Tolkien as a Post-War Writer

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

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In my book *The Road to Middle-earth* I attempted to set Tolkien in a professional context. Among that book's theses were the assertions that the major influence on Tolkien's fiction was his job as a professor of English language; that his creativity drew insistently on the texts and techniques he studied and taught lifelong; that viewed in this light he belonged to a long tradition of philologists who tried to work out from the history of often dead languages to a recreation of the lost literatures of those languages; that just as the philologist used the asterisk as a mark of the "reconstructed" word, and moved on from it to the reconstructed story or poem, so Tolkien had gone on from the *-word to the "lost tale" and eventually to a kind of "asterisk-reality"; and so on. The drive of these arguments was insistently historical. Not only did I try to set Tolkien within the history of his profession, that profession itself was also overwhelmingly concerned with history and with change. Overwhelmingly, but not quite entirely. Ever since Saussure it has been a commonplace that languages can be considered not only "diachronically", in the manner of the old philologists, but also "synchronically", i.e. as functioning systems existing at a particular moment. I believe then that in spite of the intention of my book mentioned above, there is a logic also in considering Tolkien's work, and especially his major work *The Lord of the Rings*, not just against the context of his life and learned inheritance, but also against the (at first sight perhaps adventitious) context of its moment of publication: in the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, 1954-55.

At that particular moment it is clear enough that Allen & Unwin, Tolkien's publishers, felt that they were taking a commercial risk and bringing out a work with few or no parallels (see Carpenter, 1977, pp. 214-16). In a sense they were absolutely correct. Yet looking back from what is now nearly a forty-year perspective, one can see that Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* were not quite as isolated in their nature and appeal as they must have seemed at the time. Indeed, from that perspective, it seems arguable that the major works of English fiction in the post-war decade were more like each other, and more like Tolkien, than critical orthodoxy would then or now accept. Among the unquestioned landmarks of the period were George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (published in 1949), together with his *Animal Farm* (1945); and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, published the same year as the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings*. Less unquestioned as a landmark, but still a work whose importance and popularity have grown steadily, was T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, published as a tetralogy with that title only in 1958, but with a more complex history than that single date suggests (see further below). To this I would add C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*, published in 1945. The named works by these five authors, Lewis, Orwell, Tolkien, Golding and White, seem to me to hang together in unexpected ways: they are all non-realistic works, whether one regards them as science fiction, fantasy, fable or parable (all descriptions which have been applied); and they are all books insistently marked by war, all works by writers who are "post-war" in more than an accidental or chronological sense.

One might ask, post-*which* war? It is often thought – and naturally so, when one considers such passages as the description of the Dead Marshes in *The Lord of the Rings* IV/2,[2] with its strong reminiscences of the destroyed landscapes and half-buried dead of the Flanders battlefields – that Tolkien is in essence a post-World War I writer. Before accepting this, one should consider a few dates and places. Of the five writers I have mentioned, Tolkien was the eldest: he was born in 1892, in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Lewis came next: 1898, Belfast. Orwell was born in 1903 in

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[2] Since there are so many editions in circulation, references to *The Lord of the Rings* are given where useful by book and chapter number. It will be remembered that there are two books in each of the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Bengal, White in 1906 in Bombay, and Golding in 1911 in Cornwall – the only one of these often self-consciously English writers to be native-born.[3] They were all in short quite old enough for one to expect the current of their novelistic careers to have shown itself by the outbreak of World War II, and perhaps for major works to have appeared. Actually all of them seem to have been either slow starters or slow finishers. Orwell did write and publish novels from 1935 on, but their interest for us now is mostly retrospective: we read back from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* because of that work almost alone. Lewis's first novel was *Out of the Silent Planet*, of 1938: it is the start of the trilogy completed by *That Hideous Strength*. Golding's first novel was *Lord of the Flies*, published when he was in his forties. White's career, meanwhile, is the most similar to Tolkien's. Like Tolkien, he had published a successful children's book, *The Sword in the Stone* of 1938, compare *The Hobbit* of 1937. Like Tolkien, he had gone on with a continuation of it, the tone of which turned increasingly more adult, more serious, and less immediately acceptable to his publishers. The second and third volumes of what was to become *The Once and Future King* came out in 1939 and 1940, but White's publishers (Collins) declined in 1941 to print the fourth and fifth volumes.[4] What eventually appeared as *The Once and Future King* in 1958 was a complex compromise, with the fifth volume omitted (eventually to appear posthumously as *The Book of Merlyn* from the University of Texas Press in 1977), but much of its contents subsumed into a new version of the first. Just as *The Lord of the Rings* took eighteen years to be written and appear (and still left room for posthumous additions), so White's work took twenty, with nearly twenty more before it appeared in full, if not as its author intended.

One could say then that all these writers of fiction became novelists relatively late (most obviously Tolkien and Golding, with no major creative works till they were in their forties). They were also perhaps not all natural writers, or writers to whom their craft came easily. Bernard Crick, Orwell's biographer, quotes a friend as saying of the young Orwell, "He wrote so badly. He had to teach himself writing . . . I remember one story that never saw the light of day . . . it began 'Inside the park, the crocuses were out . . .' Oh dear, I'm afraid we did laugh" (Crick, 1980, p. 179). They all made their greatest achievements (with the exception here of Golding) as fabulists or writers of fantasy.

