

## Margaret Guise

Review of *Tolkien among the Moderns* edited by Ralph C. Wood (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015)

This excellent and thought-provoking collection of essays may be recommended not only to those who are already appreciative of Tolkien's oeuvre, but also to those who may be inclined to question whether the fictional world he created – replete with hobbits, elves and wizards - can have any bearing upon, or interrogate in any meaningful way, the greater philosophical and existential questions with which humankind is faced. The writers of each of these essays share the conviction that, far from being dismissed as charmingly arcane but ultimately irrelevant tales, Tolkien's major texts, most notably *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, may be placed 'among the moderns', and can be brought into fruitful dialogue with the work of some of the most significant philosophical and literary exponents of our time. This generic contention is cogently articulated throughout, although each essay is distinctive in its choice of interlocutor and in the exploration of particular themes. Just a few will be highlighted here, before proceeding to consider in greater depth the chapter by Scott Moore, 'The Consolations of Fantasy: J. R. R. Tolkien and Iris Murdoch', which is likely to prove of especial interest to readers of this journal.

Germaine Paulo Walsh's essay, 'Philosophic Poet. J. R. R. Tolkien's Modern Response to an Ancient Quarrel', revisits the dispute between poetry and philosophy as reported in Book 10 of Plato's *The Republic*, investigating two Socratic charges: first, that poetry, construed as *mimesis*, offers lies masquerading as truth (rather than seeking truth *in se*, which is understood as the task of philosophy); second, that poetry undermines morality through its appeal to desire rather than reason. With regard to the first charge, Walsh suggests that, paradoxically, it is the very vastness and complexity of Tolkien's poetic legendarium which undermines any totalizing claim to truth. It is made clear, for example, that the sagas which constitute the early history of the elves have been subject to alteration and corruption as they were handed down from one generation to the next, and Tolkien, particularly in *The Silmarillion*, provides variant redactions of the same narrative in order to highlight that no single version can provide a definitive account of the events described. In this way Tolkien not only calls into question the possibility of interpretation-free history, but also points insistently to the limitations of language itself, and of the human mind of which it is the product. The discerning reader of Tolkien's works is thus encouraged to understand that poetry such as this is not 'masquerading' as truth, but rather has a significant role in exposing the finitude of language, and thereby in calling into question the nature of truth itself.

With regard to the second charge, that poetry should be regarded as morally suspect due to its capacity to present vice in a desirable or attractive guise, Walsh posits that Tolkien takes pains to present his fictional world as a moral universe in which characters who repeatedly choose evil become not only inwardly, but also outwardly, repellent. Characters, on the other hand, who consistently choose the good are shown as growing in wisdom, compassion, prudential reasoning and, above all, in an increasing capacity for contemplative awareness of the beauty of creation, and of their part as created beings within it. Tolkien's vision in this respect, clearly inspired as it is by a Christianized adaptation of the Platonist developmental

schema of *theoria*, avoids overtly theistic references, whilst remaining firmly committed to theological and ethical imperatives.

The question which then arises is whether this ostensibly ‘orthodox’ theological commitment renders Tolkien’s work incapable of articulation with approaches taken by the major philosophers and ethicists of our times. Tolkien himself is reputed to have ‘read very little from his own century’,<sup>1</sup> yet it is the contention of other writers within this collection that his fiction may be interpreted as both resonating with, and also challenging, the assumptions of apparently more radical thinkers.

