the change outside you but the change inside you. It was a very sharp and clear change because it was so sudden. It was the change from a “peacetime consciousness” to a “wartime consciousness.” It was a little like the change from sleeping consciousness to waking consciousness which your alarm clock triggers in you each morning. In fact, it was a lot like that: a sudden light, a sudden enlightenment. The world you woke up to was not brought into being by your act of waking up—it was always there. But *you* were not always “there.” If you were dreaming that you were a soldier, you did not cease to be a soldier and begin to be a professor when you woke. You were a professor even while you were dreaming you were a soldier. Now imagine that instead of a professor dreaming that you were a soldier, you were a soldier dreaming you were a professor. And suppose the dream went on during the day rather than the night. And then an alarm rang. For many of us, that alarm was September 11th. For others, it was a phone call at 3 a.m. about a family emergency or a death. For others, it was the Bible. But we who believe the Bible constantly fall asleep during battle and dream that we are not at war but at peace; that we are in Upper Eden, not Middle-earth, and there is no snake. There are two philosophies of life. One says “Woe unto him who cries ‘Peace! Peace!’ when there is no peace.” The other says: ‘Woe unto him who cries ‘Snake! Snake! when there is no snake.’ Which one is the dream and which is the reality? Before September 11th most of us saw America as the hobbits saw the Shire: “a district of well-ordered business; and there in that pleasant corner of the world they plied their well-ordered business of living, and they heeded less and less the world outside where dark things moved, until they came to think that peace and plenty were the rule in Middle-earth and the right of all sensible folk. They forgot or ignored what little they had ever known of the Guardians, and of the labours of those that made possible the long peace of the Shire. They were, in fact, sheltered, but they had ceased to remember it.” (I. 24-5)

Who are our Guardians? Not the CIA or the FBI. We are sheltered not by guardian agents but by guardian angels. And it is good to know just a little about them: not too much, and not nothing, but precisely those glimpses God has in fact given us. “Dear me! We Took and Brandybucks, we can’t live long on the heights.” “No,” said Merry. “I can’t. Not yet, at any rate. But at least, Pippin, we can now see them, and honour them. It is

best to love first what you are fitted to love, I suppose: you must start somewhere and have some roots, and the soil of the Shire is deep. Still, there are things deeper and higher; and not a gaffer could tend his garden in what he calls peace but for them, whether he knows about them or not. I am glad I know about them a little.” (III, 179) And so are we. We thank both authors of *The Lord of the Rings*, the inspired one and the Inspiring One, for pulling aside our curtain just a little.

One of the many reasons we voted this book the greatest of the century (in three separate polls), and why the movie will probably be the greatest and most successful movie of all time, is the need for it. That is not why Tolkien wrote it, but is probably one of the reasons why God did. (Of course it’s inspired; it’s got His fingerprints all over it.) It is a long and beautiful alarm clock. Our war did not begin in Manhattan but in Eden. Our enemies are not merely terrorists of the body but terrorists of the spirit, “principalities and powers.” They come not from Afghanistan but from Hell. You do not need to commit the sin of allegory to see who the Black Riders are.

“They come from Mordor,” said Strider in a low voice. “From Mordor, Barliman, if that means anything to you.” (I, 229) Strider’s suggestively laconic “Do you wish them to find you? They are terrible!” (I, 225) recalls Ingmar Bergman’s description of the Angel of Death in “The Seventh Seal”: “It’s the Angel of Death passing over us, Mia, the Angel of Death. And he’s very big.” More evils come from Mordor than we know: “Saruman had slowly shaped [Isengard] to his shifting pur-arts and subtle devices for which he forsook his former wisdom, and which fondly he imagined were his own, came from Mordor.” (II, 204)

So did the little local evils in the Shire that had to be “scoured”:

“This is worse than Mordor!” said Sam. “Much worse in a way. It comes home to you, as they say, because it *is* home, and you remember it before it was all ruined.”

“Yes, this is Mordor,” said Frodo. “Just one of its works.” (III, 367)

“The very end of the war. I hope,” said Merry.

“I hope so,” said Frodo and sighed. “The very last stroke. But to think that it should fall here, at the very door of Bag End! Among all my hopes and fears at least I never expected that.” (III, 371)

The Great War begins and ends in your house.

## 2. Evil is formidable

Our second surprise, after remembering we are at war, is the size of our enemy. We are shocked to hear these words from Gandalf after he



returns from death: “War is upon us and all our friends, a war in which only the use of the Ring could give us surety of victory. It fills me with great sorrow and great fear: for much shall be destroyed and all may be lost. I am Gandalf, Gandalf the White, but Black is mightier still.” (II, 132) Later, Gandalf says, after the great battle of the Pelennor Fields, “My lords, listen to the words of the Steward of Gondor before he died: ‘You may triumph on the fields of the Pelennor for a day, but against the Power that has now arisen there is no victory.’ I do not bid you despair, as he did, but to ponder the truth in those words. The Stones of Seeing do not lie, and not even the Lord of Barad-dur can make them do so. He can, maybe, by his will choose what things shall be seen by weaker minds, or cause them to mistake the meaning of what they see. Nonetheless it cannot be doubted still more being gathered, he saw that which truly is. . . . Victory cannot be achieved by arms. . . . I still hope for victory, but not by arms.” (III, 189) Evil is, in fact, immortal. All our victories against it in this world are temporary: “The evil of Sauron cannot be wholly cured, nor made as if it had not been.” (III, 197) “Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary.” (III, 197) We, like Ransom in *Peregrina*, can only defeat the bodily forms that Evil uses, the Un-men or Nazgul or evil wizards. We can break the swords but not the Swordsman. Only One can bruise the Swordsman’s head, and only by being bruised in His heel.

How can good defeat evil if not by strength of arms? By embracing weakness, by embracing His heel; by self-sacrifice and humility and suffering and death. Evil is limited to power, it cannot use weakness. It is limited to pride, it cannot use humility. It is limited to inflicting suffering and death, it cannot use suffering and death. It is limited to selfishness, it cannot use selflessness. Gandalf the White triumphs over Sauron even though “Black is mightier still” because “nothing is evil in the beginning.” (I, 351) Evil cannot create or give birth, it can only destroy and give death. For instance, “Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves. (II, 113) “The Shadow that bred them can only mock, it cannot make.” (III, 233) That is why one of the lowest and least divine arts is satire, the art of mockery, and why one of the highest and most “sub-creative” arts is fantasy. There is no satire but much fantasy in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien says “Let there be hobbits!” and there are hobbits. We are back near the Beginning. And nothing is evil in the beginning. Tolkien is not only Gandalf but also Bombadil; not only Treebeard but also Sam. He is not only old and wise but also young and when perceived by the living. It takes a child to feel the weight and size of both good and evil. And good as well as evil has a weight in *The Lord of the Rings* that surpasses any other book of the

twentieth century. What other twentieth century author could have written a passage like this one? In the midst of Mordor's landscape of death, Sam, "to keep himself awake, crawled from the hiding place and looked out. . . . There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and beauty for ever beyond its reach." (III, 244) "Only a small and passing thing"! But this Shadow is Satan, the one who succeed in killing God for three days. Who but a Christian could ever plumb the depths of evil, and therefore, by hard-won right, of good? (That hard-won right, by the way, is the point of Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*.) I think of Corrie Ten Boom's shattering statement in "The Hiding Place," from the antechambers of Hitler's Mordor in Ravensbrook: "This darkness is very deep, but our God has gone far deeper. When you have been to Calvary, even Ravensbrook looks trivial."

### 3. Evil is clear

A third surprise is that the line between good and evil is usually very clear and very obvious. Moses, Confucius, Jesus, and Mohammed all taught this "simplistic" vision and they founded the four most lasting moral regimes in history on it. But our culture is the first one in human history whose experts and teachers have sold their moral birthright for a mess of relativism. Morality is not hard to know. It is hard to do. It is hard to know only for the clever, for only if you are clever can you invent so many cover-ups that you can make it hard to know. Only the good-hearted see the good, and only the pure-hearted see God. Discernment is not a mental problem but a moral problem. "If your will were to do the will of the Father, you would understand my teaching." (Jn. 7:17) "Said Eomer, 'It is hard to be sure of anything among so many marvels. The world is all grown strange. Elf and Dwarf in company walk in our daily fields, and folk speak with the Lady of the Wood and yet live; and the Sword comes back to war that was broken in the long ages ere the fathers of our fathers rode into the Mark! How shall a man judge what to do in such times?' 'As he has ever judged,' said Aragorn. "'Good and evil have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men. It is a man's part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house.'"

Aragorn's answer rings like a clear bell in a foggy swamp.

### 4. Knowledge is not always good

Another surprise to us is that it is sometimes "better not to know" (II,

77), as Merry wisely says of the Eucharist-like waybread or *lembas*. (For the folly of wanting to know too much and believe too little about *that* lembas, the Church was split.) The sacramental, operative words that set in motion the only power that can conquer Sauron are Frodo's fateful "I will take the Ring, though *I do not know* the way." (I, 354) (That was Socrates' claim to wisdom too: that he knew that he did *not* know.)

"It is perilous to study too deeply the arts of the Enemy" (I, 347), as Denethor, like King Saul, discovered at the price of his own soul. Like Eve, Denethor "looked in the Stone and was deceived." We all have such a stone. For Eve it was a fruit; for you or me it is a thought, a first greedy or lustful or proud or despairing thought that is not taken captive to obey Christ (II Cor. 10:5).

Denethor and Theoden move in opposite directions, as do the syllables in their names. Denethor moves from life to death because he demands knowledge from the Palantir before acting. Theoden moves from death to life because he repudiates his tempting Palantir, Grima Worm-tongue (we all have one of those), and takes Gandalf's advice: "To cast aside regret and fear. To do the deed at hand." (Another bell!)

Thought lives in the past of regrets and in the future of fears. Choice and action live in the present of "the deed at hand." Almost never is our moral problem of knowing what to do; almost always, our problem is doing it. William Law says, in *A Serious Call*, If you will be honest with yourself, you must confess that there is only one reason why you are not as saintly as the primitive Christians [the martyrs]: you do not wholly want to be. We rightly want to look before we leap physically. But we must leap before we look spiritually. "If you do not believe, you will not understand." (Isa. 7:9) Faith and works of love cannot wait for knowledge; knowledge must wait for them. We cannot see God, or good, before we are pure of heart because the heart is the very eye with which we see God. Bilbo's foolish words reverse this order when he expresses to Gandalf his reluctance to leave the Ring behind: "Now [that] it comes to it, I don't like parting with it at all. And *I don't really see why* I should." (I, 59)

Sometimes, in order to see we must rest our eyes.

##### 5. Evil defeats itself

We cannot defeat evil, but we can help it to defeat itself, by a kind of spiritual judo. That's how Christ defeated Satan on Calvary. It was like a Mohammed Ali "Come on and get me" move. The Ring, says Gandalf, "cannot be unmade by your hands or mine." (I, 94) Even God did what Frodo did to conquer evil for us: "To walk into peril—to Mordor. We must send the Ring to the Fire." (I, 350) Like Orpheus, God went down to Hell for His beloved

Euridyce (us) when He cried, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” This is the logic of evil. Like a self-contradictory proposition, you cannot refute it with any other proposition, but it refutes itself. But we must be the bait, as Christ was. The whole Fellowship, in different ways, does this: Gollum does it, unwilling, Frodo and Sam do it, willingly, for each other and for the Shire; and Gandalf and Aragorn and their 7000 at the Black Gate do it for Frodo and Sam: (We must ourselves be the bait . . . we must walk open-eyed into that trap.” (III, 191) As Christ did on the Cross. For He is not our exception but our rule. The concrete particular way in which evil defeats itself is unforeseeable both by the good and by the evil. (Who foresaw 1989 in 1917?) Neither Sauron nor Gandalf anticipated the importance of Sam or Gollum, or just *how* “the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many” in sparing Gollum. It usually appears suddenly, as at the Crack of Doom, “the Dark Lord was suddenly aware of him [Frodo] . . . and the magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding sudden “blinding flash” or Miserific Vision, like that face in Doré’s illustration of Dante’s “Inferno.”

Yet, while we are surprised when we first come to the Crack of Doom in Volume III, we are not surprised. For in that consummation we recognize (re-cognize, remember) the truth; we recognize all the characters and many of the events of this story now. They are familiar to us because they are all parts of us. This is our story. It is a mirror. We are fascinated by it most deeply because of its truth. It is not even its beauties that pierce our hearts like swords (C.S. Lewis’s words), or even its utter goodness that captivates us. (If books could be canonized as saints, this one would make it in a breeze.) No, it arrests us most powerfully because it is true. It is eternal truth made flesh. Only a great myth can do that astonishing feat, can translate the eternal truth of good and evil into the radically other medium of a temporal story. It makes the abstract concrete, the invisible visible, the Word flesh. (It is the opposite of pornography, which is the flesh made word. That is why there is no pornography in the great myths. Tolkien’s mythopoeic strategy is the exact counter to Satan’s. It will take a minute to explain this. Evil can work only in darkness. Even a vampire cannot stand the sun. Good can work only in the light. Even the world’s best surgeon cannot perform an operation if the hospital lights go out. Every moral evil presupposes moral ignorance. Plato saw that; he only failed to trace it back one more step: the moral ignorance further presupposes an ignoring, which is an act of the will.

But our will is by its nature attracted to good, not evil, as our mind by nature is attracted to truth, not falsehood. So Satan has to bend that attraction by sophistry and propaganda and advertising, the world’s oldest profession. (“See this nice apple? You need this apple. Try it, you’ll

like it.) . . . By the way, the profession that is usually called the world's oldest depends on this older one for its success. All sin does. If sin didn't seem like fun, we'd all be saints. The origin of sin is advertising, the substitution of image for substance, appearance for reality. It's no accident that the New Testament calls Satan "the prince of the power of the air": ABC, NBC, CBS, MTV— he is the master of the media, where image is everything. But he has to bait the hook of falsehood with the worm of truth, for no man will believe pure lies, as no fish will bite a naked hook. For instance, "If you eat that forbidden fruit, you will know evil as well as good." That was true. The lie was that they would be "like God," knowing good and evil in the same way God knows them. That's like saying a drunk knows sobriety and drunkenness in the same way a sober person does. The lie is the hook, the truth is the bait. And the fish defeats itself by taking the bait.

Well, to catch a thief, use a thief. If the devil baits the hook of falsehood with the worm of truth, the mythmaker and poet and storyteller baits the hook of truth with the worm of myth. Sometimes the worm is as short as one of Jesus' 50-word parables. Sometimes it is as long as Tolkien's 500,000-word epic, the Greatest Worm of the Century.

#### 6. Evil is used for good

Divine providence is like a French chef, using spices from decayed organisms to make good food even better. That all things, even evil, work together for good, is as familiar as Romans 8:28, but it never ceases to be startling that "God writes straight with crooked lines"; that even "sin is behovable," or good for something, as Lady Julian of Norwich says. The clearest case is the Crucifixion: the greatest evil in history, deicide, being used as the cause of the greatest good in history, salvation. *The Lord of the Rings* is not theological, in that God never appears, as He does in the *Silmarillion*. Yet in a sense God is the main character. As the primary Author, He places into His story abundant clues to His existence, such as so-called coincidences, designs that can be seen in the threads on the backside of the tapestry. The image is from Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*: life is a tapestry woven by God and therefore beautiful beyond telling, perfect beyond hope. But only in the next life can we see this perfect beauty. What we see here, on the backside of the tapestry, is loose ends of threads. Yet there are just enough clues, even in the mess of human life, and certainly in the order of nature, to make it reasonable to believe in and trust the wisdom and goodness of the Weaver. Even Woody Allen says, in "Love and Death," that "I'm an atheist, thank God; but on a good day I could believe in a Divine Mind pervading all parts of the known universe—except, of course, certain areas of northern New Jersey."

Here are just a few of the many providential “lose threads”: One is the *timing* of Frodo’s first encounter with the Elves in the Shire: exactly at the moment when he was about to yield to the temptation to put on the Ring to hide from the Black Riders as one came sniffing for him (I, 116). We have all experienced such perfect timings in our lives; that is why we do not instinctively reject this as unrealistic. Another is the need for apparently-tragic events like Merry and Pippin being captured by the Orcs. Gandalf says that “they were brought to Fangorn and their coming was like the falling of small stones that starts an avalanche in the mountains.” (II, 127) “Is not that strange? Nothing that we have endured of late has seemed so grievous as the treason of Isengard . . . yet . . . between them our enemies have contrived only to bring Merry and Pippin with marvelous speed, and in the nick of time, to Fangorn, where otherwise they would never have come at all.” (II, 126)

The clearest example, of course, is Gollum: sparing him, finding him, using him to sneak into Mordor, and of course his completing the whole Quest at the Crack of Doom. No one else could ever have done it! Some of these providential uses of evil for good are tiny, like Barliman Butterbur’s forgetfulness to deliver Gandalf’s message. (Barliman, like myself and probably Tolkien, has A.D.D.) As Aragorn tells him when he asks what he can possibly do against Mordor, “Not much, Barliman, but every little bit helps.” (I, 229) It does. Our salvation has sometimes hung on a thread. If a cheap Egyptian tailor had not cheated on the threads of Joseph’s mantle, it would not have come apart in the hands of Potiphar’s wife when Joseph fled from her seduction, and there would have been no physical evidence to convict Joseph and put him in prison at her accusation, and he would not have interpreted the dreams of his fellow prisoners, Pharaoh’s ex-butler, who was to be returned to favor, and his ex-baker, who was to be killed, so that years later, when Pharaoh had the dream of the seven skinny cows eating the seven fat cows and could find no sage to interpret it, the butler could finally remember Joseph (he had A.D.D. too) and tell Pharaoh about him, with the result that Joseph interpreted the dream and convinced Pharaoh to store extra grain from the seven fat years to prevent starvation during the seven lean years, and only because of that was there grain in Egypt to escape starvation and survive, later to multiply to a million under Moses at the time of the Exodus. There would be no Jews, no chosen People, and no Jesus if it were not for one weak thread in Joseph’s mantle. We owe our salvation to a cheap Egyptian tailor. Divine providence has a sense of humor that is, as we say in Boston, “bizaah.” It may be a bizarre design, but it is not “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” That is our culture’s philosophy of life, in which “it” just happens. We need this story badly. My last four points are about four of

the strongest but most overlooked weapons against evil: sacrifice, humility, friendship, and words.

### 7. Sacrifice

The one power evil is utterly helpless before is sacrifice. In the book of Revelation, the lamb (*arnion*, “wee little lamb”) defeats the beast (Therion, monstrous and terrifying) by his blood, his death. Because it worked on Calvary, it works everywhere, since Calvary is the rule, not the exception. Sacrifice is the height of love, the apogee of *agape*, and *agape* is the nature of God. And God has no rival. “Who is like God?” That is the meaning of the name “Michael,” the archangel who is Gandalf to Satan’s Sauron. Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragornx are all, in different senses, martyrs, Christ-figures, who undergo different kinds of voluntary deaths and resurrections. Christ’s tomb was a rock, Gandalf’s was the abyss of Moria, Aragorn’s was the Paths of the Dead, and Frodo’s was the effect of the Ring on his spirit, a disease incurable in Middle earth. The Elves, like Frodo, give up the whole world, since the power of the three eleven rings is now gone (although you may still see a few of them lingering on the west coast of Ireland if you have a sharp eye.) Galadriel too saves Middle-earth by resisting the temptation: “‘I pass the test,’ she said. ‘I will diminish and go into the West, and remain Galadriel.’” (I, 474) Frodo explains to Sam why he must go to the Grey Havens (death): “I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.” (III, 382) The price is really paid, as on Calvary. “My life for yours” is the universal formula. It happens in every battle. Remember, Calvary is the rule, not the exception.

This is the very good news and very bad news. The good news is that it really works. Strength really is overcome by weakness, pride by humility, tyranny by martyrdom, Sauron by Frodo, Satan by Christ. The very bad news is that the price is real, and very steep. To slay evil’s head, good’s heel must bleed, and bleed forever in this world. *There are 1900 nails upon the Cross*, wrote the poet in 1940. This is not a principle for emergencies only. All of life is an emergency, in our world as well as in Tolkien’s world. For there is no difference between our world and Tolkien’s world. *The Lord of the Rings* is not set in some fantasy world but in our world. Middle-earth is the third rock from the sun. In this world, the self is saved only when it is lost, found only when really given away in sacrifice. True freedom comes only when you bind yourself to your duty. The opposite of freedom is the power, which corrupts and enslaves. The Ring is a perfect symbol of this, for it is a closed circle, like a clenched

fist, or a worm swallowing its own tail (the worm Oouroboros), and it encloses emptiness (the damned self). It is the exact opposite of the Cross.

As we know, but constantly forget, the Cross is the rule, not the exception. So is the Ring. What Gandalf tells Bilbo, Christ tells us: "It has got far too much hold on you. Let it go. And then you can go yourself and be free." And like Bilbo, we constantly reply, "I'll do as I choose and go as I please." (I, 60) To us too, as to Frodo on Amon Hen when he puts on the ring and almost exposes himself to the Eye of Sauron, come inspirations from Gandalf to counter the one from Sauron: "Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!" (II, 519) Eventually, it becomes impossible to take it off. Only Gollum can save Frodo at the Crack of Doom; only after Gollum has liberated Frodo from his finger and from the Ring, (as Beren was liberated from his hand and from the Silmaril by Carcharoth the great wolf of Angband in the *Silmarillion*) can it be said of Frodo that he "had been saved; he was himself again, he was free." (III, 277) Gollum is too far gone down that road to return: the road of losing the self by "finding" it, by grasping it. He cannot distinguish himself from the Ring; both are "the Precious." He rarely can even use the word "I" any more, the image of "I AM." His name is "we," or "Legion," for he is many. By grasping himself, and his power, and his freedom, and his Ring, he has lost himself, and his power, and his freedom, and his Ring. Down that road lives the Lieutenant of the Tower of Barad-dur, whom the captains of the Army of the West meet at the Black Gate: "his name is remembered in no tale; for he himself had forgotten it, and he said: 'I am the Mouth of Sauron.'" (III, 202) The reason why it is true in *The Lord of the Rings* that those who lose the self save it and those who save it lose it, is that Middle-earth is our earth; Tolkien's world is the real world. It is not just because Tolkien is a Christian but because a Christian is a realist.