And while they were all pre-World War I by birth, they were all effectively or as regards their major impact post-World War II by publication date. Finally, all five authors share a theme which explains many of the connections mentioned above. That theme is the nature of evil, a subject handled by all five with extreme originality, deep reluctance to accept prior opinion, however authoritative, and sometimes a degree of obsession.

The reason why these authors should be fascinated by that theme is apparent. All (except this time White) had been shot, or at least seriously shot at. Orwell was shot through the throat in the Spanish Civil War on 20th May 1937. He is said to have been a millimetre from death (Crick, 1980, p. 335). Lewis was hit by shell splinters in the leg, hand, face and lung on 15th April 1917; for a moment he thought he was dead already (Wilson, 1990, p. 56). Little is known of Golding's life, because of his dislike of biography, but he saw no less than five years' active service in the Royal Navy, 1940-45, was present at the sinking of the *Bismarck* and as an officer on a rocket-launching craft on D-Day, the invasion of Normandy. He has written eloquently, in *Pincher Martin* (1956), of the horror and pathos of drowned corpses. Tolkien went "over the top" with the Lancashire Fusiliers on 14th July 1917 and saw three months service in the trenches before being invalided out.[5] Only White did not have actual battle experience, spending most of World War II, out of conviction, in the neutral Irish Republic; yet White was in a sense the most obsessed of all with the topic, declaring openly if not quite convincingly that "the central theme of [his own?] Morte d'Arthur is to find an antidote for War",[6] and stating in the final colophon to *The Book of Merlyn* that he wrote *nationibus certantibus diro in bello* [while the nations were striving in fearful war], and had broken off *ut pro specie pugnet* [so that he could fight for his species] – not, that is, for his nation, but for a wider cause, but warfare just the same.

My suggestion is that in spite of the many differences between these writers there is an overriding similarity linking the facts presented above. In essence I am saying that these five writers all have as their major theme the nature of evil; that this theme was forced upon them by their life-experience, which I would say furthermore was a characteristically British life-experience, not shared for

[3] George Orwell chose his pen-name because he felt his real name, Eric Arthur Blair, did not sound English enough; Blair is a Scottish name, the Orwell a river in Suffolk. Tolkien's name is German by derivation, but from generations back; Tolkien felt deeply wedded to the landscape of the English Midlands, see Carpenter, *Biography*, pp. 18-19. Lewis was Irish by birth, but almost entirely English by education and connections. His Irishness was in any case that of the Northern Irish Protestant, frequently *plus royaliste que le roi*.

[4] For detailed information see Warner, 1967, and Shippey, 1983.

[5] There is a little doubt here as to how much action Tolkien saw. Carpenter's *Biography*, pp. 82-5, gives the impression that Tolkien took part only in one attack, and that a failure. This may be an understatement, caused on the one side by Tolkien's English reluctance to dramatise, and on the other by the now-established myth that all World War I attacks were failures. In so far as I have been able to trace Tolkien's battalion in official historical sources, it seems to have taken part in a highly successful attack not in terms of "breaking through", but in terms of "writing down" enemy units. Its activities during the period Tolkien was present include some of the bitterest fighting of the war, round the Schwaben Redoubt and against the Prussian Guard (units of which were annihilated). Tolkien remained deeply proud of the Lancashire Fusiliers, which won more Victoria Crosses during World War I than any other regiment in the Army.

[6] See his letter of 6th December 1940 (Gallix, 1984, p. 117).

instance by Americans or by most Europeans;[7] that they became writers of fiction to some extent to articulate this theme; and finally that all five authors turned to fantasy, or fable, or science fiction, however one likes to label their genres, because they felt that the theme of human evil was not one which could be rendered adequately or confronted directly through the medium of realistic fiction alone. These authors then were not "escapist" in their turn away from realism, though the accusation has often been levelled at Tolkien, Lewis and White, at least (see Shippey, 1992, pp. 285-7). If they avoided, as they did, the directly political issues of their time and place, such as class-distinction, they did so not out of cowardice or irresponsibility, but because they felt that there were far more critical issues lying beneath those, which those authors directly concerned with politics were in their turn trying to evade, escape from, or turn a blind eye to. There can be little doubt, certainly, that compared with many authors and genres of the mainstream English novel – thirties novels, campus novels, Virginia Woolf or E.M. Forster – the group of post-war fantasists I have identified was remarkably strongly affected by the major issue of British politics 1900-1950, which was war; and remarkably determined to concentrate on the problem which for them it raised above all: I repeat, the nature and origin of evil.

All succeeded in rendering this with uncommon and memorable force. Yet on it they all held different, sometimes totally different opinions. The most famous image of evil which they were to produce is perhaps the one in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Part III/3), in which O'Brien explains the future of humanity to his helpless and broken prisoner, Winston Smith. Speaking of the Party, O'Brien declares:

> We have cut the links between child and parent, and between man and man, and between man and woman. No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer. But in the future there will be no wives and no friends. Children will be taken from their mothers at birth, as one takes eggs from a hen. The sex instinct will be eradicated. Procreation will be an annual formality like the renewal of a ration card. We shall abolish the orgasm. Our neurologists are at work upon it now. There will be no loyalty, except towards the Party. There will be no love, except the love of Big Brother. There will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy . . . All competing pleasures will be destroyed. But always – do not forget this, Winston – always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling upon an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for

ever.