Peter Candler’s chapter on ‘Tolkien or Nietzsche; Philology and Nihilism’ is an indicative example, as is Ralph Wood’s essay on ‘Tolkien and Postmodernism’. Of particular interest, perhaps, is Joseph Tadie’s essay (“‘That the World Not be Usurped’: Emmanuel Levinas and J. R. R. Tolkien on Serving the Other as Release from Bondage’) on the links which may be established between Tolkien and Emmanuel Levinas in relation to an attentive response to ‘the Other’, and the inherent role which this plays in self-transcendence. Tadie points to Levinas’s description of the unreflective ‘usurpation’ of the world through self-satisfied concupiscence, and the ‘natural’ wish to remain contentedly *chez soi* by rejecting alterity through the absorption of the Other into the Same. Levinas’s insistence upon the illimitability of the ethical demand to embrace transcendence through engagement with the holiness of the face-to-face continues to exercise a prophetic challenge, not only with regard to Nietzschean construals of the will-to-power, but also to those (which is perhaps to say the majority?) who are tempted to set aside or ignore alterity – and thereby remain in bondage to misconstrued concepts of self-interest. Tadie perceptively indicates that both Tolkien and Levinas are inheritors, through their respective Catholic and Jewish communities, of the biblical prophetic tradition, and it is therefore not, perhaps, surprising that the themes of attention to, and care for, the Other as the route towards release from such bondage may be traced as much within Tolkienian narratives as within Levinasian discourse. Tadie suggests, for example, that Gandalf’s unexpected eruption into Bilbo’s comfortable and contented life within the Shire, and his ‘annunciation’ of the hobbit’s future mission, are accompanied precisely by the sense of shock, yet also of recognition, which characterizes the call of the Other to the Self. Initial demurral is followed by obedient response, as Bilbo responds to the call to abandon his familiar life *chez soi* and embarks, unprepared, upon ‘the Quest’ – a hazardous adventure, which will lead, *inter alia*, to the development of personal qualities and a self-transcendence of which he could not have imagined himself capable. Such moral growth is not confined to Bilbo. In the concluding section of this essay, Tadie highlights the Levinasian resonances which may be discerned in Gandalf’s thoughtful reply to Gimli the dwarf in relation to the part which he, Gandalf, had played in instigating the Quest:

I do not know the answer. For I have changed since those days [...] In those days I should have answered you with words like those I used with Frodo [...] [that] Bilbo

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<sup>1</sup> See P.M. Candler, Jr, ‘Tolkien or Nietzsche; Philology and Nihilism’ within Ralph C. Wood (ed), *Tolkien among the Moderns*, p.95.

was *meant* to find the Ring [...] And I was *meant* to guide you both [i.e. Frodo and Bilbo].<sup>2</sup>

More humble now with regard to his own role in the Quest, Gandalf, like Bilbo, has needed to be released from a complacent and over-confident ‘usurpation’ of the world. In Levinasian terms, he has been challenged by the epiphany of the face-to-face as experienced through his deeper encounters with the ‘otherness’ of others, including hobbits and dwarves, and has grown as a result. Levinas has been criticized by some for the anthropocentrism (and, indeed, androcentrism) of his discourse;<sup>3</sup> this ‘dialogue’ between his thought and that of Tolkien therefore yields particularly illuminating insights, since the concept of ‘otherness’ is extended, in Tolkien, to non-human, albeit fictional, beings.

Tadie’s essay also sheds light upon the dialectic between what Iris Murdoch would have termed ‘the Nice’ and ‘the Good’ – that is, the ethical imperative to abandon, if required, the broader and apparently safer path of comfort and familiarity in order to pass through the ‘strait gate’ of true virtue. It is therefore to the essay by Moore that we must now turn since this piece, in investigating the various categories and meanings of fantasy, also touches upon precisely the distinction between ‘niceness’ and ‘goodness’, which is inherent in much of Murdoch’s fiction, as well as her philosophy.

As Moore indicates, Murdoch was an admirer of Tolkien’s work, and the two writers were friends, although Murdoch and John Bayley were closer contemporaries of Tolkien’s son, Christopher. Murdoch is known particularly for her objection to certain types of fantasy which in her view offered a ‘false consolation’, and her novels are replete with characters whose egotistical, self-deceiving fantasizing (that of Charles Arrowby in *The Sea*, *The Sea* being a prime example) must be ‘punished’ or, to a greater or lesser extent, overcome. Her admiration for Tolkien’s ‘faerie’ universe could, therefore, seem surprising, until one begins, as Moore so cogently points out, to distinguish between the various forms and purposes of fantasy. Against Tolkien’s own insistence to the contrary, Murdoch suggested that his works should be categorized as exemplars of ‘imagination’ rather than ‘fantasy’, since it was the former, rather than the latter, which constituted ‘a kind of freedom, a renewed ability to perceive and express the truth’.<sup>4</sup>