## 8. Humility

Humility is a form of self-sacrifice: the sacrifice of pride and power. Only Men or Elves or Wizards, can get into Mordor; and only a hobbit, at the Crack of Doom, can complete the task. Unless we become like little hobbits, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. For the Lord became a little hobbit, and He is the rule, not the exception, remember. At the Council of Elrond the outcome of the principle of humility was foretold: "The road must be trod, but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. . . . Such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere." (I, 353)



## 9. Friendship

Like humility, friendship is a formidable weapon against evil. We are surprised to hear this. We cannot imagine a military propagandist, wondering how to frighten the troops of the enemy, coming up with this terrifying threat: "Our soldiers are loyal friends!" Yet friendship is strength, even in a military sense, because it unites, while weakness divides. "Divide and conquer" is the most elementary and practical military strategy. Friendship refuses to be divided, and thus refuses to be conquered. Any soldier knows that few men will do heroic deeds for abstract causes, even justice; but many will for their buddies, their friends. The single force most responsible for winning the War of the Ring is Sam's friendship and love of Frodo. (Friendship is a form of love in pre-modern language.) The very title of Volume I, "The Fellowship of the Ring," shows the centrality of friendship, or fellowship. It also shows that it is evil (the Ring) that elicits the strongest flowering of this great good in Middle-earth. Because our stories take place in the same place, the differences of time cannot change this truth. Merry and Pippin (and of course Sam) are necessary to the success of the Quest, and only friendship brings them along. When Frodo tries to leave the Shire alone, so as not to endanger his friends, they form a conspiracy not to let him go alone. Frodo complains, "It does not seem that I can trust anyone," and Merry replies, "You cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone. . . . We are your friends, Frodo." (I, 150)

There are doors that only friendship can open. For instance, the great Gate of Moria, which will respond to no force or spell of Gandalf's, but only to the word "friend" (*mellon*). The inscription said, "Speak, friend, and enter"; and Gandalf puzzled over what spell or password to speak, until he realized (as Saruman would never have done) that only the simple and innocent could solve this puzzle: "The translation should have been, 'Say (the word) "friend" and enter.' I had only to speak the Elvish word for *friend* and the doors opened. . . . Too simple for the learned loremaster in these suspicious days." (I, 402) Or as we say in academia, only a Deconstructionist could miss it. The culmination of Sam's friendship with Frodo is his carrying him up Mount Doom, like Christ carrying the Cross, or rather like Simon of Cyrene helping Christ carry His Cross to the end, as Frodo carries the Ring to the end. "To his amazement, he felt the burden light." (III, 268) "He ain't heavy, he's my brother." We shouldn't be amazed; we were promised that: "My yoke is easy and My burden is light." The words of the old marriage ceremony make the same promise (marriages being, of course, the completest possible friendship): "Married life requires great sacrifice; only love can make it possible, and only perfect love can make it a joy."

10. Words

“In the beginning was the Word.” That is why words have power over things. For it was *in* words that things were created. God first spoke the word, then the thing came to be, not vice versa. With us it is vice versa: we invent words to label pre-existing things, except when we “subcreate,” like Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings* shows this priority of words more clearly than any other book I know, because Tolkien tells us it began with his inventing a language, Elvish. Then there had to be Elves to speak it, and a world for them to live in, and events and stories in that world, and other species too: Wizards, Ents, Trolls, Orcs, Dwarves, Nazgûl, Hobbits, and even Men. (The fact that Tolkien insists on giving them capital letters is significant, as is the fact that we do not. In fact, the current fashion, unconsciously obeying our culture’s increasing depersonalization, is to insist on lower-casing everything we possibly can. God created in capitals and therefore so did Tolkien. In Tolkien’s story, words have a power we usually call “magical,” misunderstanding that word as a kind of short cut technology (as Tolkien explains in “On Fairy Stories”). But it is very different: it is the “magic” of formal and final causality, not material and efficient causality (to use Aristotelian terminology). The inherent form (meaning) and purpose of a word flows over into material and visible effects, sacramentally, so that the word can effect what it signifies. Thus Bombadil’s spell saves Merry from Old Man Willow and Frodo from the Barrow-wight: “None has ever caught him yet, for Tom, he is the master; His songs are stronger songs, and his feet are faster.” (I, 196) We are surprised to hear that songs are “strong” only because we forget what we learned from the *Silmarillion*: that it was in music that God created the universe.

Frodo too has this “magical” power: when he calls Tom’s name, two miracles happen, one spiritual and one physical: first, “with that name his voice seemed to grow strong,” and second, Tom actually comes. If we find this unconvincingly “magical,” that reveals a lot about our religious life, and how much we have taken God at His word when he repeatedly promises the same thing Tom Bombadil does: “You just call out My name, and you know wherever I am, I’ll come running to see you again. Winter, spring, summer or fall, all you’ve got to do is call, and I’ll be there, yeah, yeah, yeah. You’ve got a Friend.” We all know there are magic words, words that sacramentally effect what they signify, like “I baptize thee” or “This is My Body.” Two of the most familiar are “I love you” and “I hate you.” These are not labels, these are weapons, arrows pierce through flesh into hearts. The whole of *The Lord of the Rings* is a great armor-piercing rocket; it can even get into our underground bunkers, our darkest inner Afghanistans. The most powerful names are proper names, names of per-

sons or places. When the Black Rider bangs on Fatty Bolger's door in Buckland saying "Open in the name of Mordor!" all the terror and power of Mordor are really present there. When Frodo, on Weathertop, faces the Black Rider, "he heard himself crying aloud, 'O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!'" (I, 263) as he struck the Rider with his sword. Afterwards, Aragorn says, "All blades perish that pierce that dreadful King. More deadly to him was the name of Elbereth." (I, 165)

In Shelob's lair Frodo again speaks in tongues: "'Aiya Earendil Elenion Ancalima!' He cried, and knew not what he had spoken; for it seemed that another voice spoke through his." (II, 418) And then the tiny hobbit with the tiny sword advanced on the most hideous living thing in Middle-earth with the phial of Galadrien *and the name* of Galadriel. A little later, Sam did the same: "'Galadriel!' he said faintly, and then he heard voices far off but clear: the crying of Elves as they walked under the stars in the beloved shadows of the Shire, and the music of the Elves . . . *Gilthoniel A Elbereth!* And then his tongue was loosed and his voice cried in a language which he did not know: 'A Elbereth Gilthoniel!'" (II, 430) "What's in a name?" "In the name of Jesus" devils are exorcised and the gate of Heaven is opened for us. What's in a name? Everything. In a name, the universe was created. That name was Christ, the Logos, the Mind of God, the creative Word of God. That is the sun whose beams we use when we subcreate: the Son of God. "What's in a name?" Moses asked God that question at the burning bush, and God answered: "I am."

In a world where good is so fragile that a little evil can turn a whole world upside down, we wonder what is stronger. And we get the same answer.

---

### **The Popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* as a Film**

— In *The New York Times* (December 24, 2001) Rick Lyman comments on the film version of *The Lord of the Rings*:

Ken Nabbe and Gabriel Falcon, who work in the comic book department at Sci-Fi City, an Orlando, Florida, bookstore specializing in fantasy and science fiction, were so driven to see *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* that they found themselves at its first, sold-out screening at 12:01 a.m. Wednesday. After a few hours' rest and a full day at work, they went back to see it again at 11 p.m. Mr. Falcon, a longtime fan of J.R.R. Tolkien's "Rings" fantasy trilogy, said he was delighted with the movie, both times. Mr. Nabbe, however, who has never read Tolkien's work, was somewhat less enraptured. About halfway through that second viewing, as Wednesday slipped into Thursday, he found himself getting a

little sleepy, he said, adding, "I think it was targeted more to those who read the books." From the beginning that was the tightrope that the director, Peter Jackson, and his team had to walk: how to make their eagerly awaited adaptation faithful enough to Tolkien's work to satisfy its most fervent fans while keeping it accessible to those unfamiliar with his intricate, mythic world, those who don't know their Narsil from their Nazgul.

Fans of the trilogy—about a last-ditch coalition of men, elves, dwarves, wizards and hairy-footed hobbits to destroy the all-consuming One Ring before it falls back in the Dark Lord's hands—enjoy it for the rich detail that Tolkien, an Oxford linguist, brought to creating the landscape, myths and languages of Middle-earth. (Narsil, for instance, is the legendary sword whose shards were used to slice the One Ring from the Dark Lord's finger; Nazgul are ghostly ringwraiths who appear in the first film as black-robed horsemen.) The 1,000-plus pages of the story are bolstered with dozens of footnotes, indices, historical documents, alphabet tables and ancient myths, more than most readers can absorb, much less those who go into a film unaware of all this Tolkien arcana.

"Obviously it was a fine line that we were very much aware of," said Mr. Jackson. "So a lot of debate and a lot of pressure went into figuring out how to make a film that will appeal to the hard-core Tolkien fans without turning off everybody else. My greatest fear was that it would gain a reputation that, oh, you shouldn't see the movie until you've read the book." The early indications are very encouraging for Mr. Jackson and the executives at New Line Cinema, the AOL Time Warner subsidiary that risked a great deal in underwriting a trilogy of films based on Tolkien's fantasy epic that will eventually cost more than \$270 million to produce. (*The Fellowship of the Ring* is merely the first installment; *The Two Towers* is due in December of 2002 and *The Return of the King* in December of 2003.) *Fellowship* broke the opening day record for a December film on Wednesday, earning \$18.2 million, and had sold an estimated \$73.1 million worth of tickets by tonight, thoroughly dominating the nation's pre-Christmas box-office. On the Internet Movie Data Base, a Web site that allows visitors to rate films, *The Lord of the Rings* has shot up since Wednesday to become the highest rated movie of all time, one one-hundredth of a point ahead of *The Godfather*, and still climbing.

Discussion on the movie fan sites is exemplified by a chatroom on [www.aint-it-cool-news.com](http://www.aint-it-cool-news.com), in which visitors were overwhelmingly ecstatic. "I love life!" wrote a visitor identified as Goonie. "What a great flick!" And the film has, by and large, been embraced by critics. Rotten-Tomatoes.com, an Internet site that compiles excerpts from newspaper, magazine and Internet reviews, had 92 for the film posted by midday on

Friday and only four were negative. Characteristic was this, from Peter Howell in *The Toronto Star*: “If we’re not careful, Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* is going to give hype a good name.”

And New Line executives said they were particularly excited by the audience polling on Wednesday, with 88 percent giving the film a highly favorable rating, 78 percent saying they would definitely recommend it to friends and 74 percent saying they intended to pay to see it again. “Obviously, for a film to be a major hit, you have to have that kind of repeat business,” said Robert Shaye, co-chief executive of New Line. “So who knows, this may be a once in a lifetime thing, where you get a film that you like, that audiences like and that the critics like.” Not all is clover, however. Some, unfamiliar with Tolkien’s work, like Mr. Nabbe, felt left out of the swelling excitement. And some of the most ardent *Lord of the Rings* fanatics, including those who maintain and populate dozens of Tolkien-related Web sites and study the trilogy in college courses and fan clubs, said they were disappointed and even angered by the changes Mr. Jackson made to condense the book’s plot. Mike Foster, a professor of English at Illinois Central College in East Peoria, teaches a course on Tolkien and is also a North American representative of the British-based Tolkien Society. He took a group of fifteen to see the film on Wednesday night, including some who were very familiar with the book and others who have never read it. They sat around afterward discussing it for two hours. His conclusion: Those unfamiliar with the book seemed to enjoy the movie more than those who had read and studied it. “Jackson had a very difficult task to accomplish,” Mr. Foster said. “He did a masterful job of getting as much into the movie as he did in three hours, but to those of us who really treasure the book, the changes that he made were, well, not completely satisfactory.” Yet at the end of the session, he said, they went around the table and everyone—those who had loved the film and those who had been disappointed by it—said that they intended to see it again.

There is no question that Mr. Jackson made significant changes in the story. Some characters, like the woodsy sprite Tom Bombadil and the elf warrior Glorfindl, have disappeared altogether. And others, like the evil wizard Saruman and the elf princess Arwen, have had their roles expanded and altered. The main complaint from the academics was that Mr. Jackson had emphasized the story’s battles and hair-breadth escapes, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to the young men who make up the bulk of the movie-going audience. “I felt as if I were seeing two films at once,” said David S. Bratman, a librarian at the Stanford University Law School. “One in the visuals, which was faithful and true to Tolkien, and another in the script and in the general tone and style, which was so unfaithful as to be a travesty.”

Others, however, decided that this was not a bad thing. “The battle scenes were unbelievable,” said Kate Leahy, 25, coming out of a Thursday night showing in Chicago. “It was nonstop action.”

And not all Tolkien specialists were upset with Mr. Jackson’s condensation. Alfred Siewers, a professor of medieval literature at the University of Illinois who also teaches a course called “The Fellowship of J.R.R. Tolkien,” said he was among a group of about 100 who rented a bus to see the film on Wednesday night. “People basically liked it,” Mr. Siewers said. “Although I suppose everybody had their quibbles.” He said he thought Mr. Jackson had adapted the book admirably. “My feeling was that the key themes of Tolkien’s story really got across, although maybe it was made a little more dramatic to impress movie viewers,” he said. Mr. Jackson, a longtime Tolkien devotee whose instinct was to stick as closely as possible to the text, said that one of the ways he tried to find a middle ground between Tolkien fanatics and Tolkien virgins was to use New Line executives as a sounding board. Mr. Shaye, who had read the trilogy decades ago, had grown unfamiliar with some of its more intricate details. “So whenever Bob said he didn’t understand something, we took it very seriously,” Mr. Jackson said. Most of the give and take between the studio executives and the production team in Mr. Jackson’s native New Zealand—where all three installments in the trilogy were filmed simultaneously in a fifteen-month marathon—had to do with maintaining this balancing act. “It was an honest process,” said Michael Lynn, New Line’s other co-chief executive. “doesn’t mean that everything the studio thought should happen on this film ended up happening, but neither did Peter get every single thing he thought should happen. But what came out, I think, is the best of both instincts.”

---

### Sorrow, Pain and Death as Transforming Experiences

- *J.R.R. Tolkien has said that The Lord of the Rings is concerned with the necessity of dying. In his book Wagner’s Ring: Turning the Sky Round (New York, 1990), Owen Lee makes a similar comment about Wagner’s Ring Cycle. Father Lee writes:*

Wagner once said something very startling about his *Ring*. He said that it teaches us that “we must learn to die.” We must “will what is necessary and bring it to pass.” The great deaths in myths are symbols of inner transformations in man, who makes the myths. In this myth, Wotan—the god of consciousness—dies. Wagner didn’t originally intend that. He intended that Erda, when she appears in *Das Rheingold*, would warn Wotan that his power would end *unless* he gave up the Ring. Later, he revised

## *News and Comments*

Erda's warning to read, "All that exists ends. A dark day is dawning for the gods. I counsel you—give up the Ring." Relinquishing power is not an alternative. Wotan will pass away in any case. He must accept the loss of his power, and embrace his death.

At the end of the *Ring*, the god of consciousness dies. And his voluntary withdrawal leaves the world within us to be ruled henceforth, not by the consciousness he represents, but by that "mightiest of miracles" the transformation wrought by his daughter Brünnhilde. The *Ring*, which began as a parable of Europe's evolution towards a classless, progressive society, eventually—to Wagner's surprise, and after many revisions—became a parable of a god's voluntary death, and the transformation that results. It is indeed about evolution, but it is as far in advance of Darwin's theory (developed at almost exactly the same time) as myth has always been in advance of science. It begins with a god newly established in power and ends with that god consumed in flames. That is to say, it begins with the emergence of man into consciousness, and ends with consciousness voluntarily yielding to—the next evolutionary development in human nature.

That, I suggest, is why Wagner couldn't put the end of the *Ring* into words, even in six separate attempts. As he labored over his mythic cycle, an intuitive idea kept hammering away at him, year after year—perhaps the most important idea of his century, and not to be fulfilled for centuries to come, though man's myths knew, and had always known, it would someday happen: *man was meant to evolve beyond his present state*, even as he had evolved into it. But this step would require the death of his present consciousness, and its transformation into—Wagner could only say what that was in music, in the theme to which Sieglinde once sang the words "mightiest of miracles," the theme associated with the transformation of Wotan's will, Brünnhilde. . . .

The *Ring* is about us. About our unarticulated dreams and aspirations. About an evolutionary potential in us we sense only at moments of heightened awareness. At the end of the *Ring*, it is as if a door has opened, as if the sky has turned round, as if, in the words of C.S. Lewis remembering his childhood, we have "tasted heaven": Yes, that is I. That is the centre of my feeling and awareness. That expresses a longing in me I hardly know I have. Wagner's mythic *Ring* tells us what we are. We are the world in which Wotan confronts Alberich and Brünnhilde and Siegfried, and Fricka and Erda and Loge. Each of us is a world flawed and fallible and destined to die, full of destructive impulses, yet capable too of goodness and heroism, open to beauty and joy, and destined for greater things than we know. Like all great art, and in concert with the great religions of the world, the

*Ring* assures us that our lives have meaning—even, perhaps especially, the sorrows and the pain and the deaths in them, for those are transforming experiences. And though our consciousness is, like Wotan himself, finite, we sense that we are meant to move towards something beyond consciousness that is infinite. That comes rushing in on us on a wave of sound as the *Ring* reaches its last page.

Every commentator on the *Ring* must end by saying this: no single interpretation of the work encompasses it all. Not Shaw's, not Donington's, not Cooke's, certainly not mine, and—I must say this too, for he has been my authority at every turn—not even Wagner's. Artists from Plato to the present have freely admitted that the artist himself does not fully understand his own creation. "How can he hope to have his intuitive perceptions understood by others," Wagner wrote, "when he himself stands before an enigma, and can suffer the same illusions as anyone else?" Because the scope of the *Ring* is not much less than the world itself, no single interpretation will do. But try to understand it we must. Wagner himself used it to seek self-understanding. And he seems at last to have understood that the immense world his music creates and transforms in the *Ring* is the outer world of nature and, even more, the inner world of the human soul.

---

### The Enemy Outside and Within

— *In her book Broken Lights: Diaries and Letters 1951-1959 (Burns & Oatis, 1964) translated by Barbara Waldstein-Wartenburg, Ida Friedesite Görres comments on the way in which the problems of contemporary society affect the life of the Christian Church:*

It seems a sort of law that with controllable regularity the Church should permit the very enemy she is fighting outside to penetrate simultaneously inside, by infection and infiltration, copying him, so that at times she appears almost as his faithful image. In their struggle against the ambitions of the medieval Emperors, the Popes became super-Emperors, aspiring to universal world domination. During the Renaissance the Curia grew into the largest and most typical Renaissance court; in the battle against the Reformation Catholic piety at once developed certain Calvinist features, as well as Lutheran traits (the "dark" image of man); in the late eighteenth century the leaders of the Church adopted Enlightenment and Rationalism, the nineteenth century witnessed a penetration of its materialistic, positivist cult of science and success which found its expression in a certain kind of "apologetics," together with "quantitative piety." No wonder that today we must resist the demons of collectivism, centraliza-



tion, bureaucracy, totalitarian ideals, the managerial society, false socialization = levelling, within our walls.

As the vigilant and responsible Christians we would like to be, it's our primary task to be on our guard against these subliminal (Rahner calls them "subcutaneous") infections, and to find appropriate remedies and antidotes. There are plenty of other people engaged with "the enemy from without." Our task is all the harder since this, "adultery with the *Zeitgeist*," as Anne Catherine Emmerich called it, will always have the majority on its side, for it has all the trumps in its hand—all the attraction and fascination of what is new and topical at its command. And if you speak up about this, or take a firm stand, you're branded at once as reactionary, hide-bound, a stick-in-the-mud, refusing to face up to life, etc., and, what's worse, you begin to feel yourself senile and sterile—a sore temptation I know only too well.

---

### Praising God in Myth

— *The January 7, 2002 issue of the (Alberta) Report includes an article by Kevin Michael Grace entitled "Praising God in Myth." Mr. Grace writes:*

When various recent readers' polls in recent years revealed the supreme popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the critics were aghast. Germaine Greer spoke for them when she complained in 1997, "Ever since I arrived at Cambridge as a student in 1964 [and first encountered *The Ring* cult], it has been my nightmare that Tolkien would turn out to be the most influential writer of the twentieth century. The bad dream has materialized." One can only imagine how angry Ms. Greer must be now, as the first instalment of a US\$300-million movie adaptation of *The Ring* reaches theatres, in these days of All-Tolkien, All-The-Time. If it is any solace to her, Tolkien, were he still alive, would probably be angrier still.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) was a private man. He was not a cocktail-party, literary-prizes man, nor a gossip-column man, nor a here-is-my-signature-to-a-mass-letter-to-the-*Times*-on-today's-burning-political-issues man. The only interest he demonstrated in his own celebrity was hostile, and he has no patience with the demands of the star-making machinery. A rather innocuous 1968 request from Time-Life was met with this frosty reply: "Your ideas of the natural and mine are different, since I never in any circumstances do work while being photographed or talked to or accompanied by anybody in the room. A photograph of me pretending to be at work would be entirely bogus."

Thirty-three years later, Tolkien's children would be delighted to be let off with a posed photograph. They went into hiding months before the December theatre release of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. (The other instalments are to follow in 2002 and 2003.) His children benefit from, but have no say in, its promotion. (The *Guardian* reported last week that contrary to stories that Tolkien sold the movie rights to his novel for only £10,000—or even as little as £100—the actual 1969 price was US\$250,000 and a percentage of profits.) The hoopla is reported to have engendered a rift between the second-and third-generation Tolkiens, with the older generation supposedly rebuffing the younger for its willingness to lend family approval to the Hollywood enterprise.