This picture of the future has proved unforgettable ever since. Yet it is remarkable that however accurately he "extrapolated" from the real experience of his own life,[8] Orwell had literally no idea or theory to offer of the *cause* of the behaviour he recorded. Another of the striking moments in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the one in which Winston, having finally obtained (from O'Brien) the famous banned book by the traitor Goldstein, starts to read its cogent account of how the Party got and holds its power. Orwell expends some thirty-five pages, more than a tenth of the total work, on excerpts from this book. It seems obvious to me at least that he does so in a genuine attempt to explain to the reader how a situation like that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could in reality come about. Goldstein, in this view, is merely a "disguised narrator" for Orwell, his book an equivalent of the well-known science fiction device of the "captain's log", by which real past and imagined future are connected. Yet when Winston comes at last and at length to the question one cannot help asking, the "central secret", the "original motive", the question of *why* the Party behaves like this – he stops reading! Orwell covers up the gap by having Julia fall asleep. Winston is sure he can finish the book another day. But neither he nor we ever get the chance to read on. It is hard not to see this strange break as a confession of inability on Orwell's part. He felt he could see how evil in his world was organised and supported. What he could not explain, either via O'Brien explaining the pleasures of power to Winston, or through the medium of the Goldstein book, was why people felt impelled to it. As evil existed in his experience, it seemed to lack even the perverse pleasures of sadism.

Lewis, by contrast, has an elaborate thesis about the origins of evil in the twentieth century, which one can pick out of his fiction with little difficulty. It is noticeable that he tends to locate his images of evil in rather trivial, if gruesome actions; and that (like Golding below) he sometimes specifically excepts war from the category of the truly horrific. Thus, in chapter 9 of *Voyage to Venus*, or *Perelandra* (1943), Lewis spends nearly a thousand words on the maiming by the Un-man (or Devil) of a frog, and on the hero's attempts to put it out of its misery. At the end the hero is "sick and shaken", and Lewis remarks that "It seems odd to say this of a man who had been on the Somme". Nevertheless, he insists, that is the case. Evil is not to be measured by the force used or the size of the result, but by motive as well. Meanwhile in *That Hideous Strength* two years later Lewis seems struck like Orwell by the pointlessness and joylessness in the visions of the future his plotters present. At one moment (in chapter 8/III) the members of N.I.C.E. (the National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments) are talking among themselves, and so frankly, about their intentions. They vary

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[7] Obviously, only Britain and her major enemies Germany and Austria were at war for the maximum ten years between 1914 and 1945: other nations had periods of neutrality or defeat. War was particularly traumatic to British society because it had been unusually un-military beforehand, having for instance no system of conscription until well into both wars. See further Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*. One American author who does resemble this group of Britons in several ways, life-experience included, is Kurt Vonnegut: his *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade* (1969) is based on personal war experience.

[8] I discuss the real-life bases for Orwell's opinions in Shippey, 1987.

a good deal – some being fools, some villains and some devil-possessed, and it is admittedly a fool speaking. But what he says is that the N.I.C.E. ideal is to destroy life in favour of what he calls Mind:

"We must get rid of it. By little and little, of course. Slowly we learn how. Learn to make our brains live with less and less body: learn to build our bodies directly with chemicals, no longer have to stuff them full of dead brutes and weeds. Learn to reproduce ourselves without copulation."

"I don't think that would be much fun," said Winter.

"My friend, you have already separated the Fun, as you call it, from the fertility. The Fun itself begins to pass away. Bah! I know that is not what you think. But look at your English women. Six out of ten are frigid, are they not? You see? Nature herself begins to throw away the anachronism."

Like O'Brien, the speaker here[9] focuses on a rejection of sexuality for power. Yet there is little doubt as to why he and his colleagues pursue their plan. They are the end-product of an anti-religious and pro-scientific attitude which Lewis linked strongly with H.G. Wells and his followers, producing a parody of their dreams of scientific expansion and pseudo-Darwinian evolution at the end of *Out of the Silent Planet*, in 1938; and introducing an easily-recognisable Wells caricature in the figure of Horace Jules, Director of N.I.C.E., near the end of *That Hideous Strength*. In essence Lewis accepted George Bernard Shaw's thesis about the theory of evolution leading on, via loss of faith and erosion of morality, to the two World Wars (see Shaw, 1921). This view was shared by none of the other authors considered here, not even Tolkien. Yet some of its components are present in the others; and there is a distinct similarity between the joyless, pointless visions of O'Brien and Filostrato.