Whether one agrees or not with such a hard and fast distinction between imagination and fantasy, it is clear that this enabled Murdoch to acknowledge, within the Tolkienian narratives, the serious moral endeavour which forms the background to the Quest undertaken by his range of fictional creatures. Hobbits such as Bilbo and Frodo are consistently presented with hard choices and learn through these to distinguish between pleasant and comforting ‘niceness’, and the demands of true virtue or ‘goodness’. Murdoch’s own novels

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<sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, adapted by D.A. Anderson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), p.369, cited in J. Tadie, “‘That the World Not be Usurped’”, p.238.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Llewelyn, ‘Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)’ in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley (eds), *Re-reading Levinas* (London: Athlone, 1991), pp.234-245.

<sup>4</sup> Iris Murdoch, ‘Art is the Imitation of Nature’ in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, Peter Conradi (ed), (New York: Penguin, 1999), p.255, cited in Moore, ‘The Consolations of Fantasy’, p.203.

(not least that which she entitled *The Nice and the Good*) contain many similar examples, in which certain characters are enabled to glimpse the vacuity of a merely peaceful, self-pleasing existence and, in some cases, decide to pursue a more virtuous and ultimately more fulfilling path. The latter eschew, in other words, the ‘false consolation’ which arises from egotistical day-dreaming and are rewarded with what Moore terms the ‘austere’ or more authentic consolation which finds its fulfilment in non-possessive love and the capacity to ‘see’ the truth: ‘It is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists.’<sup>5</sup>

Whereas, within the Tolkienian world, such liberation tends to be constitutive of, and integral to, eucatastrophe (the ‘happy ending’ which is expected within the genre of faerie story-telling), the outcomes for Murdochian characters are often less clear. Her vision, which is less overtly theological than that of Tolkien, is perhaps commensurately more austere in this respect – the Good must be embraced for its own sake, without hope of extrinsic reward – although there may be unexpected moments of grace in which characters find themselves ‘surprised by joy’.<sup>6</sup> A telling instance occurs in *The Sea, The Sea*, when Charles Arrowby, who is preparing to abandon his self-imposed retreat at Shruff End, spends a night by the sea-shore and is able at last to ‘see’ the ‘otherness’ and beauty of the created order:

I woke up and it was dawn. The billion billion stars had gone and the sky was a bland misty very light blue, a huge uniform over-arching cool yet muted brightness, the sun not yet risen [...] Then I saw below me, their wet doggy faces looking curiously upward, four seals, swimming so close to the rock that I could almost have touched them [...] And as I watched their play I could not doubt that they were beneficent beings come to visit me and bless me.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, then, this fine collection of essays contains much to enjoy, as well as to ponder. It will be appreciated by those who are already cognisant of the theological, philosophical and ethical depths inherent within Tolkien’s fictional world, but may also help persuade those who have been less certain of its merit to strike up, or renew, an acquaintance with Bilbo, Frodo, Gandalf and their companions. Readers of this journal will doubtless find the piece by Moore of especial interest, but will, perhaps, be intrigued, in addition, to see the way in which several typically Murdochian themes are embedded within the Tolkienian narratives. Above all, however, this is an important book, not only because it so persuasively sets Tolkien ‘among the moderns’ (and, indeed, to a certain extent among the postmoderns) and their concerns, but also because it invites us to engage once more in those challenges – the call to respond to the ethical imperative; the recognition of the demands of ‘the Good’ over ‘the Nice’; the need for attention to the Other, including the non-human Other – with which Tolkien himself, as well as Murdoch and each of the interlocutors included within this volume, so profoundly grappled.

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<sup>5</sup> Iris Murdoch, ‘On “God” and “Good”’ in *The Sovereignty of Good*, (London: Routledge, 1970), p.65, cited in Moore, ‘The Consolations of Fantasy’, p.213.

<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth, *Surprised by Joy*, 1815.

<sup>7</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, The Sea*, (1978); (London: Vintage Classics, 1999), pp.475-476.