Once again, one can only imagine how Tolkien himself would have reacted to the movie's tie-in with Burger King. Its television commercial depicts cartoonish Dark Ages warriors tussling over tacky plastic lighted goblets offered as an inducement ("supplies are limited") to consumers of Whopper combo meals. At the end of the advertisement, the ring of the *Lord of the Rings* is incorporated into the Burger King logo. It seemed to have escaped the copywriters' notice that Tolkien's ring was a symbol representing the triumph of gold over love, that the *Lord of the Rings* is a celebration of exactly the opposite and that the climax of the novel is the ring's destruction.

Tolkien was not known for his sense of irony, but even he would probably find a grim delight in the latest practices of what is so rightly called Tinseltown. For although he was a man of the Right, he did not worship at Adam Smith's shrine. He loathed classical liberalism and all its works. He was also what we could now call a "green," someone right-wingers would mock as a tree-hugger." He wrote in a 1972 letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, "In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies." He condemned "the destruction, torture and murder of trees perpetrated by private individuals and minor official bodies," and lamented that "The savage sound of the electric saw is never silent wherever trees are still found growing."

Tolkien was saddened to the core by what he saw as the Industrial Revolution's despoliation of his beloved English countryside. This feeling was probably best expressed in Hilaire Belloc's poem "Ha'nacker Hill":

*Ha'nacker Hill is in Desolation:  
Ruin a-top and a field unploughed.  
And Spirits that call on a fallen nation  
Spirits that loved her calling aloud:  
Spirits abroad in a windy cloud.  
Spirits that call and no one answers;  
Ha'nacker's down and England's done.*

## News and Comments

*Wind and Thistle for pipe and dancers  
And never a ploughman under the Sun.  
Never a ploughman. Never a one.*

As it turns out, a mill was central to Tolkien's private mythology. In his first newspaper interview, in 1966, Tolkien told reporter John Ezard "about Sarehole, his imaginative heartland, a small village near Birmingham which was the starting point for his fictional Shire in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*." He remembered, "It was a kind of lost paradise. There was an old mill that really did grind corn with two millers, a great big pond with swans on it, a sandpit, a wonderful dell with flowers, a few old-fashioned village houses and, further away, a stream with another mill. I always knew it would go—and it did." Sarehole was long ago swallowed up by Sauron-like Birmingham, long condemned as England's ugliest city. (The mill, however, survives; it has been restored and is now a tourist attraction.)

Tolkien lived in Sarehole for only four years, from 1896 to 1900, but it would not be an exaggeration to call it the Eden from which he was banished. He was born in South Africa, to English parents; his father, Arthur, was a bank manager. Arthur Tolkien wished to return to England but could not find employment. So, at the age of three, J.R.R. Tolkien, his younger brother and their mother went home alone. His father was to rejoin them when he could, but he died of rheumatic fever a year later. The widow Tolkien raised her boys well, but funds were short. Their situation was not improved when Mabel Tolkien converted with her children to Catholicism in 1900, alienating her Anglican family. (It is difficult for us to imagine how strong the animus against "papism" was in middle-class England a century ago.) Mabel Tolkien died, exhausted, in 1904. J.R.R. Tolkien thereafter referred to her as a "martyr."

Her sons were given to the guardianship of Father Francis Morgan, and they practically grew up in the Birmingham Oratory. J.R.R. Tolkien was a good student, and Fr. Morgan took an especial interest in him. He was a kind but stern man. In 1908, the Tolkien boys moved into lodgings and J.R.R. Tolkien fell in love with the landlady's daughter, Edith Faulkner. Fr. Morgan, fearing for his charge's studies, eventually banned him from seeing Edith for three years. He renewed his courtship in 1913, only to find that Edith was engaged. After some (mainly religious) difficulty, he married Edith in 1916. She was his wife until her death in 1971; they had three children.

Tolkien took a First in English in Oxford in 1915. Directly after his marriage he enlisted, was commissioned a lieutenant and then posted to the Western Front. Joseph Pearce writes in *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (the best



Sarehole Mill

## News and Comments

study of Tolkien and a book to which this story is much indebted): “Tolkien was rescued from the ‘animal horror’ by ‘pyrexia of unknown origin,’ as the medical officers called it. To the troops it was simply ‘trench fever.’ He was invalided home, grateful to have escaped the nightmare. Many of his friends were not so lucky, joining the ranks of the bodies littering no-man’s-land.”

After this return to England, Tolkien began work on *The Silmarillion*, the epic of Middle Earth, which was the soil from which *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were cultivated. It was never finished; his son Christopher published a version of it after his father’s death. Tolkien accepted a post at Leeds University in 1920; in 1926 he returned to Oxford, first as a professor of Anglo-Saxon, then as a professor of English. “And after this, you might say,” Humphrey Carpenter writes in his biography, “nothing else really happened.” Tolkien was not regarded as a brilliant teacher, not that *teaching* was much expected at Oxford at the time. His student Kingsley Amis, later a famous novelist, wrote in his *Memoirs* that Tolkien was “the hardest lecturer I ever heard and the worst technically . . . incoherent and barely audible.” (Amis’s assessment cannot be ascribed to his atheism and hatred of medieval literature. He rated C.S. Lewis “the best lecturer I ever heard.”)

At Oxford, Tolkien and Lewis collected an informal society of like-minded souls called the Inklings; its other famous member was the apocalyptic novelist Charles Williams. They went on long walks or retired to pubs to drink beer, smoke and talk of literature. (Tolkien told John Ezard, “Every morning I wake up and think good, another twenty-four hours’ pipe-smoking.”) Tolkien’s companionship was crucial in Lewis’s journey to Christianity; Lewis repaid the debt by encouraging Tolkien’s writing. The story that Lewis once reacted to a Tolkien reading with “Oh no! Not another f---ing elf!” is untrue; it was Hugo Dyson who made this remark.

Tolkien not only helped persuade Lewis of the truth of Christianity, he persuaded him of the truth of myth. Joseph Pearce recounts a crucial argument of 1931: “Lewis explained that he felt the power of myths but that they were ultimately untrue. As he expressed it to Tolkien, myths are ‘lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver.’ ‘No,’ said Tolkien. ‘They are not lies.’ At that moment, Lewis later recalled, there was a rush of wind which came so suddenly on the still, warm evening and sent so many leaves pattering down that we thought it was raining. We held our breath.”

Tolkien resumed, arguing that myths, far from being lies, were the best way of conveying truths which would otherwise be incomprehensible.

“We come from God,” Tolkien argued, “and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. Myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbour, whereas materialistic ‘progress’ leads only to the abyss and to the power of evil.” According to Tolkien, “The story of Christ is simply a true myth, a myth that works in the same way as the others, but a myth that really happened.” Tolkien’s revelation not only explains the enduring power of myth through the ages but the extraordinary success of his own novels. It was no accident that they first became best-sellers in the 1960s after they were taken up by the “hippie generation.” As Tolkien wrote in a 1968 letter, “The behaviour of modern youth, part of which is inspired by admirable motives such as anti-regimentation and anti-drabness, [is] a sort of lurking romantic longing for ‘cavaliers’ and is not necessarily allied to the drugs or the cults of fainéance [idleness] and filth.”

In the early 1930s, Tolkien picked up an envelope and scrawled, “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” It was then that the “creation myth” of Middle Earth, of *The Silmarillion*, began to take fictional shape; Bilbo Baggins, Gandalf the wizard, Gollum, the dwarfs, the elves, the rest of the bestiary and the magic and terrible ring were inspired. *The Hobbit* was published in 1937 as a book for children. *The Lord of the Rings*, on the other hand, was a “fairy tale for adults.” (Just as the Gospels were, in Tolkien’s view, “fairy tales that happened to be true.”) It was published in three parts in 1954-1955: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*. Humphrey Carpenter writes, “There was only a modest print order: three and a half thousand copies of the first volume and slightly fewer of the other two, for the publishers considered that this should be enough for the moderate interest the books were expected to attract.” (Since then, Tolkien’s books have sold 100 million copies worldwide—one million copies in Canada alone this year.)

From the outset, the journey of Frodo Baggins and his companion Sam Gamgee has divided readers into two camps. *The Ring* has never lacked for highbrow admirers: the poet W.H. Auden and the novelist-philosopher Iris Murdoch adored it. (Poor Murdoch is about to suffer the Tinseltown treatment herself; her pathetic death from Alzheimer’s disease has been filmed with Dame Judi Dench in the lead.) More typical, however, was the reaction of Edmund Wilson, the dean of American reviewers, who damned it as “juvenile trash.” It has been derided as racist, fascist, sexist, sexless and as a “flight from reality.”

As the reaction to the readers’ polls of the 1990s demonstrates, the critical hostility to *The Lord of the Rings* has not abated. Recently, in the

## News and Comments

*National Post*, A.N. Wilson, the novelist and biographer of C.S. Lewis and Hilaire Belloc, declared that *The Ring*, for all its narrative power, had merely cribbed Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs* to less effect. Tolkien's *Ring* was "weak stuff. . . . Wagner for kiddies, Wagner without angst, Wagner without a brooding sense of spiritual catastrophe." In other words, just the sort of thing that would inspire a childish cult of dress-up, make-believe and Dungeons and Dragons.

Mr. Wilson, who has made C.S. Lewis's spiritual aeneid in reverse, betrays his ignorance of Tolkien's motivation when he claims that "Tolkien deliberately excluded religion from *The Lord of the Rings*." Nothing could be further from the truth. Tolkien said that his *Ring* was not an allegory, but he also believed, as Joseph Pearce explains, "that his sub-created secondary world was a reflection or a glimpse of the truth inherent in the Created Primary World." Christian truth, that is. "The religious element falls into three distinct but interrelated areas: the sacrifice which accompanies the selfless exercise of free will, the intrinsic conflict between good and evil, and the perennial question of time and eternity, particularly in relation to life and death." Frodo's ring is akin to Christ's cross; he bears it so that others may triumph over evil; he and Gandalf triumph over earthly life and enter the Blessed Realm.

In 1969, three years before his death, his publisher's daughter wrote Tolkien a letter asking him to explain the "purpose of life." He replied, "To the larger [question] there can be no answer, because that requires a *complete* knowledge of God, which is unattainable. If we ask why God included us in his Design, we can really say no more than because He did. If you do not believe in a personal God the question: 'What is the purpose of life?' is unaskable and unanswerable. . . . To those who believe in a personal God . . . the chief purpose of life . . . is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have and to be moved by it to praise and thanks. To do as we say in the *Gloria in Excelsis*. . . . We praise you, we call you holy, we worship you, we proclaim your glory, we thank you for the greatness of your splendour." So it may be said that the millions enthralled by Tolkien's Ring, from spotty adolescents to geeky adults, and everyone in between, are all worshipping their Creator, even if only a splintered fragment of his true light. And that, despite the Tinseltown treatment, despite Burger King's wicked wares, gives reason for Hope.

### The Film

— Andrew O'Hagan wrote the following review of the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* for *The Daily Telegraph* (December 14, 2001):

The people in my English class at school were seldom in a position to find themselves accused of reading; reading wasn't very much on the agenda, I'm afraid, and those who consorted with books were considered sort of dead from the neck down. The clever thing was to read in secret, or to walk down the street reading a library book hidden under your anorak. Treacherous readers, when frisked, would always be found to be reading the same book; some of them read it from first-year until they left, and I suppose many of them are reading it still. The book, of course, was *The Lord of the Rings*. I suspect that when J.R.R. Tolkien, professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, sat down to mark exam papers and found himself writing a simple line about a hobbit who lived in a hole, he had no idea that he was setting out on the creation of a world that would eventually revolutionise the mental habits of shy schoolboys in the Ayrshire of the 1970s. But that is one of the things he did. The millions of people who have read Tolkien are not ordinary readers; in fact, they are neither ordinary nor are they readers in the usual sense. They are mini film producers with an unlimited budget and an audience of one. Until now.

Let me come straight out with it. Peter Jackson's movie is a piece of wonderment beyond anything crafted for the cinema in a long time. On all fronts it is the movie of the year, and, really, people who don't like this movie in some fundamental way just don't like the movies. I would encourage those readers who hate the idea of this film's excellence to stop reading now and go straight to the Obituaries. There are film critics in this country (including this one) who bleat endlessly about lack of ambition in the cinema, about callow imaginations, misspent public money, affronts to decency and insults all round for paying customers, but when a film as good and as creatively generous as *The Lord of the Rings* comes along they go damp on it. They are fed up with the marketing. They are fed up in general. Dear readers, ignore these naysayers, for this adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* is a world in itself, a place where the capacity for wonder is for ever young, and where Tolkien's bizarre vision finally meets with the technology that can render it whole.

From the minute it opens, it rocks. In voiceover we hear of the powers that rule this amazing kingdom, of Sauron, the dark Lord of Mordor, who forged the one all-powerful ring, with which he aimed to enslave all the peoples of Middle-earth. The first battle we see is so exciting and so visually perfect it makes the opening battles in *Gladiator* look like the garden



party in *Howards End*. The ring, by various routes and aided by human weakness, finds its way into the keeping of Bilbo Baggins (Ian Holm), who lives in the Shire. Baggins is pleased to see the wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen) come to the Shire with his fireworks, but is discomfited when forced by him to give up the ring, as he is aware of its ultimate power.

Enter Frodo Baggins (Elijah Wood), who inherits the ring and who must travel to the Crack of Doom, deep in the Dark Lord's territory, where the ring was forged and the only place where it can be destroyed. The ring corrupts the wearer, though, so Frodo has a gigantic quest ahead, involving geographical and spiritual hurdles of a massive kind, but he must also overcome his own weaknesses. He is joined on this quest by three hobbits like himself, by Gandalf the wizard, by two men, Boromir (Sean Bean) and Strider (Viggo Mortensen), and by a dwarf and an elf (who make up the fellowship of the title). This is only the first instalment of a three-part movie, but don't be put off by that—in itself it has a dozen movies folded inside, with a great many of humanity's questing myths drawn in too. The chief virtue of the special effects in this movie is that they don't seem like special effects. Even as recently as *Gladiator* or *Titanic*—and even slightly in *Harry Potter*—the aerial shots seemed computerised and fake, whereas here they seem out-of-your-chair real, and are fantasy sequences possessing a rhythm and a stylistic valiance that would leave Tolkien himself reeling.

Frodo's gang thread their way through the Mines of Moria, a labyrinth of death and destruction, a place to which they are pursued by dark-cloaked ringwraiths (neither alive nor dead spirits trapped in Sauron's world) at breakneck speed, and where they encounter armies of orcs (sharp-toothed fantastical creatures with simian heads and chilling weapons) who are trying to kill them and steal the ring. In one scene they escape across a vast crumbling bridge with a fiery harbinger of doom at their heels. In that one scene alone there is the best of *Indiana Jones*, the frenetic emotional drama of *Star Wars*, the visual dynamics of *The Matrix*, and a nanosecond-by-nanosecond crafting of action and sound that just blows you away. Indeed, it is *Star Wars* that persistently comes to mind: the only thing that stops *The Lord of the Rings* from being better than *The Empire Strikes Back* is that it owes so much to it. There is a similar quest, a similar creation of firm characters embodying good and evil, and the same relentless deployment of terrific spectacle. The actors are on their toes and dragooned for the long haul (the three movies have been shot simultaneously) and every scene in the film, apart from one or two slightly slow ones at the beginning, is edgy with promise. As the camera swoops up and down the dreadful tower belonging to Saruman (Christopher Lee),

a wizard who was once head of the Council of the Wise and now in thrall to evil, you become certain that even the plastics of *Star Wars* have become old-fashioned now. Yet just as the *Star Wars* movies began a new era in cinema—a new era of fabulous effects forwarding giant themes—so, in its way, does *The Lord of the Rings* herald a fresh kind of movie-making for a new generation. It brings a panoply of quest narratives up to the very minute; it enjoins them to landscapes of unbelievable density and richness, pastoral idylls to snowy tundra; it choreographs a variety of beings and gives them enduring character—and it does all this with an unprecedented technological verve.

And there is love. One of the men, Strider, attracts the amorous attention of an elf princess, Arwen (Liv Tyler)—a kind of Princess Leia without the Danish pastries pinned to her head—and again we find the book's vast suggestiveness made real and physical. I should say, too real and too physical for some; the film is fierce and may frighten children younger than ten or eleven. They, I'm afraid, should patrol the outer edges of the nation's playgrounds a while longer, reading that now-changed-for-ever-book under their anoraks.

---

### A Catholic Poem in Time of War

— *The following piece by Dr. Kenneth Craven was first published on the Internet. Its epigraph is taken from these words by J.R.R. Tolkien: "You are inside a very great story." Dr. Craven writes:*

A great Catholic poem, *The Lord of the Rings*, a poem about a great war, was born from three great wars. As any essay is an explication of its title, this one will sound out the meanings of poem, Catholic poem, great wars, and J.R.R. Tolkien's story of Faerie. In a time in which language itself has been destroyed, recovering the true meaning of words is a difficult, wizardly task. High meanings must be unfolded, as they are to Frodo, with the sense of reverence demanded by true tales of old things that are ever new in the telling. So I begin with an apology.

First, the word "apology". It does not mean an admission of guilt or even of regret, but rather it is an explanation or defense of a position or point of view that justifies what has been said. Thus, John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, his great explanation of the basis for his conversion to Catholicism from Anglicanism, is in no way an "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings." It has, more, the quality of Pauline thunder, born of trying to explain the wisdom of one era to the confusion of another. This business of unfolding the words of the title is characteristic of Tolkien himself, who was an ancient living in modern, horrible times. As an

## *News and Comments*

“Ancient”, he was a word man living in a world that does not care about the spell-binding mystery of the right words. As *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were close to publication in the culturally dangerous world of America, the ancient poet Tolkien chaffed and spluttered to his publishers about the blurbs, the cover art, and the mouthings of critics. He was already aware that anything he said or made was about to be taken awry by the uninitiated, prompting him to guard against the critics, especially the academicians, “who have their pistols loose in their holsters.” Simply put, fearing that his great work profaned, he sometimes regretted that he had published it.

J.R.R. Tolkien was an “Ancient” in the sense that he never wanted to live in the present time, but in saner ages and in eternity. He was a traditionalist who saw himself in the great tradition of English poetry beginning with Anglo-Saxon poems, including his beloved Beowulf and all its Scandinavian kin in Eddas and Sagas and Icelandic myth. He did not cotton to much after Chaucer, and he could be dismissive even of Shakespeare. Tolkien is as ancient as Treebeard, a mossy poet who lived in the languages and poems of the Dark Ages. About as modern as he allowed himself to go was the medieval poems prior to the so-called Renaissance. As a scholar, he left us his superb translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a poem close to his soul. Called a Luddite by the cognoscenti of today, he didn’t like automobiles, trains, planes, or for that matter, any kind of machine that separated man from his work and his life. He loved trees and became angry when they were cut down needlessly. He walked, conversed, wrote, sang, smoked his pipe, and went to Mass as often as he could. And he had the high sense of dignity of his generation—he remarked that he could not remember himself or C.S. Lewis ever calling each other by Christian names. Modern culture and materialism left him only with disgust. He preferred archaic lore and language. And he believed that a rational man could arrive, independently, at the condemnation of modern machines and war tools that “escapist” works achieved implicitly. “Many stories out of the past have only become ‘escapist’ in of their appeal by surviving from a time when men were as a rule delighted with the work of their hands into our time when many men feel disgust with man-made things.”

It has also been my good fortune to live and be taught among ancients, from whom I learned to care about right words and right things. Arvid Shulenberg (*The Orthodox Poetic*), Frank Nelick, A.C. Edwards, and John Senior (*The Death of Christian Culture, The Restoration of Christian Culture*) were giants in an age of hostile pygmies, and elfish Dennis Quinn, who is now publishing a book on the nature of Wonder, is the last of that generation at the University of Kansas. The story of how

Sauron destroyed the bower of bliss that was the Integrated Humanities Program has been well told by one of their students, my friend and ex-student Bob Carlson, in *Truth on Trial: Liberal Education Be Hanged*. Listening to them—and that is the first thing one does with great teachers, listen to them as the monks listened to St. Benedict—taught me about a handful of words. From my time with them, I began to speak words like poem in a different way because they used it in the ancient way of the Greeks, in the way of Aristotle, who set poetry against history and philosophy as a third way of knowing characterized by symbol and myth, or metaphor and story. A poem—lyric, epic, or dramatic—is an imitation of reality through metaphor and story. Whether it is comedic or tragic or elegiac, or expressed in verse or verse narrative or prose tale, is accidental to its nature. Metaphor and story are the souls of poems as vegetative and rational souls are the essential principles of broccoli and men. To enter into the deep nature of a story requires deep listening to a poet, a maker (that’s what the word poet means), who says, “I will you a tale unfold.” *The Lord of the Rings* is such a tale and such a poem, a long story that unfolds something that “imitates” reality. Tolkien called this act of the poet “sub-creation,” as distinct from the Creation of the first poem by the first Maker, which is the world and the story we live in, and he knew that if his tale worked for hearers, it would put them in touch with high and holy things. Just as I came from one of the seminars of these Ancients in elder days, an ancient mariner placed in my hands *The Lord of the Rings*, just then (October 1965) appearing in paperback in America. He might as well have repeated Dante, “enter these enchanted woods ye who dare.”

## II

I read the tale with wonder, and my son soon read it through himself at the age of nine. Like most people who read it, we knew that we had touched something very different from the tone of most modern popular literature, and entirely different from the flood of pallid, perverse Tolkien imitations that we have seen for half a century. W.H. Auden, an early admirer, wrote that he would no longer trust the literary judgment of anyone who disliked *The Lord of the Rings*. From its appearance it was a loved poem among the millions, who return to it time and again. Predictably—as predicted by Tolkien himself—it was often handled by the cognoscenti like beads and mirrors given to natives. That in itself is not a bad thing. Like spells placed on things and words to keep them from evil doers, the air of mystery is entirely suitable to great poems, and protects them from the wreckers of salons and English departments, who still snarl and snap when the world’s readers prefer Tolkien to the modernists. In 2001, polls of English readers showed that they ranked *The Lord of the Rings* as the greatest work of English literature of the 20th century, followed by Or-

well's *Animal Farm* and 1984, a fact that drives the deconstructionist *literati* nearly mad (they call Tolkien a racist, fascist, sexist Luddite) rending their garments. Imagine: a white traditionalist male writing a patriarchal tale that smacks of sexism and morality that both children and adults want to read. It is, rather, a traditional poem that depicts things, including male and female, in their right relationships (good) and wrong relationships (evil). Like the defeated Sauron, the postmodernist wizards will suffer the worst of fates, allowed to hit the road as themselves.