Evolution is once again a key concept in the work of T.H. White, though as with Lewis his attitude to it is a complex and not entirely approving one. In *The Sword in the Stone* the Wart (later to become King Arthur) is repeatedly metamorphosed into one animal or another. From each species he learns something, whether good or ill. What comes over with particular strength, though, is White's bitter rejection of the notion that humanity is in some way at the pinnacle of evolution. Far from it, he insists. In *The Book of Merlyn* (chapter 5), the enchanter – it might be noted that he is a major character in Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* as well – argues that even the traditional classification of humanity as *homo sapiens* is totally wrong. The distinguishing quality of humanity is not ability to reason but ferocity. He is:

Homo ferox, the Inventor of Cruelty to Animals, who will rear pheasants at enormous expense for the pleasure of killing them; who will go to the trouble of training other animals to kill; who will burn living rats,

as I have seen done in Eriu, in order that their shrieks may intimidate the local rodents; who will forcibly degenerate the livers of domestic geese, in order to make himself a tasty food; who will saw the growing horns of cattle, for convenience in transport; who will blind goldfinches with a needle, to make them sing; who will boil lobsters and shrimps alive, although he hears their piping screams; who will turn on his own species in war, and kill nineteen million every hundred years; who will publicly murder his fellow men when he has adjudged them to be criminals; and who has invented a way of torturing his own children with a stick, or of exporting them to concentration camps called Schools, where the torture can be applied by proxy . . .

Yes, you are right to ask whether man can properly be called *ferox*, for certainly the word in its natural meaning of wild life among decent animals ought never to be applied to such a creature.

Just as with Orwell's Goldstein, there can be little doubt that Merlyn here is just White speaking through a "disguised narrator". When Merlyn says "as I have seen done in Eriu", White is referring to his own wartime stay in Ireland. When Merlyn rebukes those who train animals to kill, and beat children in schools, one should remember that White too had been a master in an English public school, where corporal punishment was routine, and had taken a passionate interest in training hawks. He is including himself firmly in the criticism made here; and the reason he does so shines not only from everything Merlyn says, but also from the entire frame of *The Once and Future King*. Loaded though his fiction is with kindly, decent, well-meaning characters, White says repeatedly that the source of evil in humanity is neither born of politics nor the result of nineteenth-century loss of faith: instead, it is genetic, inborn. Revealingly, White rewrites the whole traditional Arthurian legend at critical points to make his case. Since the thirteenth century, writers have had to find different answers to the question of why Sir Lancelot killed Sir Gareth, his friend and ally, standing by unarmed precisely because he did not wish to oppose Lancelot's rescue of Guenevere. Since the twelfth it has been an established fact that the Last Battle of Camlann was caused, against the wishes of everyone present, when a knight drew his sword to kill an adder, provoking instant fears of treachery. But White altered the last incident to make it even more totally pointless: in his version the snake was not a poisonous adder but a harmless grass-snake (one of the sympathetic beasts of *The Sword in the Stone*). The knight cut at it not because it was in any way a danger but because people are like that. In the same way Lancelot lashed out at the unarmed Gareth, as White makes Lancelot say himself, because humans are "horrible creatures . . . If we see a flower as we walk through the fields, we lop off its head with a stick. That is how Gareth has gone." Like Lewis,

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[9] His name is Filostrato, "the one destroyed by love". Lewis obviously knew this perfectly well, see his essay "What Chaucer really did to [Boccaccio's poem] *Il Filostrato*", first printed in *Essays and Studies for the English Association* 17 (1932), pp. 56-75. Lewis perhaps means to convey by this contradiction that Filostrato is a principled fanatic, genuinely in love with his own warped vision, though eager to destroy human love.

White is capable of locating his worst images of evil in the trivial – in *pâté de foie gras*, or in the boy Kay out shooting birds for sport. His view of the problem of war, of concentration camps and liquidations, is that they are all part of a continuum which begins in daily life and has its root in human genetics.

My final example of post-war visions of evil is the most directly stated and obvious of all. It comes from Golding's 1965 essay "Fable" – a piece written in part because of the pressure of continual requests from students to explain to them what the author had meant by *Lord of the Flies*, whence its directness and lack of camouflage. His "overall intention", Golding replied (not without a certain exasperation) had been this :

> Before the second world war I believed in the perfectibility of social man; that a correct structure of society would produce goodwill; and that you could remove all social ills by a reorganization of society. It is possible that today I believe something of the same again; but after the war I did not because I was unable to. I had discovered what one man could do to another. I am not talking of one man killing another with a gun, or dropping a bomb on him or blowing him up or torpedoing him. I am thinking of the vileness beyond all words that went on, year after year, in the totalitarian states. It is bad enough to say that so many Jews were exterminated in this way and that, so many people liquidated – lovely, elegant word – but there were things done during that period from which I still have to avert my mind lest I should be physically sick . . . I do not want to elaborate this. I would like to pass on; but I must say that anyone who passed through those years without understanding that man produces evil as a bee produces honey, must have been blind or wrong in the head.
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> (Golding, 1965, pp. 86-7)