American culture's—I use the word with some hesitation—refashioning of Tolkien began in 1965 when *Time* magazine observed that no freshman would go off to college without his Hobbit books and Tolkien shibboleths. Since that time, the tale has been processed by the usual suspects, Freudians and Jungians and all their New Age progeny. *The Lord of the Rings* is back again, this time in three movies made with all the machinery (Aristotle's term for stage magic) Hollywood can muster, together with sexuality and the usual plot meddling, though this is (I understand) lighter than expected. As Tolkien wrote in his famous essay, "On Fairy-Stories," fantasy is a great human right that allows us to enjoy making because we are made in the likeness of the First Maker, the Creator. It is a fundamental process that offers us the human necessities of Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. The true road of escape is recovery of the real—that is the mystery of imitation—or "a regaining of a clear view," or "seeing things as we were meant to see them." "Escape" for Tolkien was, far from being the negative thing the *literati* view with "scorn or pity," is a return to real life from the false life most call real. "Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?" he asked. "The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it." Here, as throughout Tolkien's writings about his own tales and fairy-stories in general, is an echo of the Gospels themselves, what he called, in the same essay, "a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world."

Introducing this thought at the end of his essay, Tolkien realizes that he has touched on a "serious and dangerous matter," and in a way, as the ancient poet leaning over to confide to the most serious of his listeners, he has let the veil slip slightly, a comparison he himself jokingly used to describe the screen between his creative soul and the world. And when the veil slips, what do we glimpse? I have called it a Catholic poem. In saying that *The Lord of the Rings* is a great Catholic poem, I do not mean to say anything but this: it is a great poem about the ultimate things made by a Catholic imagination steeped in the greatest of Western traditions. It is a poem that unites the two great passions of Tolkien's life, Northern Germanic mythology (Tolkien included England and all Scandinavia under "Germanic"), and the sacramental mysteries of the Catholic Church. Who

could have predicted such a poem, such a uniting of North and South cultures? When I first read it in the 1960's, I knew nothing about the author, but I knew intuitively that the writer was a Catholic, and when I said this to literary friends, I was immediately dismissed as a reactionary crank. There is something deeply immanent in the made things of traditional Catholic minds that cannot be had any other way, even if those minds—like the mind of Joyce—are in rebellion against Catholicism. For one thing, Catholicism is a religion, a fact that even many of its modern adherents do not grasp. That means, as Chesterton observed in *Orthodoxy*, it is a religion like all other religions on the earth in having “priests, scriptures, altars, sworn brotherhoods, special feasts.” While there are no altars or religious ceremonies in the world Tolkien has created, the reader will hear the echoes of traditional Catholicism on every page. But, as Chesterton also observed, though these features are universal to all genuine religions (as opposed to the anti-religion born in the Reformation), Christianity tells an entirely new story that radically transforms them.

By “Catholic”, I mean that J.R.R. Tolkien was a Catholic who had traditional Catholicism, the Catholicism of altars, feasts, fasts, heroic suffering, rituals, saints, miracles, doctrines, and mysteries, in his very bones. The Trinity and the Mass are as familiar to him as his garden or his beloved Beowulf; nay, more so, because these Catholic things, as he saw it, are parts of the one true “myth”, expressed in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. Real Catholics (and most other Christians) believe in this story as the foundation of their souls. Tolkien breathed it. He was a frequent Mass-goer who rarely received the Eucharist without first confessing. But he was an English Catholic, and like Evelyn Waugh, he early learned in life that as a Catholic he was something less than a Jew in England, despised and distrusted. He suspected one of his best friends, C.S. Lewis, of being a covert anti-Catholic, a reasonable suspicion based on Lewis's shameful treatment of the South African poet Roy Campbell. And, he wrote to his son, “Hatred of our church is after all the real only final foundation of the C[hurch] of E[ngland].” As an English Catholic, he knew that he saw the world in a secret, fundamentally different way, and he withdrew into the making of myth—a huge myth that by the very circumstance of its origin, could never fail to echo the Catholic myth.

### III

I well understand the objections people make to any suggestion that there is “meaning” in *The Lord of the Rings*. They object, rightly, on two grounds, 1) it is a wonderful story, and 2) Tolkien himself resisted allegorical interpretations of his poem. Tolkien resisted such interpretations because he meant no allegory and, in fact, detested allegory. An allegorical

interpretation of any of Tolkien's works fails because he did not write allegories. What most people mean by interpretation is "what does Gandalf mean? What do the rings mean? What do this and that mean?" They want the story they assume to lie just under the surface of the story. There is not much help for this point of view; until people learn to love story again for its own sake, they will miss the mark or go off disgusted. These are the same people, by the way, who attempt to apply allegorical interpretation to Christ's parables. These attempts fail because Christ did not make allegories either, he made parables, a distinctive literary form like no other that is probably closer to reverse Zen koans than it is to allegories with their one-to-one correspondence between elements of the story and things or concepts outside the poem. He was particularly upset when people assumed that the rings represented nuclear power. As it became evident that people wanted such instant meanings, Tolkien resisted all such readings and did all he could to discourage them. After all, he confessed that sometimes he had no idea what his imagination was unfolding. At the same time, when he looked back at his work, he was often willing to "find meaning" or to make comparisons of things in the tale to things happening in the world. He wrote that he did not "invent" the tale but received it, and was even elected for it. As such, Tolkien is merely one reader of the tale he has been given. Like any reader of a mysterious tale, he can be ambivalent or self-contradictory, sometimes in relation to the person he is addressing in a letter, and sometimes by the times as they unfolded. In many of his letters, he first dismissed any suggestions that "this means that," and then flip flops.

For example, when Strider appeared in the tale, the author did not know who he was. He had to discover the answer like the little old lady writer who said, "How do I know what I mean until I see what I say?" Tom Bombadil first appeared in a separate story where he embodied, for Tolkien, the spirit of countryside vanishing from England, but he found his way into *The Lord of the Rings*. It is interesting to follow Tolkien's musings about this. "He is just an invention," he writes, "but: he represents something important, though I would not be prepared to analyze the feeling precisely. I would not, however, have left him in if he did not have some kind of function. I might put it this way. The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness, tyranny against kingship, moderated freedom with consent against compulsion that has long lost any object except power, and so on; but both sides want a measure of control, but if you have, as it were taken a 'vow of poverty', renounced control, and take your delight in things themselves without reference to yourself, watching, observing, and to some extent knowing, then the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control might become

utterly meaningless to you, and the means of power quite valueless. It is a natural pacifist view, which always arises in the mind when there is a war. But the view of Rivendell seems to be that it is an excellent thing to have represented, but there are in fact things with which it cannot cope; and upon which its existence nonetheless depends. Ultimately only the victory of the West will allow Bombadil to continue, or even to survive. Nothing would be left to him in the world of Sauron.”

Reading Tolkien’s comments on other aspects of the tale, it is as if he is looking into a separate universe and trying to make sense of it in reference to his own, but never in a reductionist way. Reductionism and scientism, as well as a kind of fundamentalist Biblical approach, forever deny mystery; as approaches to *The Lord of the Rings*, they invariably contradict each other or become so ingenious that they mystify rather than illumine mystery. Giving up on that mechanical approach, people then resort to, “it’s only a wonderful story.” Precisely, Tolkien would say, but nothing wonderful is “only” anything. That is the curse of scientism in our thinking and beholding—the curse of Ramus, Descartes, Bacon, positivism, and video games. A wonderful story doesn’t mean anything except being full of wonders, which ought to be enough. It is meaningful in the way a human person is meaningful, inexhaustibly rich, never caught by the factory machines of univocal interpretation, and richer as it draws closer to God. A wonder is meaningful because it is an opening into seeing, into truth. Tolkien knew precisely what he was doing when it came to the kind of story he was making and what that kind of story could do. Because he is carefully staking out his turf for people who know little about the subject, he takes his time in explaining what a “fairy-story” is and isn’t. It isn’t a child’s story in the usual sense, he says, and it is only accidentally, by reading them to children, that it is thought of so. If such stories relied on mere credulity, they might so be considered. They do not. Instead they rely on “literary belief,” which both children and adults may share. Such belief occurs when the maker of the story is a successful sub-creator who gives us a “Secondary world which your mind can enter.” Such stories, do not respond, Tolkien says, to the question of belief. They respond to the human desire to know. To the extent we believe that Fantasy—an act of desiring truth—is good for people, we will value it. Faerie, the mysterious land from which such stories come, is the product of deep human desire to know “other worlds.”

Knowing other worlds is the activity such stories elicit from us. For what reason? The modern psychologist, a reductionist at heart, can only make comparisons downward, as Robert Frost says. He therefore regards fantasy as a matter of wishing, not belief. We are not seeing the world as it is through fantasy, but as we would wish it to be. For that reason stories



## News and Comments

are regarded either scientifically, as machinery for interpretation, or psychoanalytically, as clues to the psyche. In his poem, *Mythopoeia*, Tolkien mocks this failure to understand poetry: “Yes! Wish-fulfilment dreams we spin to cheat our timid hearts and ugly Fact defeat./ Whence came the wish, and whence the power to dream,/ Or some things fair and others ugly deem?” The poem makes clear that the “wish” is in fact desire for the Blessed Land, where the real is no longer broken or bent by Evil. There, all true poets will draw directly from the Pure All, enjoying the direct poetry of seeing face to face.

*Mythopoeia* is a poetic manifesto in the form of a prayer. “Blessed are the makers” is the theme, “who shall see God.” Partly a litany of blessings on legend makers and minstrels, the poem is also a prophetic declaration of independence from the mind of modernism and all its works. . . . By contrast with the meddling of progressive apes, “Salvation changes not, nor yet destroys/garden nor gardener, children nor their toys.” The salvation of things in true poetry is the opposite of the diminishment of them in reductionism, which demands that we follow a “dusty path and flat./ denoting this and that by this and that.” In this hell on earth man has made, “your world immutable” has no part for the “little maker or the maker’s art.” Outside that hell, poets on earth voyage on a “wandering quest beyond the Fabled West,” where common activities can bring “the image blurred of a distant king . . . a lord unseen.” In Paradise, however, the poets “shall have flames upon their heads” like the Apostles at Pentecost, and “there each shall choose for ever from the All.”

*The Lord of the Rings* is a tale from the land of Faerie. As such, it harkens back to that “serious and dangerous matter” mentioned above. “Danger” is another special word for Ancients like Tolkien. It does not merely mean a hazardous condition; the “daungier” of old romance suggests a spiritual peril, like that faced by knights on their quests. The serious and dangerous matter grows, for Tolkien, from the sudden turns that occur in fairy-stories, when the reader or hearer experiences “a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire.” These moments Tolkien calls “Eucastrophe.” That glimpse of joy, he says, results from a turn in the story that allows us to glimpse underlying reality or truth. At this point, “true” is no longer “true only in that world you have made.” This is perilous, and Tolkien knows it. He is, in effect, claiming that the well-made story is an occasion of grace, an opening into the infinite for finite man. The Gospel is the perfect story, a true Fairy-Story, which begins and ends in joy, and at its core is the “Great Eucastrophe,” the joy of the greatest moment in time, the Resurrection, that is also the greatest entry into eternity, the moment at which all heaven and earth break into a *Gloria in excelsis Deo!* Because the Christian story is the ultimate fairy-story, all tales, especially those

with happy endings, are thereby hallowed, made holy. Everything, no matter how humble, has now been redeemed, and therefore all tales that prefigure or portray participation in happiness are true. Art has been verified because the art of the maker can carry us into moments of joyous truth of the highest order. Echoing Thomas Aquinas on why truth is first communicated in story and symbol, Tolkien's poetics centers on the heart of the common man, on tales that, in the words of Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*, "call children from their play and old men from their chimney corner." A serious and dangerous matter, indeed; *The Lord of the Rings* may lead through the baptistry into the gates of heaven.

When Frodo and Sam have completed the Quest to destroy the Ring and all seems lost in the wastes of Orodruin, the Eagles rescue them and carry them to Ithilien where Sam wakes in a blissful state under Gandalf's eye. Sam wonders how long he has been asleep and asks where he is. The past seems like a long dream, and he is surrounded by softness and fragrance. "I'm glad to wake." When full memory floods back, Gandalf tells him that the Shadow is dead, he is in Ithilien and in the keeping of the King. Sam exults in the recognition that things have been restored in music and joy and laughter and tears, and that there is at last a good King ruling over all the Western lands. It is heart-healing Eucastrophe, and it is not too much to say that it is a prefiguring of Heaven.

Tolkien is a great Catholic Christian poet for modern times because he has made a myth about a world in which Creation, the Fall, Sin, Guilt, Redemption, Forgiveness, the battle against Evil, and Grace are major themes that speak to anyone. The Numenoreans, who are men, know God in Eru, but they fall more and more under the spell of Sauron and desire immortality as they move farther from Numenor, "the True West," and into the Fall. Tolkien said simply that he did not think it was in his poetic power to write directly about the Incarnation. The poem yearns for salvation, but beautiful as it is, neither Middle Earth nor Numenor can offer more than a blessed preternatural state achieved through love of beauty and wisdom. Like the world before Christ, Tolkien's world contains high virtue and a longing for something else, spoken cryptically in its tales and cultures. Only the Incarnation can bring the hope that fulfills that longing. Both Elves and Men in Tolkien's world view death as an enemy, and the Numenoreans can fall when they do not see and accept dying as a gift of Eru. Such individuals want to reverse the order of things to achieve immortality. The most dangerous road to immortality is the Ring itself, whose power enslaves the soul, giving it power but robbing it of life.

For those Evangelicals and other fundamentalist Christians who find Tolkien threatening or foreign, *The Lord of the Rings*, with its dragons and demons and monsters, may appear as forbidding as the Potter books. The

fundamental difference is, in a world in which magic is a given, the whole issue is how to use it and for what ends. True power grows from sacrifice, renunciation, and love, as exemplified by Frodo and Sam. At the center of Tolkien's vision lie the Mass and the Blessed Sacrament. Listen to what the elder Tolkien says to his son Michael: "Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament. . . . There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves on earth, and more than that: Death, by the divine paradox, that which ends life and demands the surrender of all, and yet by the taste (foretaste) of which alone can what you seek in earthly relationships (love, faithfulness, joy) be maintained, or take on that complexity of reality, eternal endurance, which every man's heart desires." Those who do not accept the sacramental life of the Catholic Church may enter Tolkien through a lesser door, through his moral vision of good and evil. Take, for example, Tolkien's constant reminder that the Machine (the Ring) is magic which uses power to gain domination over wills and gain ultimate control of all souls. It is this kind of Magic that Tolkien's work warns us against on every level. No other tale can awaken hearts to pure goodness and pure evil as Tolkien's can, and if you view it as a pre-Gospel work, well and good.

Tolkien was quite clearly, in everything he wrote and said, a Catholic Christian whose mother suffered greatly after her conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism, and whose education under the Birmingham Oratorians was redolent of the founder of that second home Tolkien found after his mother's death, Cardinal Newman, whose own conversion from the Church of England to Catholicism shook 19th century English society. From both he learned a particularly English version of Catholicism, one inspired by Saints More and Becket, the Catholicism of three hundred years of hidden chapels and martyrs like St. Edmund Campion, executed for treason because they celebrated the Mass on English soil. Myths grow in the imagination from such a soil. Tolkien's myth grew from remembered and experienced suffering, and from a profound sense of loss of all things sacred. Though the myth that informs *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* takes place for the most part in a monotheistic but, for the most part, pre-religious world, it nevertheless turns on the temptation of sin and the lure of power. The Elves fight evil but are also drawn by it, and the upheavals of the Second and Third Age point to the end of both the high kingdoms of the Elves and the vestiges of the Numenorean True West. There is an air of melancholy about it all, a deep melancholy that yearns for the joy of Eucatastrophe and laments the passing of all that is good and beautiful. That rhythm of joy and lamentation is at the very root of the Psalms and of Christian life.

The reductionists and fundamentalists among us may be taught something by Tolkien if they learn to listen to the resonance of such mythic rhythm. “Mythos” in Greek means story or plot, not something false. Both the poorly thought-out scientific reductionism and literalist fundamentalism unite to destroy a proper appreciation of story in the sense Tolkien meant it. Even C.S. Lewis, certainly a classically educated man, originally thought of the Greek and other primordial myths as “lies,” until on a walk with Tolkien, the latter suddenly turned in one of those great moments of revelation and firmly said, “they are not lies.” The “true myth” of the Gospel is “a myth that has really happened,” Tolkien said, but because it is through God’s gift that men are story tellers, every story is a partial reflection of the True Light that has come into the world, from man’s beginnings to the present. God expresses himself through the minds of poets. The difference was that God is the poet who made the true story of the Gospel. This revelation, a personal word from Tolkien to Lewis, was so earthshaking that shortly after, Lewis became a Christian and began his own famous mythmaking about the great war at the heart of all myths.

Before New Agers and Jungians get excited about this, they must see that believing that all myths are true does not mean that all myths are equally true nor that all religions are equally true. Believing this, like Joyce and Jung, they move in an endless Circean circle of titillating doubt. One of the greatest Catholic writers of the 20th century, G.K. Chesterton, had already dismantled the arguments for the endless Jungian maze that many wander in now by pointing out that though all the stories point to a truth, there must be a Truth for them to point to, and that new story of Christianity is a new poem of joy unlike anything the Pagan world, trapped on the wheel of sorrow and suffering, had to offer. Classical and primitive myths could strain toward truth as echoes harken back to the original. When men sense or experience glimpses of truth in such stories, the perennial annoying question of “is it a true story?” is answered. Yes, it is. You have had a moment of truth—and of grace, the “eucastrophe,” “a sudden joyous turn representing a miraculous grace never to be counted on to recur.” Such a moment can occur in many stories and fairy tales, but all such moments depended on the ability of man to count on the very thing itself. The Gospel is, in fact, Tolkien argued, a Fairy Story in itself; in the Incarnation, we see the ultimate Eucastrophe of the Resurrection and enter into a kind of real joy the world before Christ did not have to offer.

#### IV

The deep myth that Tolkien made was his inner home for most of his adult life; indeed, it may have been said to have begun in his childhood, when he first began to play with words. But if his poetic life began in the

## *News and Comments*

Shire, first in South Africa, and then in England, it found its focus and drive in war. He had written of dragons as a child, but it was battle which gave birth to the first glimmerings of the vast tale of which *The Lord of the Rings* is only a part. On March 2, 1916, while in the trenches of France in the First World War, he wrote his newly wed wife that between military lectures he was improving his “nonsense fairy language.” “I often long to work at it and don’t let myself ’cause though I love it so it does seem such a mad hobby!” The mad hobby was the germ of his life’s work. Years later, when he wrote his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” he confesses that “a real taste for fairy stories was awakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life by war [*italics added*].” Later he recalled that a particular peninsula in France inspired the “kernel of the mythology,” resulting in the tale of *The Fall of Gondolin*. In the letter in which Tolkien recalls this, he writes movingly of his own story as if someone else had written it, admiring, and being moved by, particular events, even particular sounds.

As he struggled with bouts of trench fever, Tolkien’s love of faerie and language led him to begin creating the great cosmogenic myth that is the *Silmarillion*, which began in notebooks in 1917. Though its story of the history of a world was the center of Tolkien’s vision and the mythical force behind his other writings, it was not published in its final form until four years after his death. It as if Tolkien had to write a Bible before he could create a derivative tale. Early on, after the success of *The Hobbit*, he attempted to get publisher Raymond Unwin to publish the whole as a single unit, partly because he thought no one would understand the one without the other.

Tolkien began *The Lord of the Rings* in 1937, as the dark clouds of Mordor were again gathering over the West, but he often said that neither of the World Wars had anything to do with it. Again, he was usually resisting allegorical interpretations when he so demurred. Privately, he knew that these wars of the West generated much of the vision of the wars of his Secondary World. Writing to son Christopher in May 1944, Tolkien urged his son to write to find a way to deal with the horrors of war, and said he generated Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes in “grimy canteens, at lectures in cold fogs, in huts full of blasphemy and smut, or by candle light in bell-tents, even some down in the dugouts under shell fire.” In the same letter, he commiserated with the soldiers who found themselves in stupidity and scarcity caused by “planners” and “organization,” and lamented war as an inevitable evil due to “humans being what they are” short of “Universal Conversion.” The war was an “evil job, for we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring. And we shall (it seems) succeed. But the penalty is, as you will know, to breed new Saurons, and slowly turn men

and elves into Orcs . . . and we started out with a great many Orcs on our side. . . . Well, there you are, a hobbit among the Urukhai. Keep up your hobbitry in heart, and think that all stories are like that when you are in them. You are inside a very great story.”

Having grown up in a non-Catholic and anti-Catholic landscape, the southern West Virginia coal fields, I learned like Tolkien to love Catholicism “and the very great story” as the one secret road of adventure and to loathe industrial wastelands as the product of the Machine. The tiny stone Sacred Heart Catholic Church a block from our house was a way into a different world, and perched over the endlessly banging, huffing, whistling, smelly, cinder-spouting, coal-laden railyards, it offered God rather than coal dust. “Anyway all this stuff is mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality, and the Machine,” he wrote of his myth, firmly asserting that the Machine was a kind of enslaving black magic. The detestation of industrial magic and his experience in World War I came together in a military hospital where, after becoming the only survivor in his unit of the horrendous Battle of the Somme, he began to write the “Fall of Gondolin,” which details the brutal destruction of the fabled city of Gondolin by the dark power of Morgoth. Wounded in a similar war which drained and spiritually depressed a generation, Tolkien, as one writer put it, had turned in his hospital bed toward the wall and begun dreaming of another world and another war of good and evil.

As we read *The Lord of the Rings* during the beginnings of what is said to be another great war, it is worth listening to Tolkien’s own thoughts about the two great wars he lived through. He fought as a soldier in World War I and served in the reserves in World War II; he helped design a curriculum for naval and air cadets at Oxford; and he agreed to assist in cryptography, if called upon to do so. He despised the Nazis against whom he could be colossally angry and said he wished he could fight Hitler personally. There can be no questioning of Tolkien’s patriotism, which he considered a high virtue. He knew evil when he saw it and knew it had to be defeated—but defeated, not destroyed, for even hurling the Ring into the crack of doom ends only one chapter, and vigilance is ever required of the protectors of the West. The letters also reveal that Tolkien never saw either of the wars in popular ways or believed government propaganda, which he despised. At this point, Tolkien knew that no war can be properly understood apart from the larger war in which we are engaged until the Last Judgment. Because human beings are under the Fall, he observed, there will be no end to wars, and it is folly to think so. We cannot, he said, truly win a war nor enjoy or even estimate outcomes, nor can the victors enjoy the fruits of victory, “not in the terms that they envisaged; and insofar as

they fought for something to be enjoyed by themselves (whether acquisition or mere preservation), the less satisfactory will ‘victory’ seem.”

Because of the Fall, at every point of battle, we must know that the real battle is like the battle that goes on inside the individual nation and soldier, like the battle that goes on inside Frodo—and Frodo loses the fight, succumbs to temptation, but is saved by Grace. He gains a great wound from his struggle and the healing of that terrible wound requires exile, suffering, and higher powers. “The Quest,” Tolkien wrote to the editor of the *New Republic*, “was bound to fail as a piece of world-plan, and also was bound to end in disaster as the story of Frodo’s humble development to the ‘noble,’ his sanctification.” Frodo ‘apostatized,’ Tolkien says, and until he read a ‘savage’ wartime letter from a reader insisting that Frodo should have been executed as a traitor, he did not realize how the story, conceived in outline in 1936, would appear “in a dark age in which the technique of torture and the disruption of the personality would rival that of Mordor and the Ring and present us with the practical problem of earnest men of good will broken down into apostates and traitors.” The ultimate judgment of Gollum, Tolkien says, must be left to what medieval poets called “God’s privatee,” but Frodo’s pity and forgiveness of Gollum is what saves him in the real world of good and evil. His succumbing to power of the Ring, like Smeagol and Saruman, must be understood, like the weaknesses of the inhabitants of the Shire, from the perspective of the Gospel. Because the power of the temptation is so great, the final scene of the Quest, when Frodo fails and Gollum falls, the catastrophe of the tale, can only be understood from the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

One may compare the quest of another soldier by another Catholic writer. In Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Honour* trilogy of World War II, Guy Crouchback, sickened by the evil of the Nazis and Fascists, hears of the fall of Prague to the Germans, knows that war is inevitable, and understands with joy that he can now be a Christian soldier. Seven days earlier, Russia and Germany had pledged to split the spoils of a world ripe for plunder, plunging European communists into despair and opening a window for those who hated both totalitarianisms. “He [had] expected his country to go to war in a panic, for the wrong reasons, or for no reason at all, with the wrong allies, in pitiful weakness. But now, splendidly, everything had become clear. The enemy at last was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off. It was the Modern Age in Arms. Whatever the outcome, there was a place for him in that battle.”

Like one of his ancestors, Crouchback pledged his quest at the tomb of a Christian crusader who fought the evil of Islam. After Germany

changes sides and attacks Russia, and when it becomes clear to him that England has united its cause with atheistic Soviet Communism, he is greatly disillusioned and crushed, and can only fall back upon his personal honor as a motive for soldiering on. The insanity of war and the absurdity of his own army and government finally reduce him to a numb disillusionment. At the end, his personal pity for a small community of Jews in Yugoslavia, where he is stationed, is the only motive for action. The question of joining a Christian West against evil, except in spirit, is now dead. Crouchback returns to England where, as a Catholic, he can devote himself to the only thing he can now understand, his family.

Like Guy Crouchback, in the thick of the realities of war, Tolkien found it impossible to maintain a simple desire for revenge or a jingoistic correctness. Though he never seemed to lose his anger against the Nazis, his feelings did not extend to the country of Germany, the Germanic tradition, or the defeated soldiers and helpless civilians. In 1945, he lamented the destruction of the commonwealth of Europe “which will affect us all.” “Yet people gloat to hear of the endless lines, 40 miles long, of miserable refugees, women and children pouring West, dying on the way. There seem no bowels of mercy or compassion, no imagination, left in this dark diabolic hour.” While he acknowledged that Germany created the situation, and knew the suffering “necessary and inevitable,” he asked, “but why gloat? We were supposed to have reached a stage of civilization in which it might be necessary to execute a criminal, but not to gloat or to hang his wife and child by him while the orc-crowd hooted.” And if that was something to be sad about, Tolkien also saw the present catastrophe against the unfolding story of a dying planet. “The War of the Machines seems to be drawing to its final inconclusive chapter—leaving, alas, everyone the poorer, many bereaved or maimed and millions dead, and only one thing triumphant: the Machines. As the servants of the Machines are becoming a privileged class, the Machines are going to be enormously more powerful. What’s their next move?” When the next move came about, atomic bombs, he was stunned by lunatic scientists calmly plotting the destruction of the world. “Such explosives in men’s hands, while their moral and intellectual status is declining, is about as useful as giving out firearms to all the inmates of a gaol and then saying you hope ‘this will ensure peace’.”

In hating the enemy, he did not lose perspective, just as he did not lose respect for the virtues of the Germanic tradition and its mythology, which he valued far above the Classic tradition and classical mythology, and counted England and Scandinavia in that tradition. The Germanic virtues of obedience and patriotism and courage, he rated as stronger in Germany than in England. The ancient Germans gave to Europe the “noble



northern spirit.” “Nowhere, incidentally, was it nobler in England, nor more early sanctified and Christianized.” Such words were, one may imagine, best uttered privately in 1941.

The reason that Tolkien was able to maintain such perspective on the enemy was twofold. First, because he lived in myth, not allegory. The same people who wanted to see all stories as allegorical wanted a neat dualism. “Wars are derived from the ‘inner war’ of allegory in which good is on one side and various modes of badness on the other. In real (exterior life) men are on both sides, which means a motley alliance of orcs, beasts, demons, plain naturally honest men, and angels.” The second reason for the perspective was that the myth he lived in was the Christian myth, which sees things such as sin and evil in a radically different way. As Tolkien explained to the *New Republic*, the final evil deed done to Frodo by Gollum was made possible by Frodo’s forbearing to kill Gollum—which pity looks like “ultimate folly”—and in the Divine Economy, it is this loving the enemy that makes Frodo’s salvation possible. At the beginning of the tale, Frodo declared that Gollum deserved death. Gandalf relied, “Deserves it? I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that dies deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the wise cannot see all ends.”

V

As readers of Tolkien at the end of 2001, we too cannot see all ends. We are told that we are in the beginnings of another great war against another great enemy. After 1400 years of sporadic assault from Islam, it is not difficult, though it is politically incorrect, to know who that enemy is. If an enemy is a force and a mind, however inchoate, that insists on dominating or even destroying you, then Islam is an enemy, as it has always been. A priest friend from Nigeria, who was brought up in a Muslim-dominated area and has no illusions about the nature of that religion, said to me angrily, “if the enemy is not Islam, what is it?” Like Tolkien with German culture, today’s Catholic can appreciate points of agreement between Catholicism and Islam and can admire strengths in Islamic and Arab cultures. We can also take a cue from Tolkien in recognizing that if there are terrible orcs among the Islamists who kill us, we must also be aware that there are orcs, and orc spirits, on our own side. Fighting what is called “terrorism” is, as with the war against the Axis powers, “necessary and inevitable,” to use Tolkien’s words. Not letting the spirit of that necessary conflict grow into something evil is the perilous part.

At the same time, Western Catholics today are subject to a kind of theological fog machine that began to blow some forty years ago when the

Second Vatican Council completed whatever its work was. Tolkien himself—as did Evelyn Waugh—abhorred the changes in the Mass and the prevailing Catholic mind. He knew that his imaginative and spiritual roots were in the Ancient Church, and he was bewildered by the theological wreckers who would, as he put it, pull up a tree to discover its roots. No matter how scandalized, he reaffirmed his Faith in the Church and the Pope because they defended the Blessed Sacrament and kept it in its prime place as the center of our worship. He well understood that the entire “Reformation” was an assault on what the Reformers called “the blasphemous fable of the Mass.” Today, as many Catholics know, the assault has continued within the Church under fables and lies generated by orc-ish priests, theologians, and Bishops, so much so that upwards of 30 percent of Catholics today no longer believe in the Real Presence, which Tolkien would have died to protect. In churches that are more like gymnasiums and malls rather than reverential sanctuaries where He abides, the Catholic Faith that Tolkien knew is often reduced to kindergarten games. One is sometimes tempted to ask, what is the point of going to Church if the culture inside is no different from the one outside?

The enemy within, the anti-culture we have allowed to develop, is as important as the enemy of Islam, and though we cannot agree with the Muslims on every point, we can certainly agree with them that Western culture is now so decadent that it can no longer even understand what is wrong with itself. From World War II, in which we flattered ourselves that we were the victors, we brought home the Nazi spoils—abortion, infanticide, elimination of the unfit, euthanasia, assisted suicides, eugenic experimentation, and State determination of personhood, all of which now dominate our hospitals and threaten our homes as much as any buzz bombs or Panzers ever did. Today, moderns in the “media” always utter the word Nazi with horror and loathing, blithely unaware that the evils we said we were fighting have taken up residence in our very hearts, a kind of series of interlocking Rings of Power that we use to deny the realities of sex, love, family, and community.

Tolkien feared that arriving anti-life anti-culture, though he could not imagine how far it would, Saruman-like, seize the Western soul. Writing in 1944, he asked, “when it is all over, will ordinary people have any freedom left (or right) or will they have to fight for it, or will they be too tired to resist? The last seems the idea of some of the Big Folk. Who have for the most part viewed this war from the vantage point of large motor-cars. Too many are childless. But I suppose that the one certain result of it all is a further growth in the great standardized amalgamations with their mass-produced notions and emotions.” “You and I,” he wrote to son Christopher as *The Lord of the Rings* neared completion, “belong to the ever-defeated

never altogether subdued side. I should have hated the Roman Empire in its day (as I do), and remained a patriotic Roman citizen, while preferring a free Gaul and seeing good in Carthaginians.”

The literary republic constituted of writers like C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers, and Evelyn Waugh—as well as the larger Catholic tradition of Augustine and Aquinas, exists now only in scattered individuals and scorned enclaves. Indeed, the teachers and exponents of traditional Catholic culture are even hunted down like terrorists, as happened in the last year with the closing of St. Ignatius Institute by the Jesuit priest who heads the University of San Francisco, whose mission statement sounds more like a UN document than anything Catholic or Christian. What is so enormously sad about this, the kind of sadness that often enters Tolkien’s tales, is that true culture is not something that happens or is manufactured. As John Senior used to say, it takes three generations to make a farmer or agri-culture. It takes a whole Dark Ages to make a Catholic culture. What begins in monasteries, deserts, and caves must be lovingly transmitted by people who know it and exemplify it. The kind of sensibility that can make a *Lord of the Rings* takes centuries of learning, suffering, and living to create. The notion that a multimillion dollar movie—the kind of Faerian Drama Tolkien imagined the Elves as producing for men—can substitute for reading or hearing is of itself suspect. Tolkien speculated that such a drama, like the Wish Fulfillment dreams he condemned in *Mythopoeia*, would come too close to Enchantment. To the extent that such a performance deludes, it threatens to have the force of a Primary world, becomes too potent, and is easily used as a technique for domination.

Nevertheless, though modern anti-culture has a way of destroying what it celebrates and undermining the very thing it portrays, it just may be that because of the hoopla, *The Lord of the Rings* may seep into both naïve and jaded imaginations, drawing some people to read and wonder. At the present time, engaged in a terrible war with evil, we may be forgiven if we grasp at any hope of being serious about genuine culture, which is the handing on (*traditio*) of the love of good words, good deeds, and good beliefs. “Whatever enlarges hope, exalts courage,” Dr. Johnson wrote, “after having seen the deaf taught arithmetick, who would be afraid to cultivate the Hebrides?” If we had a map of the Christian world a century after St. Augustine’s death, a map of true Catholic culture would look like tiny points of light in a sea of barbarian darkness. Two centuries later, there would be many more points. But even in the period of medieval greatness, the points of light, now more numerous and often much larger, would be threatened all around by the incessant lapping of the violent waves of Islam.



On the South Downs near Lullington, Sussex

## News and Comments

The difficulty is, of course, starting institutions that will be the good ground the seeds fall upon, as in Christ's parable of the Sower. St. Benedict started the monasteries, St. Augustine the schools, with the blessings of the teaching Church. Now the "pastoral church," as it is fond of calling itself, uses its shepherds' crooks to keep the fields fallow. Roving Gandalfs are few and far between; Saruman and his dupes, the defectors, abound. This is all well and good for those who know the difference. If there is cause for lament, it should be for the hundreds of thousands of young people who honestly ask and seek but who have no true teachers among them and, in Milton's words, are "hungry sheep that look up and are not fed." Here and there a few may be tapped for adventure, for one thing we can learn from Tolkien about a time of war is that adventure is something that comes to you. It is there, and suddenly you are in it. Grace works that way. Let us pray that it does and that the unlikely Frodos among us will receive the grace they need to make a culture that will grow. One such Frodo was Karol Wojtyła, who built a Catholic cultural community in backstreets and side paths under the very noses of the Nazis and Communists.

My hope is that Tolkien will be read as what he undoubtedly is, a great Catholic poet of the post-Christian era. If Dante created the Catholic poem of the Middle Ages by explicitly telling the Christian story from top to bottom, Tolkien has created the great Catholic poem of the anti-Catholic age by embodying the Catholic imagination in a not-quite-parallel universe of hobbits, elves, dwarves, wizards, orcs, and men. He has, because of his own love of pure story, discovered and revealed a way to speak unmentionable things to a post-Christian culture. In the trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter*, Nobel prizewinner Sigrid Undset was able to do this by casting her story in medieval Norway in a great explicit Catholic poem of the last century. In his fiction, Evelyn Waugh was able to render the beauty of Catholicism through hints and gestures, suggesting its nearly concealed presence in a progressively secular world. In *The Lord of the Rings*, I believe Tolkien does exactly what he said he was doing, communicating a religious, Catholic vision through a Secondary World that radiates something vital for souls on perilous quests in a world of wars and War: the holiness of high calling.

Those who follow that calling today will know from reading and absorbing *The Lord of the Rings* that adventure is unexpected and may cost not less than everything, that risk is what makes home and family and country secure, that small fellowships based on truth give birth to courage, that the truly dangerous things are the powers we cannot see, that conspiracies against the truth run are deep and live on visions dangerously seductive and completely alien, that the East is always an anti-truth woven of

lies and the True West is always to be built, that a Quest demands you know who you are and what you seek, that every point in time intersects with eternity in free choice, that history is a long defeat and glory is elsewhere, that the mass of men will never appreciate or remember the great deeds of those who die for them, that evil always returns in new clothes and is always ready to destroy the old fashioned verities, that vigilant watching is ever needed, that home is something you make with sacrifice and love, that the telling of true tales in dark times is the succor of the brave, and that without Grace there is no salvation.

---

### ***The Lord of the Rings as a Classic***

— Under the title “Why the critics must recognise Lord of the Rings as a classic” (London Daily Telegraph, 2 January, 2002) Tom Shippey writes:

After almost fifty years, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is headed back into the best-seller lists. It is true that it is propelled by the Peter Jackson film, but then what caused the film if not the grateful memory of millions of readers? What has given Tolkien’s work its lasting success—a success achieved in defiance of every commercial consideration (too long, too strange, too hard), and in the teeth of bitter resistance from academic and critical establishments?

Could it be its failure to fit any literary category? It is a long prose narrative, which makes it a novel by some counts, and the adventures of those quintessentially bourgeois creatures, the hobbits, are told throughout in standard middle-class novelistic style. The hobbits are surrounded, though, by the personnel of fairy-tale, elves and dwarves, trolls and goblins. And the fairy-tale creatures are acting out an epic theme, that of *translatio imperii*, the shift of power, this time not from Troy to Rome, as in the *Aeneid*, but from the non-humans to their short-lived successors: the Age of Men begins, sadly and regretfully, as the book closes.

So *The Lord of the Rings* is a fairy-tale epic told in the form of a novel—with, one has to add, a strong dose of quest romance and more than a dash of Macbeth, walking woods, magic mirrors and misleading prophecies all included. This variety of genre is reflected in a marked variety of styles, all the way from hobbitic banter up to quasi-medieval and quasi-Biblical, something that has infuriated critics who expect books to stay on the same decent middle-class level all the way through, like proper novels. Yet there is a further and more ambitious level in Tolkien, which is stylistically neutral: the level of myth.

## News and Comments

Tolkien, as is well known, was a devout Roman Catholic, and insisted that his work was inspired by his belief. You could be forgiven for wondering. Not only are none of the characters Christians, they aren't even pagans—no gods, temples, priests, sacrifices. Middle-earth is a well-mapped Limbo, seemingly scrubbed of religious belief. Yet it contains a ruling myth based on traditionally Christian and even more traditionally English images, and one that speaks even to its present and largely post-Christian audience. The myth may be called, for short, “the myth of stars and shadows”. For much of *The Lord of the Rings*, its central characters are quite literally “bewildered”. They are lost in the wild, in fact in Wilderland, and they often have no idea where they are or what to do. Pursue the orcs, or follow the Ring? Hide the Ring, or send it into danger? Scenes of agonised doubt and indecision, like “The Council of Elrond”, stud *The Lord of the Rings*.

The bewilderment is at its worst inside the book's repeated forests, not Mirkwood this time, but the Old Forest, the Enchanted Wood of Lothlórien, most of all inside Fangorn Forest. There one set of travellers meets the resurrected Gandalf, but they think he's Saruman, and the last time they thought they saw him he *was* Saruman. Meanwhile Fangorn himself knew Gandalf was there, but did not let on to the hobbits, who continue to know that Gandalf is dead. Tolkien's forest is similar to, but much more threatening than, Shakespeare's wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the lovers wander constantly, pixie-led by Puck. It has a hint about it of Spenser's allegorical Wood of Error, and more than a hint of the wood in Milton's *Comus*, where the enchanter rules and the rescuers cannot see their way.

Woods are like that, of course. They cut off your lines of sight, and make you lose your bearings. That is what makes them a powerful metaphorical image, even into modern times. Tolkien's wanderers are awfully like us, but pre-Christian as most of England is now post-Christian. With their bearings lost, they cannot “trust in the Lord”, because they have only the barest inkling of him. They can “trust to luck”, and they do, and Tolkien has a theory about that, but it is a deliberately non-reassuring one. Through the trees, however, and from the depths of their bewilderment, they can see the stars, Tolkien's image of hope. The hobbits sing songs about this, even in the Old Forest. So do the elves, singing their quasi-hymns to Elbereth “Star-Lighter” from *galadhremmin ennorath*, “tree-tangled Middle-earth”. The elves see themselves as exiles in Middle-earth, shut out from their true home in the Undying Lands. Quite like Christians, one might say, but not quite.

The traditional image of the Christian is that of the pilgrim, only passing through the world, eyes fixed on the next one. The elves, and the

hobbits, and Tolkien, are all deeply attached to this one, to Middle-earth itself, and indeed to its woods. Forests may be dark, dangerous and deceitful, but Tolkien was all for trees as against chainsaws. Leaving the world, even for Heaven, is not a perfect solution for him, or for his characters, or for us. We'd rather stay here, most of us, make this world a better one, re-establish England's green and pleasant land as the Shire. But we can't. Death prevents us, and the passage of time, and the shifts of power and politics.

Tolkien speaks to that sense of loss and rather surprisingly he speaks not just to English people, but to people across the world. His images are universal, his myth is timeless. Up there are the stars, unaffected but unreachable; down here the wanderers, lost in shadow. But in the Wood of the World, one might say, there are three things to remember. First, decisions cost: if Gandalf saves Faramir, he loses Théoden. Second, you're not alone, even if it feels like it: Frodo and Sam stumbling through Mordor are sheltered unbeknownst by Aragorn looking in the *palantir*. Third, the one thing definitely wrong is giving up, losing hope. All this is true of Middle-earth and of our own bewilderments as well. That is why Tolkien remains alive for so many, and why his book should be accepted as a classic, in spite of its defiance of so many literary conventions.

---

### **A Portal to Middle Earth**

— *The following are extracts from Wired magazine's online archive (October 2001):*

One thing most critics don't understand is that *The Lord of the Rings* is more than a story. It's a portal into Tolkien's Middle-earth, the most realized imaginary realm in the history of the fantastic. For millions of contemporary readers, Middle-earth serves the function that Eden once did for the common man, or that Dante's *Inferno* did for the literate elite: It has become a collective map of a moral universe, a fabulous landscape that, in its depth and detail, floats just beyond the fields we know. Many fans would heartily agree with Margaret Howes, a 73-year-old veteran of Tolkien fandom and the guest of honor at the recent Bree Moot Tolkien convention in Minnesota:

"Reading *The Lord of the Rings* is like looking into another world, a real world." Tolkien explained his method in the 1939 essay "On Fairy-stories." He wrote that a skillful creator of fantasy "makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': It accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside." Tolkien called them Secondary Worlds, but today



we would call them, with a little metaphoric license, virtual realities. And Middle-earth remains the original and supreme virtual reality, the ultimate imaginative simulation. Like today's virtual realities and game designers, Tolkien knew that successful Secondary Worlds were not wild flights of fancy, but products of consistent detail and clever technique—what he described as an “elvish craft” capable of suspending the disbelief of “both designer and spectator.”