In this view, very much as in White's, evil is simply genetic. In people, producing evil is an instinct or a reflex. Golding recognises that his opinion may in a sense be a prejudiced or conditioned one, created by the experience of a particular time; he even hints that he may be getting ready to modify or reverse it. At the same time he insists that anyone with his experience who did not share his opinion "must have been blind or wrong in the head". One might paraphrase by saying that Golding is prepared to accept that there might be a larger view of humanity than the one he put in *Lord of the Flies*; but that any larger view would be incomplete if it did not at least contain his. There is meanwhile in Golding's mental state a strong element of disillusionment, shared both by Orwell and by Lewis. Golding says he had once believed in "the perfectibility of social man", i.e. before World War II. War jolted him out of that belief. It did the same to Orwell, as one can see from *Animal Farm*, an allegory of disillusion, though admittedly Orwell's disillusionment had started earlier than Golding's, perhaps with the treatment he received after return from Spain in 1937. Meanwhile Golding shared with Lewis a strong interest in, and even stronger rejection of the works of H.G. Wells. He produced a relatively affectionate Wellsian parody in his novelette "Envoy Extraordinary", from 1956, reprinted in *The Scorpion God* (1971) (see Shippey, 1973). His second novel *The Inheritors* (1955) is a more serious and damning refutation of the Wells story "The Grisly Folk". The case has yet to be argued, but one explanation of the structure of *Lord of the Flies* is to say that it follows in some detail the explanation of how religions arose in Wells's once well-known, now virtually forgotten work *The Outline of History* (1920); to which one is partially guided by the entries under Baal, or Baal-zebub, the "lord of the flies" himself, in the index of that work. Part of Golding's disillusionment, in other words, was with the promises of science and rationality; he however did not follow Lewis into a return to Christianity, a belief that evil was or could be genuinely diabolic.

Summing up the above, one might say that Orwell had no explanation for the origin of evil in his day; Lewis was trying to revive a traditional religious one; White preferred a genetic one; and Golding was poised somewhere between White and Orwell, though with significant agreements even with Lewis. All four however were observing much the same phenomena; all were capable of writing with a genuine bitterness and horror, which far outstrips anything in the recent genre of "horror fiction"; and none of them paid any attention at all to the official explanations of their time and culture, as promulgated by politicians, church leaders, literary critics, or even the "great tradition" of their predecessors as English novelists.

I now come to the question of how Tolkien fitted in to the group outlined above: and in some ways the answer must be, not too well. He was certainly like them in his rejection (or ignorance) of recent literary tradition, as in his overall pattern of life-experience. On the other hand he had less apparent interest than any of them in politics, or genetics, or science and the loss of faith, or H.G. Wells, all replaced in his case by an overriding professional interest in philology.[10] More significantly, it is hard to find in Tolkien a passage which equals in horror and degradation the excerpts from Orwell or White above, or anything like the disembowelling of the frog in Lewis or the killing of Piggy in Golding. In Tolkien, horror tends to take place "off-stage", as with the "place of dreadful feast and slaughter" in *The Lord of the Rings* IV/4; Shelob, the Ringwraiths and the Uruk-hai, while imaginatively threatening, do not make the same accusations about humanity that O'Brien, Filostrato and Merlyn do. Indeed it is significant that when I asked (at the presentation of this paper at "The Tolkien Phenomenon" in Turku) for examples from Tolkien's work of ultimate evil, the most penetrating example I was given, by Professor Verlyn Flieger, was Frodo's claiming of the Ring in the chambers of the Sammath Naur in *The Lord of the Rings* VI/3. This runs as follows:

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[10] Though one has to say that this interest in its turn was shared by Lewis, another professional medievalist, and by White, a passionate amateur.

Then Frodo stirred and spoke with a clear voice, indeed with a voice clearer and more powerful than Sam had ever heard him use, and it rose above the throb and turmoil of Mount Doom, ringing in the roof and walls.

"I have come," he said. "But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" And suddenly, as he set it on his finger, he vanished from Sam's sight.

In the context of *The Lord of the Rings*, this is certainly a most ominous and potentially disastrous moment. Putting on the Ring means going over to the other side, the side of evil. In the future it will lead to a destroyed and enslaved Middle-earth, and to Frodo as a wraith, or as a new Sauron. The moment negates everything that has been achieved so far, by men, elves or wizards. Yet at the same time putting on a ring is hardly in itself an image of evil. Nor is it self-evidently clear what it is that Frodo is doing wrong. When he says, "the Ring is mine", he has a case, at least in terms of ordinary legality. After all, he never stole it; it was given to him honestly; even Bilbo can only just be called a thief. None of this refutes what has been said above about the critical nature of the moment in terms of the special circumstances of *The Lord of the Rings*. But one could say that readers of that work are not made to feel the pointless, sterile, self-willed cruelty of evil as are readers of the other works discussed above.

Yet Tolkien certainly had a theory of evil, and took as deep an interest in the subject as any of the authors mentioned above. I have discussed his theory in historical/philological terms in *The Road to Middle-earth*,[11] and will not repeat the argument here. My conclusions were that Tolkien's theory was in a sense a distinctively modern one, centring on the idea that evil is an addiction; that Tolkien also kept up a balance between two old and apparently contradictory views of evil, (a) the Christian/Boethian one that evil is an absence, essentially internal, a temptation or a delusion, and (b) the Northern/heroic one that evil is an outside force to be fought physically; and that the weaving or "interlacing" of these views through the narrative presents a clear, individual, even idiosyncratic image of the nature of life in this world, which has contributed a great deal (whether consciously-realised or not) to the success of Tolkien's work.

A further point repeatedly made in my book, however, was that no matter how clearly Tolkien might express himself, to many of his readers, and most especially to professional readers like reviewers and literary critics, his views were unacceptable and often literally invisible.[12] It is this phenomenon which can perhaps best be approached "synchronically", in the context of the time. One of Tolkien's most hostile (though at the same time most involved) commentators was Edwin Muir. He reviewed each volume of *The Lord of the Rings* as it came out, in reviews for *The Observer* dated 22nd August 1954, 21st November 1954, and 27th November 1955. I cannot confirm that the

assertion is true, but if it *is* true (as has been said) that the anonymous review for the *Times Literary Supplement* of 25th November 1955 was also Muir's work, then Muir had four tries at Tolkien – five if one counts also the letter in *TLS* of 9th December, in which the anonymous reviewer replied to demonstrations of his own inaccuracy. One thing that these four (or five) pieces share is their evident anxiety to do Tolkien down, and on the principle that "any stick will do to beat a dog" Tolkien is attacked on many counts: childishness, inadequate style, etc. However, a recurrent worry in all of them is failure to present evil in an acceptable (I would say, for the reviewer(s) a *recognisable*) way. The first *Observer* review complains that "[Tolkien's] good people are consistently good, his evil figures immutably evil; and he has no room in his world for a Satan both evil and tragic". The third *Observer* review resists the comparison with Malory offered by Naomi Mitchison, and says: "The heroes of the Round Table did not end happily. They were as brave as the heroes of the Ring, but they knew temptation, were sometimes unfaithful to their vows, or torn between the opposing claims of love and duty." The *TLS* review complains again that the evil characters in Tolkien are not sufficiently analysed: "save for their cruelty in war (and the Good do not as a rule grant quarter) we are never told exactly in what their wickedness consists", while as for the other side "there seems to be nothing outstandingly virtuous in their character". The assertions being consistently made are: evil characters are not sufficiently explained; good characters are not sufficiently mixed; and while the two sides are kept unrealistically apart (pure good and pure evil), they nevertheless behave in much the same way, especially as regards the use of force. To make the point even clearer, when a former colleague of mine, Mr. David Masson, wrote to the *TLS* on 9th December 1955, pointing out moderately that the reviewer had made a string of factual errors, and was as far at fault in his lack of perception over good and evil, the reviewer replied: "Throughout the book the good try to kill the bad, and the bad try to kill the good. We never see them doing anything else. Both sides are brave. Morally there seems nothing to choose between them."

Some of these complaints are as factually wrong as the repeated inability of reviewers (Muir included) to get the characters' names right: the notion that Tolkien's good people are "consistently good" for instance ignores a string of characters including Boromir, and the scene where Frodo claims the Ring; while the belief that evil is immutable is contradicted by open statements that even Sauron "was not always so", and the whole idea of the Ringwraiths. Yet to advance, one has to try to see what lies behind these reviews' evident anxiety (the cause, in my opinion, of their wilful lack of perception). One sees for instance more than once in Muir the feeling that *The Lord of the Rings* does not conform to literary pattern. Why can't it be more like *Paradise Lost*, have a Satan "both evil and tragic"? One answer to that was given by C.S. Lewis, whose *Voyage to Venus* is in effect a long

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[11] See chapter 5 in both editions, and esp. pp. 123-33 in the 2nd edition.

[12] I write "literally" here because of the evidence that several of his critics simply could not take in elementary data like the names of the characters (see Shippey, 1992, pp. 1-5, 123-4, 156-7, 283-4).

commentary on *Paradise Lost*: in chapters 9 and 10 of that work Lewis makes it clear that he thinks that the "sombre tragic Satan out of *Paradise Lost*" (as well as the "suave and subtle Mephistopheles" of the Faustian tradition) are simply false as images of what evil is really like. In the same way Muir asks why Tolkien's heroes couldn't be more like the traditional Arthurian ones, especially (Muir is evidently thinking) Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, with their adulterous and destructive passion? An answer to that was given by T.H. White (see above) with his rejection of the standard Arthurian interpretations and his insistence that evil in the real world is not individual and exciting at all, but a mere reflex action. Muir in short is trying to impose a literary pattern on Tolkien, and resenting the fact that Tolkien rejects that pattern; but the pattern was rejected by other authors as well, and always for the same reason: they felt that old literary patterns were unable to cope with the twentieth-century experience of evil (of which they, N.B., had first-hand and non-literary experience).

And then there are the linked issues of cruelty, mercy and violence. Tolkien very much resented the accusation of mercilessness, writing to his defender David Masson on 12th December 1955 (see Shippey, 1992, fn. p. 132) that "Surely how often 'quarter' is given is off the point in a book that breathes Mercy from start to finish: in which the central hero is at last divested of all arms, except his will?" Other defenders made similar replies, Masson for instance arguing that the great contrast was not Good and Evil but "love and hatred" (the *TLS* letter already cited), and W.H. Auden even more tellingly pointing out that a contrast between good and evil lies in the very structure of the book, in that good can imagine evil (which is why neither Gandalf nor Galadriel nor Faramir nor Frodo till the very end will take the Ring), but that evil "defiantly chosen . . . can no longer imagine anything but itself" (which is why Sauron takes no precautions at all against the attempt to reach the Sammath Naur) (see Auden, 1956, and Shippey, 1992, p. 156). But once again, viewing the matter "synchronically", it is not enough to argue these reviews down. One has to try to see what particular anxieties caused them, what challenge Tolkien's view of good and evil (like those of his fellow "fabulists") was presenting to the moral pieties of official culture.