If Middle-earth is an immersive simulation, then the code it runs is Tolkien's invented languages, especially Quenya and Sindarin, which were spoken by the elves and provide most of the world's place-names. Tolkien tinkered with his languages throughout his life, and this “mad hobby” lay at the core of his creative activity. In a famous letter, he explained that when it came to his fiction, “The ‘stories’ were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse.” And because Tolkien was an Oxford philologist, a scholar of Anglo-Saxon and other Northern European tongues, his languages were exceptionally realistic, featuring consistent roots, inflections, and the sort of linguistic drifts that crop up over time. This sense of verisimilitude was vital to Tolkien, who wanted people to “get inside this story and take it (in a sense) as an actual history.” To this end, Tolkien fleshed out Middle-earth with an exquisitely crafted topography; a rich cultural ecology of elves, humans, dwarves, orcs, and hobbits; and an immense historical back story published posthumously, and only in part, as *The Silmarillion*. He spent countless hours working on genealogies, maps, and the appendixes that lard *The Return of the King*. To plot his story, Tolkien also used elaborate charts to keep track of days of the week, distances traveled, even the phases of the moon. The sense of verisimilitude was vital to Tolkien, who wanted people to “get inside this story and take it as an actual history.”

Such minutiae is the reader's drig, and people couldn't get enough. By 1956, Tolkien was already complaining about readers demanding geological data, Elvish grammars, and lots more maps. Musicians wanted tunes, botanists wanted technical descriptions of flora, historians wanted details about the political structure of Gondor. Though pleased that “so many should clamor for sheer ‘information,’ or ‘lore,’” Tolkien was a bit disturbed as well. Readers named houses or pets or children after his characters, while others sent him artifacts from Middle-earth: goblets, paintings, sculptures, photos of costumes, tape recordings, food, tobacco, tapestries. “I am not now at all sure that the tendency to treat the whole thing as a vast game is really good,” he wrote, admitting that he personally found such a game fatally attractive. But the genie was out of the bottle. Tolkien fandom exploded in the 1960s, when badges like “Frodo Lives” and “Gandalf for President” popped up on college campuses and the

nascent Tolkien Society started serving mushrooms and cider at costumed “hobbit picnics” up and down the West Coast. . . . The success of the books spurred a literary (and sub-literary) boom in fantasy and science fiction. Like Tolkien’s own work, both genres are deeply concerned with world building—not just extrapolating possibilities or spinning yarns, but creating believable, engaging, and self-consistent worlds that absorb the reader. These genres were so popular with hippies, druggies, and computer geeks alike partly because all of these folks wanted, in different ways, to reprogram reality. Nowadays, with the ascendance of computer games, special-effects blockbusters, and online Virtual Reality, it seems as if one of the most important functions of Science Fiction and fantasy novels like *Dune* and *A Wizard of Earthsea* was to prepare us for the coming culture of virtuality. And that makes Middle-earth the motherland. . . . With its ineffable blend of longing and loss, Tolkien’s story of eternal hope in a melancholy world has an obviously spiritual dimension. Likewise, the enthusiasm of Tolkien’s fans has often been compared, not always kindly, to a religion. Mithrilian is a 27-year-old Russian woman, now living in America, who first stumbled across an abridged Russian version of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 1988. The book brought her to tears. In 1990, she got her hands on samizdat translations of the second and third volumes. Photocopiers were scarce in Russia at the time, and she was given only four days to read 700 pages before passing them on. “I had a photographic memory back then,” she says. “I would close my eyes, call up the page, and read it to my friends.” Mithrilian, who applied herself to learning English in order to read Tolkien in the original, explains the tremendous appeal that *The Lord of the Rings* had for someone growing up in Russia. “Soviet people were raised as atheists,” she says, “Tolkien’s books offered me hope for our world, the hope that Tolkien’s elves call *estel*. Tolkien does not mention God in *The Lord of the Rings* at all, but you feel something really wonderful when you read it. Later I recognized it as faith.”

Will Jackson’s film serve Sauron or the elves? From the moment New Line announced the project, fans flocked online to make sure it came out right. Tolkien was a devout Catholic, but he avoided the Christian symbolism of his friend C. S. Lewis’ *Narnia* series. For Tolkien, the creation of an authentic Secondary World was itself an expression of faith, since “we make still by the law in which we’re made.” But though a mortal and in some ways very earthly place, Middle-earth is as profoundly seductive as any heaven. Mithrilian is not alone when she says, “Given a choice, I would probably choose the life of a hobbit.” . . . In contrast, the villainous Saruman “has a mind of metal and wheels” and spends his days building mills, chopping down forests, and blowing things up. Tolkien associated

technology with a sorcerer gone bad because black magic and technology were, for him, pretty much the same thing. Both were motivated by a hunger for “speed, reduction of labor, and reduction . . . of the gap between the idea or desire and the result or effect.” He disliked technology because he believed that the domination and control of the “primary world,” even in the utopian name of the good, brings tremendous suffering to Creation. With these concerns in mind, Tolkien placed the modern problem of technology at the heart of his saga. The One Ring is the supreme instrument of coercive power, and though using it would enable the fellowship to defeat Sauron, its addictive potential is too great for even Gandalf or the high elves to risk. Frodo’s quest is thus really an antiquist: The final goal is not to achieve power but to renounce it. “One of Tolkien’s great themes is that power itself always corrupts,” explains Peter Jackson. “Ultimately there can never really be any good power.” In his letters, Tolkien contrasted the black magic of technology with enchantment, the artistic creation of Secondary Worlds that satisfy desire and in turn bathe the primary world in wonder. Enchantment was the ultimate elvish craft, and the *raison d’être* of Tolkien’s whole production. But as Tolkien scholar Shippey points out, the don could not reconcile the fact that techno-magic and elvish enchantment both spring from the same source: the desire to create. After all, it was elvish lore that created the One Ring in the first place, lore the elves shared with Sauron because they believed it would help turn war-ravaged Middle-earth into a paradise.

---

### **Wagner for Kiddies?**

— *A.N. Wilson, a biographer of C.S. Lewis, wrote the following piece about Tolkien for the November 24, 2001 issue of the London Daily Telegraph:*

Some time ago, in one of his witty columns in *The Daily Telegraph*, Andrew Marr repeated a story of C.S. Lewis, in his college rooms at Oxford, listening to J.R.R. Tolkien reading aloud from *The Lord of the Rings*, and interrupting with: “Oh no! Not another f\*\*\*\*\* elf!” This story is not true, though it is a garbled version of a truth. Lewis, Tolkien and a number of like-minded dons, from the late Thirties to the mid-Fifties, would meet regularly to discuss literature. Sometimes, they would read aloud to one another from work in progress. The high point of these meetings of the Inklings, as the friends called themselves, were the readings from *The Lord of the Rings*. J.R.R. Tolkien was not an eloquent man. He mumbled and muttered. His lectures on old Germanic philology, when they were not cancelled because of his repeated colds, bronchitis and

laryngitis, were only semi-audible to the small, intelligent band who followed this, the primary area of his professional concern. When Lewis and friends could bear old Tolkien's mumblings no longer, they enlisted Christopher Tolkien, the professor's youngest son, to read from the great book. Christopher is a man of extraordinary eloquence. His lectures at Oxford on Norse mythology were always packed out. I wish I had heard him read from *The Lord of the Rings*. I have heard him read from the *Edda*, from the Sagas, and from the Anglo-Saxon poems which were the chief inspirations for his father's work.

The "f\*\*\*\*\* elf" story came from Christopher himself and I put it in my biography of Lewis. It was not C.S. Lewis who made this unmannerly interruption, but Hugo Dyson, a noisy veteran of the First World War, who taught English at Merton College. Lewis has far too much generosity of spirit and far too much admiration for Tolkien's narrative skills to have been capable of uttering such a sentiment. He was always greedy for more *Lord of the Rings*, and it was largely through Lewis's encouragement that the great tale ever came to be finished. Lewis was the first Tolkien addict, and there have been many since, ranging from the stoned hippies of the Sixties who wore T-shirts with "Gandalf lives!" on their chests, to the members of the Tolkien societies, who meet at "moots" and dress as characters in the story, to millions of enthralled readers, held by the sheer power of the narrative. It is the archetypal story of homely, virtue-loving creatures contending against great odds. Moreover, though a devout Catholic, Tolkien deliberately excluded religion from *The Lord of the Rings*—there is just a strange moment when the hobbits are about to settle down a meal with the elves, and the older, more dignified elves turn silently in prayer towards the east. The hobbits, being earthly creatures, do not understand what is going on. For the rest of the tale, it is good versus evil, and good magic versus bad magic which contend. Of course, a lot has been made of the fact that the story was written, much of it, when the small island of Britons stood alone against the Dark Lord of Berchtesgaden in his mountain fastness. But Tolkien was always anxious to deny any suggestion that the story was an allegory; and nor is it. If it is inspired by the Dunkirk spirit, it is not a story secretly about that spirit.

Iris Murdoch, interestingly, was a tremendous fan, and loved talking to the old professor about the more abstruse points of elvish lore. When her husband John Bayley exclaimed that *The Lord of the Rings* was "fantastically badly written" she would look astounded, and say that she did not know what he meant. Actually, Murdoch and Tolkien had this in common, though they could hardly be more different in other respects: like Murdoch, Tolkien did not worry about "style" at all, simply charging on, where *The Lord of the Rings* was in question, with his sub-William Morris

prose. There are occasions—I shall speak of these in a minute—where Tolkien’s use of the old language and lore of the North, and of Wales, is shimmeringly brilliant. All storytellers take over older material, as this medieval professor would have been the first to tell us. But it is his use of “other men’s flowers” (as Montaigne called them) that sometimes grates. J.R.R. Tolkien was not a great opera-goer, but he pored over the text of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle as a young man. It goes without saying that his own great myth about the Ring of Power, *The Lord of the Rings*, was first suggested by the music-dramas of the German composer. The Ring in Tolkien is lost, like Wagner’s Ring, in water. Like Alberich, Gollum is a base figure of pure cupidity. The possession by a low creature of this instrument of power creates reverberations among the higher creatures—in Wagner among the giants and the gods, in Tolkien among the elves and in the heart of Sauron, the Dark Lord himself, who sends out his emissaries, the Dark Riders, to reclaim the Ring when by accident or providence, it falls into the hands of the homely little hobbits of the Shire.

Compared with Wagner, *The Lord of the Rings* is weak stuff. It is Wagner for kiddies, Wagner without angst, Wagner without a brooding sense of spiritual catastrophe. *The Hobbit* had been a story written to amuse children, and very little of Tolkien’s imagined mythology had intruded into it, beyond the Ring of Power having fallen into the hands first of Gollum and then of Bilbo Baggins, the Hobbit himself. Even *The Lord of the Rings* did no more than lift a corner of the tapestry into the buried world of lost tales and languages which had been their creator’s preoccupation for most of a long life. Only after the old professor died, and his son Christopher withdrew to the South of France to edit the manuscripts, was the full extent—one might even use the word enormity—of the Tolkien universe revealed. The first book to be published was *The Silmarillion*, which *Private Eye* satirised as *The Sell-A-Million*. Those accustomed to think that the name J.R.R. Tolkien on the spine of a book would guarantee an unputdownable narrative were amazed to discover that *The Silmarillion* was something completely different. Here, I think, one finds something much deeper and more interesting than the rattling yarn of *The Lord of the Rings*. In his imaginative reworking of Welsh and Germanic languages, in his evocation of how myth grows out of language, and how language is sustained by myth, he is saying something truly interesting. Its originality has not really been plumbed, I fancy. For this reason, I found *The Silmarillion*, with its creation-myths and its elvish grammar, more impressive than *The Lord of the Rings*. And I realised, as I turned the pages of *The Silmarillion*, why, during a recent re-reading, I had given up on *The Lord of the Rings*: that is, I saw that J.R.R.T. was not really a writer at all. Take the example of the Ents, the talking trees. It seemed obvious to me on this

reading that the Ents in *The Lord of the Rings* have partly been suggested by the talking apple trees in the film of *The Wizard of Oz*, and more by the suicides who have turned into trees in Dante's *Inferno*. Beside both originals, Tolkien's imitation seemed feeble. The Ents seem wonderful when you first read the story as a child. In the forthcoming film adaptation (opening on December 19) they will be wonderful again—you won't be thinking about their literary analogues.

Yet, two things remain hauntingly good about *The Lord of the Rings*, even for the reader who fears he will never enjoy it as he once did. One is the sheer power of the narrative. The second is the elvish mythology and the language. I found myself turning back to a volume called *The Lost Road and Other Writings: Language and Legend Before the Lord of the Rings*, edited by Christopher Tolkien and which contains sixty pages of "the etymologies of the old tongues"—Danian, Eldarin, Noldorin, Old Noldorin, Primitive Quendian and Telerin. You might ask what is the point of reading the etymologies of a fake language when you might be learning Old Norse, Old English or Greek. The same sensible habit of mind might ask why one should read ersatz mythology by Tolkien rather than reading Homer. In Tolkien's own case, the psychological reasons for, not merely creating, but, as far as one can tell, almost completely inhabiting his mythological world are fascinating, if impenetrable. They perhaps explain why, for so many years of the twentieth century, Tolkien made fans among dopeheads and fantasists. He deserves better than this, however. If not exactly a writer, he was a serious craftsman. It is possible that the film will win him new generations of rapt admirers, caught up in his hypnotising skill as a storyteller.

---

### The Lure of the Rings

— In the November 25, 2001 issue of the London Sunday Telegraph, Jenny Turner comments on the strange power of Tolkien's writing. Under the title "The Lure of the Rings," Ms. Turner writes:

A writer, born around 1890, is famous for three novels. The first is short, elegant—an instant classic. The second, the masterpiece, has the same characters in it, is much longer and more complicated, and is increasingly interested in myth and in language games. The third is enormous, mad, unreadable. One such writer is James Joyce, of course. Another—*The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1955), *The Silmarillion* (1977)—is J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien (1892-1973) spent his working life as a philologist. He was the world's leading expert on *Beowulf*, and he probably knew more about the Old Norse languages than anyone else alive. He was over

sixty by the time *The Lord of the Rings* was published. And though he wrote the book to keep the modern world at bay, it is one the modern world adores: a number of recent “Best Book” polls have shown it to be far and away the most popular book ever written in the English language. Next month sees the worldwide release of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first in a three-part film adaptation of Tolkien’s masterwork. The film promises spectacular digital effects (like *Gladiator*’s, only more so) and has a proper cast, with proper stars in it: Sir Ian McKellen as Gandalf, Cate Blanchett as Galadriel, Liv Tyler as Arwen Undómiel (the women’s parts have been beefed up somewhat).

The man and his *oeuvre* are about to be turned inside out. This most backward-looking and fustily word-bound of popular novels is set to become a multi-media franchise—like *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. The footnotes, languages, scripts, maps and appendices that are so much a part of the *Lord of the Rings* experience will be replaced by a tie-in with Burger King, a pop record, trading cards and furry backpacks. It is a strange reversal. Except that in a way it is not. The landscapes in the film have a digitally enhanced quality more sumptuous than Technicolor, more magical than cartoons: super-icy mountains, mega-scary forests, the stormiest of stormy skies. This is Tolkien through and through. He allegorised it in his 1947 short story *Leaf by Niggle*, in which the hero paints “the only really beautiful picture in the world” and then walks about inside it. “As you walked, new distances opened out; so that you now had double, treble and quadruple distances, doubly, trebly, and quadruply enchanting. You could go on and on, and have a whole country in a garden.” Of the many strange things about Tolkien, one of the most striking is the way his ideas about his own writing converge with our modern conceptions of virtual reality.

Like many people. I spent a lot of time when I was younger—from the age of ten—lolling about and dreaming in the world that Tolkien created in *The Lord of the Rings*. Far too much time; and with an intensity I now find scary. That book is fused with my being in a way that happens only with things one encounters when one is young. Even now, even as I find the book silly and rather “noisome” (to use a word from J.R.R.’s special vocabulary), it still locks with my psyche in a most alarming way. In its time, the book has had its distinguished admirers—Auden was an early fan—but mostly, the sort of people who get their opinions published have lashed it with contempt. “Hypertrophic . . . a children’s book which has somehow got out of hand,” Edmund Wilson wrote in 1956. “A combination of Wagner and *Winnie-the Pooh*,” the poet John Heath-Stubbs joshed at around the same time. “My nightmare,” added Germaine Greer.

It is hard, though, to find someone writing sensibly at length about what exactly is wrong with Tolkien's novel. Obviously there is a problem with elves, hobbits and so on as protagonists; obviously there is a problem with the prose, and with the matchstick-cathedral, labour-of-madness nature of the project. I don't want to defend Tolkien, and nor do I want to attack him. Rather, I want to describe how the strange power of his book casts a spell over readers—as children, as adolescents, as adults—a spell some of them grow out of and others don't. It is possible for readers to live their whole lives through Tolkien's universe, for weeks and months and even longer; which suggests that among the novel's other attractions, it has cubby-holes for all sorts of urges to hide in, like *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*.

So where to begin? Well, one place might be a study in Oxford in 1930, where a thirty-eight-year-old professor of Anglo-Saxon and father of four small children sat down to mark some exam scripts. On a blank page he found himself writing this: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." It became the first sentence of the children's classic we know. Tolkien always said he had no idea where the sentence came from, or what a hobbit might be. But without this word, there would have been no *Lord of the Rings*. The hobbit was the precondition for everything that followed. It was the keyhole, and the key. Hobbits were a bridge between the ancient, heroic world Tolkien had already formed in his imagination and the *petit bourgeois* suburb in which he spent his waking life. Tolkien admired little that had been written after Chaucer, but he did like Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). *The Hobbit* fits easily into that gentle, don't-forget-your-galoshes world. The hobbit was Bilbo Baggins, a member of a small, sturdy, rather conventional species of humanoid, with furry feet, a liking for seedcake and a fondness for a pipe. *The Hobbit*, the novel that tells of Bilbo's journey into the Wilderland of the East to rescue dwarf treasure from a dragon's lair, was published in 1937.

"I am in fact a hobbit," Tolkien wrote once, "in all but size. I like gardens, trees and unmechanised farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like, and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. . . ."

*The Hobbit* was a great success, and its publisher, Stanley Unwin, wanted a sequel. He didn't get it until nearly 20 years later—and when he did, it was a novel of a very different sort. *The Lord of the Rings* is an epic sword-and-sorcery novel, more than a thousand pages long. It was published in three parts: one and two in 1954, three in 1955. The story is set in an imaginary world, early medieval in feel—horses and swords and arrows and chain-mail. The landscapes seem to be northern European and are marvellously rendered; forests, mountains, plains, caves, great cities.



Different peoples inhabit this world: humans, dwarfs, elves, hobbits, orcs, trolls, ents. Some of them are basically human (hobbits, dwarfs, the men of Gondor and Rohan); some are superhuman in both powers and goodness (elves, wizards, men of royal blood); some are superhuman but evil (ring-wraiths); others are subhuman and sturdy with it (orcs, trolls). The story begins in the cosy Little England world of *The Hobbit*—village life, seed-cakes, awful relatives called the Sackville-Bagginses, with Gandalf the crotchety wizard providing the fireworks. But then it deepens and widens in the most alarming way. Gandalf, it seems, is a great soldier and moral leader who has been sent from his own blessed land far in the West to save Middle-Earth from perdition. The golden Ring that Bilbo Baggins tricked away from Gollum, the wretched creature he met in *The Hobbit*, is no toy: whoever owns this Ring has the power to enslave the entire world to his will. The Dark Lord Sauron is eager to draw the Ring into his possession, and the only way to guarantee that he won't is by destroying it once and for all. Bilbo's nephew, Frodo, has inherited the Ring and so inherits the terrible journey east that must be taken to drop it into the Crack of Doom.

The prose, which starts out quite dry and comic, becomes clogged with archaic words and faux-noble cadences; “wains” and “wights” and “wroth”. “Well, bless my beard!” That's Gandalf in Chapter 2 of Volume I. “Go in peace! I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil.” That's how he's talking by the end. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of *The Lord of the Rings*, however, is that it isn't just a novel, with a plot and a dreadful prose style. It's a whole world, with its own half-hidden structure and shifting layers. All the peoples have their own language—and the elves have two. Snatches of these languages come up unexplained in the dialogue. There are folk songs, learned sayings, passages from ancient documents: Dwarvish, Númenorean, the Black Speech, Entish, Quenya, Sindarin. Each language looks different from the others and appears to be internally consistent. The two elvish languages, Quenya and Sindarin, look like Finnish and Welsh respectively. The Black Speech looks a bit like Turkish. You can't be a Tolkien fan without liking the look of these fake languages. There is something wonderful about looking at a new language, noticing something of its structure, sensing its power to communicate and hold things. In Tolkien, however, the languages are only the start of it. The past is forever piercing the surface of the narrative. It is hinted repeatedly that even if the struggle between the bad folks of Mordor and the good people of Gondor is settled, along with the struggle for supremacy between the Dark Lord Sauron and the elves, older forces and me powerful powers are waiting their turn.

While composing his fiction, Tolkien would deliberately pile up fragmented layers to give the appearance of age, depth, variant versions and

mystery that he so loved in the broken texts he studied in his academic work. You can imagine him like someone on *Changing Rooms* antiquing a chest of drawers, painting on a layer, then scraping it off with a nit-comb, then painting on another one, then distressing it with a sponge. Tolkien loved maps, and drew his own for the book. They are strangely anthropomorphic-looking, or so I used to think. The sea, the goodies, the elves, are in the West (of course), a face in profile. The unknown regions and the land of shadow are at the back of the head, in the East. Thinking about those maps makes you realise how spatial and spreading *The Lord of the Rings* is. It's not temporal and plot-driven, like most popular fiction. There's a whole little world in there, simplified and protected, as in the role-playing games that followed it. It is its own university, its own library, its own structure of branching knowledge.

Then there is the scholarly apparatus. Volume III, *The Return of the King*, has 110 pages of appendices, and another twenty-three of separate indices for songs and verses, first lines, persons, beasts and monsters, places, things. *The Lord of the Rings* was the first book I ever read which had anything like this at the back: the first book I ever read in which the scholarly rituals were observed, in which you flipped from index to text to appendix, cross-referring to maps. I remember how impressed I was with myself as I studied the chronologies and family trees. And I remember feeling the ground had opened up in front of me when I got to Appendix F/ii, "On Translation", only to learn that the Common Speech—the language in which characters from different races communicate—is not, in fact, identical to English. The relationship of all the new languages to the language of the narrative was not, as I had thought, of strange to familiar. It was strange to doubly strange. It was perhaps my first experience of the adult condition. Things that start out looking simple always turn out to be much more complicated.