Here it seems to me once again that life-experience is the clue. Tolkien's critics in the mid-1950s were frequently unhappy with the violence habitually used by the forces of good in his story. In the context of the heroic literature of earlier periods – the literature of Tolkien's professional life – this criticism is simply weird. There is never any possibility of Beowulf reasoning with Grendel, for instance, or Sir Gawain refusing to decapitate the Green Knight when challenged to do so. During the twentieth century, though, a lesson bitterly learnt is that "violence breeds violence", that (to go back to British experience) victory in World War I

bred only the desire for vengeance which erupted in World War II. The whole British experience of World War I moreover tended to show that there was no clear indication of right and wrong as between the two sides, no matter what official propaganda might say. One common reaction to these and similar realisations was then to decide that "Violence is always wrong", that "the end never justifies the means". It was in this spirit that the Oxford Union in 1937 passed its famous resolution that "This House will in no circumstances fight for King and country"; it is this spirit that animates the *TLS* reviewer's "Morally there seems nothing to choose between them", and the *Observer* reviews' repeated calls for a blurring of the lines between good and evil (as regards motivation), and a simultaneous sharpening of them (as regards behaviour). Good and evil are seen as defined by attitudes to force.

This belief was quite clearly not shared by several of the writers here discussed. Golding, one notes, specifically excepts acts of war from his definition of evil: "I am not talking of one man killing another with a gun . . .", see above. In the same way one climax of *Voyage to Venus* (published in 1943, I repeat) is the realisation by the academic and pacific hero that it is his duty not just to reason with the Un-man in defence of the Lady's innocence but to attack him physically; *That Hideous Strength* also ends in a slaughter, of innocent (or at least semi-innocent) as well as guilty. Orwell never wavered in his belief that World War II had to be fought to a finish, calling on all resources of patriotism, however seemingly discredited. While White's attitude to force wavers continually, he insists on presenting the very idea of the Round Table as an attempt (unsuccessful, but perhaps not ultimately unsuccessful)[13] to civilise the human genetic urge to violence. In this context, Tolkien's good, violent, kindly, bloodthirsty characters – the adjectives just used fit particularly well for Théoden King – seem much less eccentric, paradoxical or thoughtless than so many reviewers indicated. The "postwar fabulists" I am discussing were all without exception highly conscious of the way in which good intentions could be perverted into evil, whether in Sauron or in Napoleon the pig in *Animal Farm*. Where they parted company with the very common academic view of Muir or a dozen later critics was in their refusal to accept that the danger of perversion excused inaction. It is very tempting to add that this joint refusal had its root in their own experience. Four of them had seen battle, all had lost friends, two of them had been shot: they were not prepared to accept that it had all been a mistake. By contrast many of their critics came from the most sheltered classes of British society. It is easy to believe that evil will go away if you ignore it, if you have never left an academic environment.

The question of civilising or legitimising violence also seems to me to be a highly realistic and critically important one, especially in the context of Tolkien's or Golding's lifetimes. To put the matter personally, I myself, though born

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[13] At the end of *The Once and Future King*: "The cannons of his adversary were thundering in the morning when the Majesty of England drew himself up to face the future with a peaceful heart." Three lines above, King Arthur is sure that "Mordred must be slain". The very last words of the tetralogy – White is relying on the belief that Arthur is not dead but will come again in England's need – are "THE BEGINNING".

in 1943, have met Englishmen who have to my certain knowledge shot surrendered prisoners; burned men alive with petrol; killed unarmed women and children: all of them, I have to say, in normal life kindly, decent men who would never think of doing such things *except in wartime*. The latter fact, they thought (with exceptions and with different degrees of conscience) excused the former ones. The problem such men create – and I have no doubt that all the "fabulists" were much more aware of such things happening than I am – is how one resists evil without becoming it. It seems to me that much of *The Lord of the Rings*, as of *Lord of the Flies* or *The Once and Future King*, is dedicated to dramatising this particular problem. But it is emphatically *not* a solution to it to say, with Muir, that there is no need for violent resistance at all, or that evil is all in the mind.

A final perspective on Tolkien may be provided by considering the literary world of England in the between-wars period. This was characterised by intense post-war irony, cynicism, and rejection of authority. The thesis of Martin Green, in his book *Children of the Sun: a narrative of "decadence" in England after 1918* (1977), is that from 1918 onwards English literature was dominated for a while by *Sonnenkinder* – privileged young men, often homosexuals, often Old Etonians, deeply contemptuous of the older generation, and classifiable as Naifs, Dandies or Rogues. Green gives examples of each of these groups from both life and literature, for instance and respectively: Waugh's Sebastian, from *Brideshead Revisited*; the Burgess-MacLean-Philby group of traitors from Cambridge; Waugh's Basil Seal from *Put Out More Flags*. He sees this domination as essentially disastrous in both life and literature, leading to both national and literary decline. I can again report from personal experience with what fury this thesis was greeted, even in 1977, by the heirs and descendants of the group Green identified: at least one reviewer for a national newspaper was approached personally and told in all seriousness that this book *had to be squashed*, and that failure to join in the squashing would have unpleasant consequences. The reviewer, a colleague, wrote a highly laudatory review. There were no unpleasant consequences. But forty years earlier, when Tolkien was writing *The Hobbit*, or twenty years earlier, when *The Lord of the Rings* was meeting its reviewers, the *Sonnenkinder* were more firmly in control.

It is striking that Green is quite unable to fit Tolkien into the literary scene he presents so thoroughly. He mentions him only twice, puts him in a "Christians" group with Lewis,[14] and sees him via his Catholicism as a literary descendant of G.K. Chesterton :

> Chesterton's most direct descendants were C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, Charles Williams and J.R.R. Tolkein [*sic*] – the Oxford "Inklings". These people escaped dandyism and aestheticism – to which they all felt some attraction – but without confronting it. They

provided themselves with a handsomer dialectical enemy, the forces of evil as defined by orthodox Christian theology, which they located on the contemporary scene most often in the misuse of science and social science . . . Most aspects of their ideological and imaginative behaviour strike me as more generous, intelligent, and dignified than those of either Leavis or Waugh – or Orwell, for that matter – if considered in the abstract. But considered in the concrete, the ideas of the last three have at various times meant everything to me, while the others *mean*, in that sense, nothing. I approve what they did, but theoretically; I read the books it resulted in approvingly, but I am not really engaged by them at all.

> And one reason surely is that these writers removed themselves from the cultural dialectic. Undignified as that often was, both personally and intellectually, that was where the action was . . .

And Green goes on to say that for all his awareness of their personal qualities, he is "no more attracted to Auden and Lewis and Tolkein [*sic*, again]" than he ever was (1977, pp. 495-7).

It is perhaps significant that for all his general benevolence, Green is still unable to spell Tolkien's name correctly. Just like Muir, Edmund Wilson and the other critics who consistently misspelled the names of the characters, there is a suspicion that some non- or pre-literary antipathy prevents Green from looking closely and sharply at what he is criticising (though Green of course has the honesty to admit openly his inability to take an interest). One can see this antipathy two ways. What was it like for Tolkien, or Lewis, to find themselves in an Oxford whose literary circles were dominated by the kind of young man Green describes, and for whom they would quite certainly feel the deepest distaste? The answer is clear enough: they dropped out (as many must have done), creating a cult of self-conscious simplicity, heartiness, even Philistinism, as a kind of protection. That cult may seem rather ridiculous now.[15] But if you did not wish to collaborate, like Waugh, or oppose, like Orwell, what other option was there? Meanwhile both Lewis and Tolkien made their plan to go "over the heads" of the literary Establishment and appeal to a mass market where they believed, or hoped, that they would still find unprejudiced readers. Lewis was successful in this from an early stage, using radio as well as print to make his mark; Tolkien struck later and cut deeper. Neither has ever been forgiven for it.

But one can see the antipathy between critics and "fabulists" in another way. I commented in the "Afterword" to *Road* how very strange I found it that a critic like Philip Toynbee should be able to write such a perfect description of Tolkien under the heading of the "Good Writer" – someone private and lonely, "shocking and amazing", excessively knowledgeable and (N.B.) deeply dissatisfied with "modern

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[14] White and Golding do not figure in Green's index at all. Orwell is seen persuasively as (though an Etonian) a rejector of the ethos, an "anti-dandy"

[15] See for instance the accounts in Carpenter, 1977, pp. 53-4, or Wilson, 1990, pp. 129-32. Wilson also remarks on the ethos of 1920s Oxford in pp. 71-2.

English"! – and still fail completely to see how well Tolkien's work fitted his own description, when it appeared. Yet Toynbee is a perfect product of the "decadent" environment Green describes, labelled unhesitatingly by Green as one of the naifs, "all limpid sensitiveness and generous responsiveness". The sensitivity and responsiveness were in the end just an act; but put in this context one can see how threatening the public success of writers like Tolkien was to the *Sonnenkinder* and their heirs. It told them their time was over. They had controlled literature in the post-World War I period. No doubt they had looked forward to substantial reinforcement for their cynical, irreverent and irresponsible beliefs in the post-World War II period. Instead the beliefs and the control were challenged, though I do not believe (remembering 1977 and the *furore* over Green's book) that they have by any means been overthrown.

I would argue, then, that Tolkien can be seen as in essence a post-World War II writer; one of a group of English writers whose subjects were war and evil; who drew their subjects from their own life-experience, little affected or assisted by the views of official culture, whether literary or political; and who wrote in non-realistic modes essentially because they felt they were writing about subjects too great and too general to tie down to particular and recognisable settings. The views of this group about evil, widely different though they were, were similar in that they challenged the comfortable opinions of sheltered contemporaries, which is why none of the group (except Golding) has *both* been accepted into the unstated but well-known "canon" of academic texts *and* had his works receive a reading of the kind "which its author may be supposed to have desired", to use a Tolkienian phrase.[16] I hope this paper has suggested a way in which Tolkien can be set in a contemporary as well as a historical context, and has pointed to the importance – political as well as literary – of the group in which I place him, and of the themes which that group felt impelled to treat.

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[16] In my article on Orwell (Shippey, 1987) above I give reasons for my belief that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for all its "canonical" status, still frequently provokes only "averted-eye" or emasculating responses from post-"decadent" literary critics.

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