Studying and researching—the everyday activities of the scholar—are deeply pleasurable. In his fiction, Tolkien created a machine for the evocation of scholarly frisson. The thrills are the thrills of knowledge hidden, knowledge uncovered, knowledge that slips away. Children, Tolkien wrote, do not know enough about the world to be able always to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Their boundaries are blurred. And Tolkien played those boundaries like a master. The kicks I used to get from *The Lord of the Rings* were sensual, textural, a feeling of my mind being rubbed by the rough edges of the different layers. In Tolkien's fiction, one trick in particular is used over and over again. Suddenly, eerily, the world inside the book and the world outside seem momentarily, like planets aligning, to slide together and form a magical new whole. One of

these instants comes early in *The Hobbit*, when it is said that Bullroarer Took invented the game of golf when he knocked a goblin's head down a hole. There is another in *The Lord of the Rings*, when the hobbits sing a song that seems to be an earlier, fuller version of the nursery rhyme *Hey Diddle Diddle*. When I was young, these moments disconcerted and delighted me beyond expression. I really did believe that the world inside the book had taken over the world outside.

No battle lasts terribly long in *The Lord of the Rings* before giving way to deliverance and a hot bath. A fearful dart across the Shire ends with a roaring fire and a mushroom casserole at Farmer Maggot's. The Dead Marshes . . . then stewed rabbit in Ithilien. To read *The Lord of the Rings* is to find oneself gently rocked between bleakness and luxury, the sublime and the cosy. Scary; safe again. Scary; safe again. And so to sleep. This is the compulsively repetitive rhythm Freud writes about in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and which he links to the "death instinct", the desire to be free of all tension for ever (as with the "And they all lived happily ever after" of the traditional fairy tale). This rhythm was fundamental to Tolkien's imagination: the subtitle of *The Hobbit* is *There and Back Again*. By the end, it is passivity that defines Frodo, the Ring-Bearer, broken by his quest, racked by melancholy, unable to forget. Every March—the anniversary of his sojourn in Mordor—he is ill: "It is gone for ever," he says, "and now all is dark and empty." According to the critic Joseph Pearce, "the parallels with Christ's carrying of the Cross are obvious."

But isn't Frodo just depressed? His sufferings are wonderfully evocative of the self-pity and self-mythologisation that tend to come with depression. One always does feel that life is a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. How much more satisfactory to think one has been defeated not by ordinary slings and arrows, but in one's heroic struggle to save the world? *The Lord of the Rings* reads like a panoramic portrait of the depressive state. The real War of the Ring has nothing to do with how many trolls and orcs Mordor can muster. It's a struggle with despair.

Tolkien apologists adore this aspect of his work. It is proof, they say, that *The Lord of the Rings* is a serious twentieth-century novel. Proof that it is grown-up. Depressed people report feelings of powerlessness; and just look at how power is distributed on Middle Earth. Aragorn has it, Gandalf has it, Galadriel has it, because of what they are (a king, a wizard, an elf-queen) rather than what they do. To hold power is to be good-looking: "great and beautiful" (Galadriel), "in the flower of manhood" (Aragorn). Apart from the Ring itself, which makes its bearer invisible when it is worn, there isn't a lot of magic on Middle-Earth. Its place is taken by

something more plausible-seeming and refined. Political power (being a king, a queen, a wizard) is elided with willpower, an ability to make things happen. In a politics like this, hobbits are in a subordinate position, always slightly left out. They don't have any special powers or dispensations, unless they can cadge some from the big guys: hospitality and amulets and potions from Elrond, Galadriel, Treebeard. They are "flotsam and jetsam", "small ragtag". They are small and weak and furry-footed—and Tolkien has given tallness and strength and glinting grey eyes far too much weight in his world for this not to count.

The politics of *The Lord of the Rings*, in short, comprises a familiar mixture of infatuation with power and an awareness of one's own helplessness beside it. One's best hope, really, is to suck up to the big people, in the hope they will see you all right. It's the perennial fantasy of the powerless. Things would indeed be hopeless were it not for your secret friend the Big Bad Elf-Queen, who will come along when you finally call for her and wreak revenge for you on all the nasty children at school. Occult systems always look impressively difficult from the outside: that elvish script, those runes. This is one reason people find them so attractive. Something different, some special form of knowledge, just for me. But the system turns out to be tremendously easy to get to grips with. Every bit joins up with every other bit—which is not surprising, given that these are artificial creations, and that is exactly what they were designed to do. This is why occult systems appeal to vulnerable people. You can feel secure inside them, no matter what is going on in the nasty world outside. The merest weakling can be master of this cosy little universe. Even a silly, furry little hobbit can see his dreams come true.

---

### **How to Read the *Silmarillion***

— *Tom Shippey (author of J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century) writes in answer to an online question concerning the difficulty of "getting into" The Silmarillion:*

I think there are two things I can suggest. One, don't start at the beginning. The first few chapters are highly mythical: I would start at about page 50. Two, keep careful notes on some scrap paper, especially of who everyone is. It's essential for the story to be able to sort out which branch of the elves each character belongs to, and their seniority, and their marriages—one way of describing the story is to say it's all about half-brothers and half-sisters, or as the Norsemen would put it, "same-mothers" against "sunder-mothers." One of the things Tolkien was imitating was Icelandic sagas, which are always full of complicated genealogies. Now if

## *News and Comments*

you're brought up to it, like Icelanders, you can remember whether someone is someone else's second cousin once removed without thinking about it, but most of us can't. And to follow the *Silmarillion*, you need to.

Having said that, I would also say that you have to remember exactly what people say. Every word is weighted, with irony, or prophecy, or fate. There's no chit-chat in the *Silmarillion* (unlike works with hobbits in them). In fact it's a very high-protein diet, which often makes you wish for a piece of just plain old bread and butter. As you get into it, you start to realise that every action has unexpected consequences, and the whole thing is genuinely a web, all the sections fitting together to create the tragedy of Arda. And perhaps the last thing I'd say about it is that it is extremely sad—no Hollywood happy endings at all. Some people like and admire that, but it's certainly not what we're brought up to.

This interview can be found at the following web address:

**[www.tolkien.co.uk/jrrtolkien/tom\\_shippey\\_answers.asp](http://www.tolkien.co.uk/jrrtolkien/tom_shippey_answers.asp)**

Stratford Caldecott recommends the following web-sites for further study of Tolkien and his work:

Verlyn Flieger's web-site:

**[www.mythus.com/index.html](http://www.mythus.com/index.html)**

The Tolkien Society:

**[www.tolkienesociety.org/](http://www.tolkienesociety.org/)**

The Encyclopedia of Arda:

**[www.glyphweb.com/arda/default.htm](http://www.glyphweb.com/arda/default.htm)**

The Mythopoeic Society:

**[www.mythsoc.org/](http://www.mythsoc.org/)**

A Tolkien Art Gallery:

**<http://user.baden-online.de/~ckraemer/index3.htm>**

Sites devoted to the study of Tolkien's invented languages:

**[www.elvish.org/](http://www.elvish.org/)**

**[www.uib.no/People/hnohf/index.html](http://www.uib.no/People/hnohf/index.html)**

The HarperCollins Tolkien web-site:

**[www.tolkien.co.uk/index\\_nf.htm](http://www.tolkien.co.uk/index_nf.htm)**

---

### **Tolkien's Teenage Admirers**

— *The London Sunday Telegraph* (December 9, 2001) provides a somewhat critical profile of Tolkien's teen-age admirers. Under the title "Elvish Lives," the article reads as follows:

Hairy and diminutive, they cluster at the feet of the great wizard. Theirs is another world, and their language a mysterious one. Their quest is obsessive and their pursuits arcane. No, not hobbits. These are the strange teenage creatures who swear by the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. For such fanatics, the world première tomorrow of Peter Jackson's film version of *The Lord of the Rings*—or rather the first instalment of a cinematic trilogy—is an event of dizzying, almost cosmic significance. Tolkien himself auctioned off the film rights to his great work in 1968, five years before his death, for £10,000, or slightly under a tenner a page. A cartoon version of the book was released in 1978, and found severely wanting by Tolkien fans and critics alike. The author's son, Christopher, has already signalled his disapproval of Jackson's effort. But that will not deter the hordes of spotty obsessives, most of whom were not born when his father died, who will swarm to see their holy writ made real on the big screen. The second and third instalments, which have already been filmed in the director's homeland, New Zealand, will follow between now and 2003.

The Tolkien cult is perhaps the most spectacular example of unintended consequences in literary history. The author, a linguist of genius, hoped to create from the building blocks of ancient folklore a gargantuan Christian fable, which would express the message of his Catholic faith through the metaphor of Frodo Baggins mythical quest to cast a ring of unspeakable power into Mount Doom. In this endeavour, he competed with his fellow "Inklings", the group of Oxford intellectuals which met during the 1940s in C.S. Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College and at the Eagle and Child pub. Lewis tried twice to produce the definitive work of Christian fiction, in the Narnia chronicles for children, and his science fiction trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. But it was Tolkien—or "Tolly" as his fellow Oxonians called him—who was to produce the real block-buster, the first volume of which was published in 1954. By the time of his death, fifty million people had read *The Lord of the Rings* in 25 languages, seduced by its brew of strange creatures, magical incantations and gripping narrative. In handing out this passport to Middle Earth, Tolkien had one clear intention, which was to proselytise his faith. "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work," he wrote to Robert Murray, a Jesuit priest, in 1953. "The religious element is absorbed into the story and symbolism."

Which is as maybe. Unfortunately for Tolkien, that was not what consumed his readers at all. Already in the Sixties, the trilogy had become a key text for hippies, who saw in its fantasy world a sort of intellectual acid trip and an inspiration to dress up even more absurdly Kitsch T-shirts declared: "Tolkien is Hobbit-forming", and "Gandalf for President". The author recoiled from his growing cohort of unwashed middle class devo-

tees, dismissing them as a “deplorable cultus”. It is a mercy, therefore, that Tolkien has not been around to see how his great work has been quarried since. It was perhaps inevitable that such a successful book would become a massively lucrative franchise. In the half-century since the final instalment of the trilogy, *The Return of the King*, was published, a steady stream of Tolkien apocrypha has appeared: the quality of the material has declined, but the commercial demand for anything written by the master has not. The only reason that Tolkien’s shopping lists have not been published is that nobody has been able to find them—yet. The new cinematic trilogy has been financed to the tune of £210 million and every kind of *Lord of the Rings* merchandise imaginable has been imagined: jewellery, statues, mugs, tins, toys, keychains. “It’s just a wowser of a franchise,” according to the new film’s executive producer, Robert Shaye. The rings have indeed proved more “precioussss” than even Tolkien’s deformed creature Gollum could have imagined. The author—as his son clearly believes—would doubtless have found this commercialisation appalling. But there are no words—not even in Elvish—for what he would have made of his fans today. *The Lord of the Rings* was meant to be a devotional work, an inspiration to religious valour. Instead, it has spawned a vast moronic subculture of computer games, penny dreadful sword-and-sorcery novels, and unspeakable heavy metal music. It was meant to be a book for the chapel; but its spiritual home has ended up as the video arcade.

The archetypal Tolkien fan today is not a tweedy undergraduate sucking precociously on a pipe as he contemplates the allegorical significance of Frodo and his fellow hobbits, the good wizard Gandalf and the rings themselves. Instead, he is likely to be a spotty teenager wearing a black T-shirt with an iron-on transfer celebrating the latest heavy rock band. He will spend most daylight hours in his bedroom, a shrine to arrested development, the curtains drawn, in front of a flickering computer screen giving him access to thousands of Tolkien-inspired websites, many of them subliterate. He will devote hours to video games with names like *The Forest of Fear*, *Bilbo Slider Puzzle*, *War in Middle Earth* and *The Hobbit Software Adventure*. By night, the Tolkien fan will gather with his fellow inadequates to play “Dungeons and Dragons”, or one of the many other fatuous “role-playing” games which plagiarise the world of *The Lord of the Rings* with their dwarves, wizards and interminable quests. While their classmates are chasing their first girlfriends, these groups of emotional hobbits will be chasing trolls and rolling special dice in games which can last days and days. Their parents will fret that they are not drinking, smoking, or pursuing the opposite sex.

In the background, an obscure rock group will play loudly. Rivendell, Arathorn, Marillion, Morgoth, Gandalf, Isengard, Minas Tirith—the list

of groups who take their inspiration directly from Middle Earth is depressingly long. One particularly inane website currently asks the pressing question: “J.R.R. Tolkien—A Metal pioneer?” It is a grim posthumous fate for a scholar who could speak Latin, Greek and Gothic at school and became professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford to be remembered as the founding father of the most uncultured music ever created. In the minds of his followers today, Gandalf’s staff has transformed itself into an electric guitar.

And yet Tolkien has only himself to blame for this horrible outcome. The world he created is so complete in every detail, so magically different to our own, that it presents an irresistible refuge to the nerdish and the socially dysfunctional. The misfits of Planet Earth find themselves warmly welcome in Middle Earth. They fail at the school disco but prosper in the Shire, home of the hobbits. They mumble in English, but speak boldly in Elvish. And once they have read *The Lord of the Rings* (perhaps the only work of literature they will ever read) they can happily devote the remainder of their teenage years—and beyond—to the woeful imitations which line the shelves of science fiction bookshops and to the computer games inspired, explicitly or otherwise, by Tolkien. Most teenage boys in this country want to be Robbie Williams or David Beckham, heroes of the pop charts or the football pitch. A small, reclusive minority wish they were Frodo Baggins. Yes, they are deeply *nimba*—that is, in Tolkien’s Elvish, deeply sad. On the other hand, they are also deeply harmless. Awash with Clearasil, this modern-day fellowship of the ring begins its latest quest, to the gloomy depths of the local cinema: one Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

---

### **Do Anti-Semitism Charges Against Tolkien Ring True?**

— *The following piece by Craig Bird appeared in the N.J. Jewish News on November 29, 2001. Mr. Bird writes:*

The “discoverer” of Middle-earth and the source of the imminent block-buster movie *The Fellowship of the Ring* was a lot of things—many of them contradictory. The erudite professor of philology and expert in Norse languages wrote books about dragons and trolls and elves and wizards. The devout Roman Catholic purged any mention of Christianity from the 500,000 pages of his epic, *The Lord of the Rings*.

The unrepentant monarchist (“Give me a king whose chief interest in life is stamps, railways, or race horses; and who has the power to sack his Vizier if he does not like the cut of his trousers”) became an icon of the



1960s counterculture and his literary themes enlisted to encourage drug use and free love. The fiercely loyal Englishman who wasn't sure the Americans were any better than the Soviets is more popular and intellectually respected in the United States than in his own country (but arguably even more wildly popular in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics). But as Peter Jackson's cinematic trilogy based on *The Lord of the Rings* unfurls over the next two years (the December release of *The Fellowship of the Ring* will be followed by *The Two Towers* in 2002 and *The Return of the King* in 2003) and adds significantly to the millions of his existing fans, some will ask: Was J.R.R. Tolkien anti-Semitic? Since there are no religious designations or distinctions of any kind, including Christian, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the answer must come from other sources. Most troubling for many is Tolkien's love for and use of the Norse pagan myths—the same ones the Nazis (and many present-day white supremacists) turned to for inspiration. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church of his era (he was born in 1892), which he loved so fiercely, was known to harbor many with anti-Jewish sentiments. In a 1971 BBC radio interview two years before he died, he was asked if the different races in *The Lord of the Rings* represent specific characteristics, “the elves wisdom, the dwarves craftsmanship, men husbandry, and battle, and so forth.” “I didn't intend it, but when you've got these people on your hands you've got to make them different, haven't you?” he replied. “. . . The dwarves of course are quite obvious; wouldn't you say that in many ways they remind you of the Jews? Their words are Semitic obviously, constructed to be Semitic. The Hobbits are just rustic English people.”

That well may be his only recorded comment linking Jews with *The Lord of the Rings*. The stereotype is there if one wants to use it. The dwarves' primary weakness, as revealed in the saga—to their own detriment as well as harm to the quest of *The Fellowship*—is a lust for gaining, protecting, and hoarding jewels and gold and silver. Therefore? Not much, most critics agree. It is obvious that each of the races of Middle-earth is a combination of strength and weaknesses, and each contributes negatively and positively. In fact it is the race of “men” who are the most given to evil. The racial distrust and bigotry of Lefolas, the elf, toward dwarves is matched prejudice-by-prejudice by the feelings of Gimli, the dwarf, toward elves. Yet it is these two who struggle toward and eventually reach a position of mutual respect and deepening friendship that models how different cultures and races should be able to get along.

Andrew O'Hehir, writing in *Salon* magazine last summer, agrees Tolkien “is the product of his background and era, like most of our inescapable prejudices” but insists, “At the level of conscious intention he

was not a racist or anti-Semite. Michael Martinez, a major authority on Tolkien on the Web at Suite 101.com, turns the he's-guilty-because-he-was-a-man-of-his-times inside out by noting that Tolkien's "times" included "living through two world wars and the 1960s" when the scholar would have been aware of the discussion and dissection that revealed the shallowness of anti-Semitism. "One would think" the stubbornly opinionated Tolkien "who expressed so much disapproval of his fellow white Englishmen" would have voiced his phobia about Jews somewhere, if he had one, Martinez says. "Instead in his letters we are treated to discussions of how the Orcs in the British army behave."

The best response comes from Tolkien himself. After Hitler came to power prior to World War II, the German government officially requested through Tolkien's publisher that he establish his racial purity so they could authorize a translation of *The Hobbit* (the prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*). The Oxford don, struggling financially to support his family, could have used the income from Third Reich sales. Instead, though Tolkien obviously is a Germanic name, he took the opportunity to remind the Nazis of the ludicrous pretension of racial purity. "Thank you for your letter. . . . I regret that I am not clear as to what you intend," he wrote. ". . . I am not of Aryan extraction: that is Indo-Iranian; as far as I am aware, none of my ancestors spoke Hindustani, Persian, Gypsy, or any related dialects. But if I am to understand that you are inquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people. . . ."

---

### On Moral Fiction

— *In the November 23-24, 2001 issue of The Wall Street Journal's European edition, Brian M. Carney explains why he believes Tolkien's fiction is superior to that of J.K. Rowling as a moral fable for our times. Mr. Carney writes:*

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* opened last weekend to record crowds in the U.S. and U.K., and similarly impressive turnouts as it opened across most of the Continent this week. Children on both sides of the Atlantic—and some adults too—have been turning out in huge numbers, dressed in wizards' cloaks and witches' hats, to see Harry ride a broom and fight evil.

The question of good and evil is one that has vexed the mind for ages. It has been a centerpiece of moral philosophy since at least Plato. In the *Republic*, one of Socrates' interlocutors argues forcefully that "justice" is simply what benefits those in charge, and the happiest man will be the

most perfectly evil one. This is deep water, and it may be a lot to ask a writer of what are basically children's stories to delve into a 2,000-year-old tradition of confusion on the question. But J.K. Rowling, as she is well aware to judge by how liberally she borrows from it, is writing in a tradition too. That tradition began with her compatriot, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, whose three-volume masterwork, *The Lord of the Rings*, is by coincidence coming to the silver screen next month. Thus Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins, Tolkien's protagonist, will soon not only be battling evil, but also each other, for the hearts and minds of a generation. If there is any justice in the world, Frodo the hobbit should win. It is not enough to say that Tolkien's is the better story, nor that Tolkien came first. No, the reason Tolkien deserves the laurel is that Tolkien conceived of fantasy writing as a medium for conducting moral thought experiments.

Don't get me wrong. *Harry Potter* is a delightful book, entertaining, imaginative and written with a wry sense of humour. What *Harry Potter isn't* is challenging. The problem with Potter—and perhaps the danger for its young readers—is not that Ms. Rowling's world is fantastical or outlandish, but rather that, morally speaking, it is so perfectly conventional. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, as the book was originally and more literately called, is a classic struggle of Good vs. Evil. Harry, of course, is Good, and the wizard Voldemort, who killed Harry's parents, is Evil. Why is Voldemort evil? Well, he wants to "take over," we learn, and he kills people. Harry is good because he's nice, and we can't help sympathizing with him, since Voldemort killed his parents and all. This is very straightforward stuff, and there's little to argue with in it. But there's also little to argue *for*.

Tolkien delves deeper, and borrows from the original philosophers to do so. When Socrates wanted to examine whether the just or unjust man was happier, he addresses the problem by way of a myth in which a man discovers a ring that allows him to become invisible, and so to commit terrible crimes at will and with impunity. Tolkien (belatedly) takes up Socrates' challenge in attempting to show that the man who uses the ring is worse off than the one who would destroy it. At the same time, he is not sanguine about man's ability to resist the temptation of absolute power. The difficulty of resisting the temptation to use evil means, even if one's ultimate intentions are good, form the heart of Tolkien's tale. Contrast this with Ms. Rowling's rather flip use of another great artifact of ancient legend, the philosopher's stone. Alchemists believed the stone would turn lead into gold. As an added bonus, it was also thought to confer eternal life. The conceit of Harry Potter is that such a stone has been made, and the bad guy wants it.

This is a setup worthy of Tolkien; indeed, it mimics it in vital respects. But Ms. Rowling's tale manages to bring to light none of the moral dilemmas or insights that the existence of the stone naturally suggests. It serves instead as a mere object, in the sense that the reader merely accepts as given that both sides want this thing. No particular importance is assigned to its capabilities, and Harry never shows any interest in or temptation about using it. He merely wants to keep it away from the Bad Guy, Voldemort. Once that's accomplished, the object simply drops out of the story, like some token at the end of a video game.

Thus great and important moral themes—mortality, wealth, power—are suggested but never truly engaged. In Tolkien's world the temptation of evil is one that all, or nearly all, of his characters must confront. The argument of Tolkien's tale—which is controversial, to be sure—is that while intentions matter, the *way* we act is far more important in moral terms than *why* we act. That is, Tolkien's story is meant to present a rebuttal to the idea that good ends can ever justify using evil means to accomplish them. That Tolkien, who wrote *The Lord of the Rings* during the war and published it shortly after, saw this as a message for his times was made plain in his famous foreword to the second edition. When the books first came out, many advanced the theory that Tolkien's tale of the good guys in the West battling aggressive evil in the East was a parable for World War II. Tolkien savaged this analogy, implying that, by compromising with Stalin in Europe and using the atomic bomb against the Japanese to end the war, the Allies had failed to live up to the standards set by his fictitious allies. In our world, Tolkien concluded, referring to the diminutive, earthy creatures at the centre of his tale, "Hobbits . . . would not have survived even as slaves."

To mention the war, of course, is to remind ourselves that Tolkien was writing in perilous times indeed, during and immediately after World War II, whereas Ms. Rowling's writing, begun while on the dole in Britain in the 1990s, reflects the greater comfort and apparent security of the pre-Sept. 11 world. Times have changed, however, and if the need to confront and to understand evil could have been doubted before, it certainly cannot now. We no longer have the luxury of treating evil lightly. Just as the emergence of Nazism and Stalinism in the 1930s caught the West unawares, so we too must shake off our moral complacency. This may seem a heavy burden to place on what is, after all, basically children's fiction. But moral fatuousness in fiction is not merely a sin of omission. By encouraging simplistic and ultimately untenable ideas of good and evil, it encourages moral cynicism when the world fails to fit into the moral cate-

*News and Comments*

gories of naughty and nice. Now that we have come face to face with profound evil in a way we hoped never to have to, the attempt to understand what drives men to evil has become an urgent one. Tolkien, who was unquestionably a writer for his times, is also the better choice for ours.



Porlock Vale, Somerset

Please remember *The Chesterton Review* and the work of the G.K. Chesterton Institute in your will. The new Chesterton Institute will need your support, and a bequest would be an effective way of providing that help.

**Our address is:**

The Chesterton Institute  
Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey 07079,  
and The G.K. Chesterton Institute  
Box 249, Battleford, Saskatchewan S0M 0E0



# Letters

## “The Timeliness of *The Lord of the Rings*”

As the first segment of the movie adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* opens across the United States, post-September 11th audiences will find the themes raised by its original creator, J.R.R. Tolkien, to be highly, perhaps even eerily, relevant. Tolkien, who served in the Somme during World War One, began writing what was to be a sequel to *The Hobbit* in 1937. By 1949, he had completed most of *The Lord of the Rings*, though it was not published until 1954. During the years Tolkien was writing his epic, his country experienced its own series of bombing attacks on civilian targets, attacks which came from an outside force which many were to come to label as the ultimate evil.

Many other parallels between Tolkien’s story and recent events can be drawn. Early in the story, Frodo becomes reluctantly involved in a conflict of global proportions, a conflict which he was not seeking, but which was thrust upon him. Through no fault or actions of his own, Frodo then becomes the bearer of a ring of power which must be destroyed. He asks the wizard Gandalf, “Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?” Gandalf has no real answer as to why he was chosen, but only affirms that Frodo has indeed been called to take on the quest, and that given this call, he must use “such strength and heart and wits” as he has.

Tom Shippey, Tolkien’s successor at Oxford and the author of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, has noted that Frodo’s mission might be referred to as an anti-quest, as opposed to a quest, because its purpose is not to find some treasure or healing balm, but to get rid of something. Its accomplishment will bring merely a return to the way things ordinarily should be, to the way things were. And even if Frodo is successful, things will never be quite the same, for something has been irretrievably lost. The antagonists in *The Lord of the Rings* may also hold a resonance for American movie goers. The chief force of the evil in the story, Sauron, never appears in any scene, but is always a dark presence in

---

On the edge of Epping Forest, Essex

the background. It is from him that all the lesser emissaries of evil come. Yet as we are told at the council of Elrond, “Nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so.”

Sauron, like his agents—the Ringwraiths, the orcs, and even Gollum—was once good, but has perverted the good in himself and turned it to evil. And, as Paul Kocher points out in his book *Master of Middle-Earth*, this evil is always a diminution. The orcs are perverted elves; the Ringwraiths were once proud and great mortal men; Gollum began as a gentle hobbit-like creature. While the orcs and Gollum seek evil largely for personal gain, Sauron and the Ringwraiths—his “most terrible servants”—commit their evil acts for power and domination, and also simply for evil’s sake. Frodo is stabbed with the knife of one of the Ringwraiths, and Gandalf later points out that had the splinter not been removed, Frodo would have become a wraith himself “under the domination of the Dark Lord.”

A somewhat uneasy multi-national alliance—the fellowship of the ring—is formed from a widely diverse group of races to combat the evil forces arrayed against them in Middle-earth. The members of this company must struggle themselves to keep the means that they use to accomplish their purpose from perverting their originally good intentions, to keep from becoming as evil as those they fight against. The fellowship finally comes apart amidst the mounting pressures of the conflict and the conflicting goals of its different members. In the end, the task of the fellowship is accomplished, though not without great cost. And when Frodo and his fellow hobbits return to the Shire, they find that the worst is still to come. After being cast out of his own home, the evil wizard Saruman has gone before them to ruin theirs. When Sam sees what has become of the once peaceful Shire, he bursts into tears, exclaiming, “This is worse than Mordor. Much worse in a way. It comes home to you, as they say; because it is home, and you remember it before it was all ruined.” Thus begins the final task, that of restoring and rebuilding their homeland.

Perhaps paradoxically, Tolkien’s great fantasy holds many penetrating insights about the complexities of living in the real world, about the nature of power and the nature of evil, insights that are as compelling today as when they were written sixty years ago, insights that resound even more clearly since the tragedies at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Near the start of his undertaking Frodo is leaving home, and expresses his dismay to Gildor, an elf whom he meets early in his travels. Frodo laments, “I knew that danger lay ahead of course; but I did not ex-



pect to meet it in our own Shire. Can't a hobbit walk from the Water to the River in peace?" The answer that Gildor gives him is a timely one in light of recent events: "The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot forever fence it out."

Devin Brown  
Asbury College

\* \* \*

"A Child's-eye View of *The Lord of the Rings*" \*

The task of reading me stories often fell to my father. Stories in our house were never restricted simply to bed time; we read whenever there was a pause in the rush of day to day activities. When I was not being read to I was often spending my time acting out the stories of the day before. While we read *Treasure Island*, my father would put on the character of Sick Dick with his outrageous pirate's accent and stumbling ways. I would inevitably be the hero, sometimes a character from the book, or more often just myself, a hero saving the day for Jim and Squire Trelawney (but mostly just laughing at Sick Dick's antics).

It was *The Hobbit* that began something completely different from the casual bedtime story. It began what was to turn into an obsession of mine. The notion of another world filled with heroism, magic and adventure drew me in. I wanted to immerse myself entirely in J.R.R. Tolkien's world of Middle Earth. When we reached the last pages of *The Hobbit* I was devastated and elated. The notion that a book could enthrall me that deeply was wonderful, but it had ended. I wanted desperately for there to be more. I did not ask for *The Hobbit* to be read again as I had for many of my other favorite books. It was not just the book that I loved but the world. I wanted nothing more than to return to that land of possibilities and visions. For a while I was left to my own imaginings of Middle Earth and its inhabitants.

When I was about six, perhaps a year after we had completed *The Hobbit*, I sat taking bath. I remember how thick the air was with steam, and how I sat, bored as always with scrubbing off the dirt in which I saw no offense. As I was about to climb laboriously out of the delicious heat of the water, my father came in carrying a fairly nondescript tan book. The book looked entirely boring to me, perhaps a tedious grown-up book of theology and philosophy with no hint of a plot. But then my father began to read *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J.R.R. Tolkien. I started from my place in the bathtub. I could not believe that there was more, that Middle Earth continued. I was indignant that this book of revelations had been

concealed from me. Nothing could have been dearer to me than this book. I settled back with joy to listen to the tale unfold. As my father read, I began to find companionship in the characters of Middle Earth. I idolized them and wished I could be as they were.

After numerous readings and rereadings of the *Fellowship of the Rings* trilogy, I was living in Middle Earth. I believed I could talk to elves and had an invisible sword that would materialize “in my direst need”. The characters of Middle Earth were my friends and heroes. I would talk endlessly to my family about Middle Earth. I would quote ballads and fragments of elvish speech from my childhood bible. I believed in a code of duty and chivalry that I had to follow in order to become an elf, or at the very least a hero. When I first went to school, I would often sit away from the other children who played their games of house and Ninja Turtles. I felt as though I would insult the friends I had in the elves if I chose to play with human kids. Slowly, the importance of my Middle Earth friends was suppressed. As I got older I realized that no one else my age had imaginary friends or aspirations to ride into battle carrying the standard of the King. Middle Earth simply ceased to apply to my life. I never denied my childhood heroes, but I pushed them to the back of my mind. I did not want them to bother me as I grew up.

Some time ago I picked up my old and battered trilogy and began to read the appendix, something I had never done. At last I read of the deaths of my childhood heroes. Though I had long since given up my ideas of friendships with elves and invisible swords, I have always struggled to retain the ability to imagine and believe. I still do, in a way, believe in my heroes of Middle Earth, but as I read of the grass growing over funeral mounds with the leaves of the mallorn drifting down, I was able to cry, and to understand how, as the last shreds of my childhood drifted away, my heroes of the past stood firm. Their courage, nobility, and ultimate humanity had finally transferred into my world. They became, as ideas, more real than my fantasies had ever been.

Nell Champoux  
Sweet Briar College  
Virginia

\* This letter was first written as an essay on the subject of “What Novel Has Had the Most Impact On You and Why?” At that time, the author was attending high school in Northfield, Massachusetts.

\* \* \*

“The Re-Scheduled Irish Conference”

I am very glad to have confirmation of the re-scheduled Irish Conference, “Chesterton’s Ireland: Then and Now”, for the weekend of 13-15 September, 2002. The Conference comes at what is a very painful time in the life of the Church in Ireland, as well as in the United States. We greatly need the voice of Chesterton at this time, a voice that was always realistic, and yet full of hope, breathing that “joy and peace in believing” of which St. Paul speaks. I hope that, by September, the storm will have abated somewhat. Though painful, this can be also a time of purification for the Church, a time of penitence and deep renewal. I am sure that the Irish Conference will make an important contribution to that renewal and I wish it much success. As the date approaches I look forward to taking part in the Conference and, in the meantime I assure readers of the *Review* of my kind personal regards and my good wishes.

Cardinal Cahal B. Daly  
Ard Mhacha  
Belfast

\* \* \*

“Brother Gilbert’s Pardon”

When I read John Cooney’s article “No Chesterton Please, We’re Irish” (November 2001, pp. 550-552) my first thought was “Why on Earth was this man invited to the Conference in the first place?” Unless I misread his first book, *No News Is Bad News* (Veritas, Dublin, 1974) he is not Irish but Scottish. I understand that he is a Scot who believes in Home Rule for Scotland but not for Ulster. How these old Catholic prejudices do cling on! His argument is that because, historically, Ulster stands to Leinster, Munster and Connaught as Scotland does to England and Wales, a “United Ireland” is an English idea! However when I came to his tasteless attack on Chesterton as “a windbag convert to English (sic) Catholicism,” two poems immediately sprang to mind. Mr. Cooney will, I am sure, approve the first merely because it *is* by an Irishman, W.B. Yeats:

Once when midnight smote the air,  
Eunuchs ran through Hell and met  
On every crowded street to stare  
Upon great Juan riding by:  
Even like these to rail and sweat  
Staring upon his sinewy thigh.

Though he might not care as much for the second, it is given with apologies to G.K. Chesterton:

If Brother Gilbert pardoned Brother Flea,  
There still seems need of such strange charity,  
Seeing he is, for all his gay goodwill,  
Bitten by funny little creatures still.

Anthony Cooney  
Liverpool, England

\* \* \*

### “Inner Coherence as Strength”

I am writing to express my appreciation for the consistently fine writing, editing, and selection of articles in the *Chesterton Review*. “Consistency” is an apt descriptive term for the *Review*, which, in my many years of reading it, has never suffered a moment’s confusion as to its identity or its mission. This inner coherence is a tremendous strength. So many well-intentioned contemporary organizations, which undoubtedly do some good works, are crippled by the absence of a coherent, articulable understanding of why they do what they do. Without such an internal framework, it is almost inevitable to fall into confusion and to end up promoting both soup kitchens and abortions.

A vague desire to embrace a diversity of views, without committing oneself to any particular one of them, appears to be the only overriding principle informing many contemporary publications and eleemosynary institutions. Where “diversity” is not the guide, one generally finds that an unexplored and crude utilitarianism, or even more sentimentality, provides the only basis for making enormously significant moral decisions. The intellectual confusion beginning to emerge in popular discussions of cloning and embryonic manipulation is another manifestation of the same muddled thinking. We may expect wildly inconsistent statements of position to emerge on these topics. Without intellectual rigour and a courageous adherence to principle of the kind found in the pages of the *Review*, one is truly adrift, and liable to land almost anywhere.

We just need to arrange for the large body of well-intentioned, but unreflective folk to read the *Chesterton Review*! Many thanks again for all your work, which is enormously encouraging to your readers.

John Gregory Odom  
Hahira, Georgia

\* \* \*

“A Message from Purgatory”

In the August 2001 number of the *Review*, Daniel H. Strait reviewed Stephen Greenblatt’s *Hamlet in Purgatory*. In chapter three, he notes, Greenblatt’s primary focus is on a popular fourteenth-century Middle English text *The Gast of Gy*, which tells of a remarkable event that took place, so the legend goes, in 1323 in the village of Alais in southern France.” Now, Alais, or, in current spelling Alès, a sub-prefecture in the Department of the Gard, is a good deal more than a village, and the story of the ghost of Guy in its original form, a good deal more than a legend. Fr. Herbert Thurston, SJ examined the question in *The Ghost of Guy*, published in the *Dublin Review*, July 1921 and collected in *Ghosts and Poltergeists*, edited after Fr. Thurston’s death by Fr. J.H. Crehan, SJ, and published by Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, as a *Gateway Edition* paperback in 1954. A work, *De Spiritu Guidonis*, exists in a number of manuscripts and was translated into many languages, including Catalan, Swedish and Welsh. These were all expanded and much elaborated versions of the story, which nobody now could suppose had any historical value.

There is, however, a short and sober contemporary account submitted to Pope John XXII at Avignon, some forty miles from Alais, of which the Dominican Bernard de Ribera sent a copy to Bishop Guy of Majorca with a covering letter dated 23 April 1324. The statement, given in the first person by John Goby, the Dominican Prior of Alais, explains that on Christmas Day 1323 he and three companions went as requested by the principal inhabitants of Alais to the house of Guy de Torno, where for eight days since his death a voice had been heard in the bedroom where he died. Goby was initially sceptical and had the premises thoroughly searched to make sure that there was no imposture. The voice declared that he was indeed Guy de Torno, that he was at present in Purgatory, and that he could be helped by prayers, especially Masses. An inquiry conducted by the Dominican Archbishop of Aix and the officers of King Charles IV of France confirmed Goby’s account in every respect.

Muriel Smith  
Maidenhead  
Berkshire, England

\* \* \*

“The Catholic Teachings of George W. Bush”

I am writing to ask a question about the principle of subsidiarity as the idea is interpreted by Catholic neo-Conservatives, and, if Franklin

Foer is right (August 2001, “News and Comments”, pp. 401-405), as the idea has been apparently adopted by President George W. Bush. I have long suspected that the neo-Conservative definition of subsidiarity is fundamentally mistaken because they apply the principle exclusively to the political sphere. According to Yves Simon’s 1940 Aquinas Lecture and book *The Nature and Functions of Authority* (Marquette University Press, Milwaukee:1948), the hierarchical order of subsidiarity arises from the tension between the principle of authority and the principle of autonomy. He defines these principles in the following ways: The principle of authority means that “wherever the welfare of the community requires a common action, the unity of that common action must be assured by the higher organs of that community.” The principle of autonomy means that “wherever a task can be satisfactorily achieved by the initiative of the individual or that of small social units, the fulfilment of that task must be left to the initiative of the individual or to that of small social units.”

My understanding is that subsidiarity applies to the economic sphere as much as it does to the political sphere. This view finds support in the social encyclicals where the term is applied to both spheres of activity. When subsidiarity is applied to economic life, it results in a Distributist emphasis on small, independent production, just as Distributist-minded social thinkers such as Jefferson have always said. My concern with the neo-Conservative interpretation of subsidiarity is its equivalence to the thinking of *laissez-faire* Capitalists. When subsidiarity is limited exclusively to the political sphere, the conglomerated market forces and entities are left with no competent authority to govern them, since local governments are scarcely able to do so. Historically, the Welfare State developed as a response to this problem. Governmental and market conglomerations represent problems that must be addressed simultaneously.

I would be interested in knowing whether or not other readers of the *Review* share my view.

Michael J. Trevelline  
Washington, D.C.

\* \* \*

#### “Small Explanations”

I was appalled when I read the John Cooney piece in the *Tablet* last fall, especially since that periodical had been supportive of your efforts in the past. But the subsequent publication of the responses by Strat Caldecott, Mary Kenny, Sheridan Gilley and Dermot Quinn (November,

## Letters

2001 issue) restored sanity to the situation. Nevertheless, the episode was distressing, and led me to conclude that although much is made of the division between “liberal” and “conservative” Catholics, the real problem is with *divisive* Catholics. When argued in the proper spirit, disagreements between “progressives” and “traditionalists” are not harmful, and sometimes open new lines of thought which prove fruitful. On the other hand, divisive Catholics are destructive. They declare their opinions are incontestable, and savage or patronize anyone who ventures to disagree. It is not a new problem for the Church. See Rom. 16: 17-18; 1 Cor. 1: 10-13; 3: 3-4; 2 Tim. 2: 23; among other scriptural references. What saddens one is the absence of humility in these “ultras”, because one remembers the reflection of a French nun that the only virtue which will not be found in hell is humility.

Beyond that personal failing, the ultras also weaken the Church by persuading fellow Catholics to give undue importance to the political dimension of Catholic existence. That impoverishes the life Our Lord provides for us in His Church. One is reminded of of GKC’s insight in *Orthodoxy*: “. . . the strongest and most unmistakable mark of madness is this combination between a logical completeness and a spiritual contraction. The lunatic’s theory explains a large number of things, but it does not explain them in a large way.”

Vincent Whelan  
San Diego, California



Spring in Herefordshire

# The Chesterton Institute

*President:* Ian Boyd, C.S.B.

*Hon. Chairman:* Cardinal Emmett Carter

*Chairman:* Hugh MacKinnon

*Directors:* Daniel Callam, C.S.B., Jeff Nelson and Dermot Quinn

## *Members of the Advisory Board*

Dale Ahlquist	Elizabeth Fox-Genovese	George Marlin
Hadley Arkes	Robert George	Victor Milione
Conrad Black	Frederick Hill	Rabbi David Novak
Mary Ellen Bork	Paul Johnson	Michael Novak
George Bull	Michael Joyce	Robert Royal
Ted Byfield	Annette Kirk	James V. Schall, S.J.
Msgr. Eugene Clark	Judith Lea	Paul Akio Sawada
Edwin J. Feulner, Jr.	Lewis Lehrman	

---

## *Board of the Chesterton Institute in the United Kingdom*

*Hon. President:* Aidan Mackey; *Director:* Stratford Caldecott;

*President:* Ian Boyd, C.S.B.; *Chairman:* Russell Sparkes

*(The Institute is Registered Charity Number 801608)*

### *Trustees:*

Lord David Alton	Stratford Caldecott	Peter Nockles
Ian Boyd, C.S.B.	Peter Garrett	John Saward
George Bull O.B.E.	Gregory Glazov	Russell Sparkes
Lynette Burrows	Malcolm Guite	

The Institute in the UK operates through the Centre for Faith & Culture, Plater College, Pullens Lane, Oxford OX3 0DT, directed by Stratford Caldecott (caldecott@plater.ac.uk).

The journal of the Centre, *Second Spring*, is published twice a year by the Chesterton Institute.

*Editors:* Stratford and Léonie Caldecott, Philip and Carol Zaleski.

---

## *The Chesterton Review: The Journal of the G.K. Chesterton Institute*

*Editor:* Ian Boyd, C.S.B.; *Assistant Editor:* Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

*Managing Editor:* Sister Mary Loyola; *Business Manager:* Jane Morris

### *Editorial Board:*

William F. Blissett	Peter Hunt	John Saward
Stratford Caldecott	Philip Jenkins	Thomas Storck
John Coates	Msgr. Richard Liddy	Daniel Strait
Owen Dudley Edwards	Race Mathews	Ewa Thompson
David W. Fagerberg	Stephen Medcalf	Gertrude M. White
Sheridan Gilley	Isobel Murray	
Leo A. Hetzler, C.S.B.	Dermot Quinn	

---

## *Gilbert! The Magazine of G.K. Chesterton*

*Publisher:* John Peterson; *Editor:* Ronald McCloskey

*Managing Editor:* Dale Ahlquist, President American Chesterton Society

*Art Director:* Ted Schluenderfritz

*Editorial Assistants:* Denis Cullinan and Kevin O'Reilly



# CONTENTS

IAN BOYD, CSB . . . . .	Introduction
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	A Great Man and a Myth
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	Education by Fairy Tales
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	The Ballad of the White Horse
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	The Ethics of Fairy-Tales
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	A Letter to a Child
ANONYMOUS . . . . .	A Morning Prayer
G.K. CHESTERTON . . . . .	The Court of Camelot
STRATFORD CALDECOTT . . . . .	The Horns of Hope: J.R. Tolkien and the Heroism of Hobbits
OWEN DUDLEY EDWARDS . . . . .	Gollum, Frodo and the Catholic Novel
C.S. LEWIS . . . . .	Tolkien's <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>
CLIVE TOLLEY . . . . .	Tolkien's "Essay on Man": a look at Mythopoeia
VERLYN FLIEGER . . . . .	A Cautionary Tale
DWIGHT LONGENECKER . . . . .	The Little Way Through Middle Earth
LÉONIE CALDECOTT . . . . .	Film Review
PETER MILWARD, SJ . . . . .	Tolkien, the Ring and I
OWEN LEE, CSB . . . . .	Wagner and the Wonder of Art
OWEN LEE, CSB . . . . .	Wise Words for University Graduands

Reviews

News and Comments

Letters



PRINTED IN CANADA

Printed by Marian Press Ltd.

