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Abstract

This essay explores Tolkien's work (especially *The Lord of the Rings*) in terms of what I identify as his three central concerns, described here as English culture, nature and ethics. I also defend the work against its detractors, especially cultural materialists. I am more concerned with the reception of the work (e.g. its contemporary meanings) than its production.

Additional Keywords

culture; Englishness; ethics; nature; social and political criticism

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I

What I am trying to do here is take a serious social and political look at *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* that respects both the works as books, as literary artefacts, AND my own subjective experience of them. My title takes its cue from Tolkien's well-known desire "to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own". By ideology, all I mean is that his particular view of Englishness, is not, of course, socially neutral, but selective in a way that emphasises some aspects at the expense of others. That's all – nothing more or less.

Sociological literary criticism has a reputation, often richly deserved, of practising a gross or subtle reductionism that sometimes leaves its subject little more than a collection of elements representing something else. In that, of course, it is hardly alone; for example, there are Freudian, feminist, structuralist, Jungian, anthroposophical, and Marxist interpretations of fairy tales, of which the same could said with varying amounts of justice. (Jack Zipes (1979), with a degree of seriousness that is hard to determine, has pointed out of *The Hobbit* that it clearly involves an alliance between the lower-middle class (Bilbo) and working-class miners and skilled workers (the dwarves) in order to overcome a parasitic capitalist exploiter who "lives off the hard work of small people and accumulates wealth without being able to appreciate its value" (the dragon). This is fun, but it says as much about Marxism as a fairy tale as it does about the capaciousness of *The Hobbit*.)

I have tried hard to avoid such a practice, my chief motive being an abiding love of Tolkien's work and respect for its integrity. But I have also benefited from some excellent warnings if ever tempted. There is his own, of course: "he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom". But also Professor Shippey's: "Adventure in Middle-earth embodies a modern meaning, but does not exist to propagate it" (1982).

Thus armed, I settled down to a little non-reductionist *ideologiekritik* of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. However I quickly encountered trolls, if not Black Riders, because although the role of hobbits – who chiefly embody Tolkien's ideological Englishness – is crucial, it became apparent that they are so to speak nested within a larger and more weighty matter, just as the Shire is within Middle-earth: namely nature, the natural world. Following this up, then, I found myself at the edge of this second circle too, but still within my remit. In Tolkien's terms, I had been brought up short by the Sea. This third sphere proved to be the most encompassing of all: the spiritual, or, in this context, what is essentially the same, ethical. What has made trying to analyse Tolkien's project daunting is the way its heart lies in the overlap of these three concerns: the cultural (Englishness), the natural (nature) and the spiritual (ethics). It seems to me that any meaning found in or derived from his work that does not inseparably embody all three concerns is inessential. But each one exerts enormous centrifugal force as a subject in its own right. Thus, despite my best efforts to exert some editorial control, this tale too has grown in the telling.

I should emphasise that my chief critical interest is the meaning, especially the wider social significance, of the work, not the man. Of course there is a relationship between the two. But it is complex, and the one simply cannot be deduced from the other. And as Tolkien himself reminded us, "when we have done all that research . . . can do . . . there remains a point too often forgotten: that is the effect produced *now* by these old things in the stories as they are." Besides, it is both boring and pointless to spill ink establishing whether Tolkien was "reactionary" or "progressive". Neither can the work itself be pigeonholed in such a way – as if its meaning was forever fixed, and not whatever it presents itself as, in ways that cannot be

predetermined. I am going to argue that the *The Lord of the Rings* has a life of its own in ways beyond what Tolkien himself could have anticipated, and which are a part of the explanation of its enduring appeal.

Let us look at that appeal for a moment. English-language sales for *The Hobbit* total 29 million (ahead of my other single work of fiction this century); for *The Lord of the Rings*, 18.5 million. And that only covers up till 1989. Tolkien's global popularity is well-known, from the "Middle-earth Libre" graffiti in Quebec to the adoption of his work (I am told) by an Italian anarchist group. It is also attested to by the 30-odd translations, an early and possibly fabulous example being that into Vietnamese in 1969. (A South Vietnamese army division immediately, and rather perceptively, adopted the Eye of Sauron as their emblem.) There is even an area of submarine features off the South-West coast of Ireland named after Tolkien characters (hence "Gollum's Channel", and so on). So no one could argue that all this was a flash-in-the-pan phenomenon, riding on the heels of the 60s counter-culture; sales in the 90s remain brisk.

Yet this extraordinary popular success has been accompanied by relentless critical hostility. Beginning with Philip Toynbee's sneers and Edmund Wilson's rant in the 1950s, it has never flagged. The general view was perhaps best summed up by the poet John Heath-Stubbs: "A combination of Wagner and Winnie-the-Pooh".

Given that criticism from the left tends to be more social and political, that's what I intend to concentrate on here. Amid all the critical rubbish, there are a few serious points. First, however, let's get the rest of it out of the way.

Catherine R. Stimpson brought up several common refrains in 1969. "An incorrigible nationalist," she wrote, Tolkien "celebrates the English bourgeois pastoral idyll. Its characters, tranquil and well fed, live best in placid, philistine, provincial rural cosiness" (or would prefer to). His language reveals "class snobbery" (both trollism and orcism, in fact). His characters are cleanly divided into "good and evil, nice and nasty" (notwithstanding the fact, which she notes, that almost all the races are a collection of good, bad and indifferent individuals; and completely overlooking the inner struggles of Gollum, Boromir, Denethor and Frodo himself. This is *not* a serious point).

Finally, "Behind the moral structure is a regressive emotional pattern. For Tolkien is irritatingly, blandly, traditionally masculine . . . He makes his women characters, no matter what their rank, the most hackneyed of stereotypes. They are either beautiful and distant, simply distant, or simply simple". Here it is tempting to reply, guilty as charged. Even with the characters of Galadriel, Éowyn and Shelob – without whom *The Lord of the Rings* would be seriously impoverished, and who are more complex than Stimpson allows – Tolkien's paternalism if not patriarchy is unmissable. Yet it is too easy to ask a work to be something it isn't, or its author to do something he or she didn't set out to do. Indeed, maybe we should be grateful that Tolkien *didn't* attempt a more feminist Middle-earth. Consider the ghastly results, for example, when two otherwise superb

writers, John Fowles and Dennis Potter, tried to place female characters centre-stage in *The Mantissa* and *Blackeyes* respectively. Just imagine what Tolkien might have wrought!

Some of these points were recently recycled in the *New Statesman and Society* (Kaveney, 1992): Tolkien's emphasis on social hierarchies (no mention however of "the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the great"); the fact that "praise of Tolkien has often been the cover for a broadside attack on modernism and even on realism" (is nothing sacred?); and a putative link between Tolkien's cult following and "the authoritarian direction taken by much American commercial fantasy and science fiction". (He really should have anticipated that, back in 1937.) The author concludes that Tolkien is "worth intelligent reading, but not passionate attention". Clearly, this town isn't big enough for both of us.

It is true that Tolkien's evil creatures are frequently "swart, slant-eyed", foul-mouthed and apparently poorly educated, and tend to come from the south ("the cruel Haradrim") and east ("the wild Easterlings") – both threatening directions in Tolkien's "moral cartography". It is also true that black is a terrible colour, especially when contrasted with white. It must be admitted that Tolkien is drawing on centuries of such moral valuation (not unrelated to historical experience) attached to his chosen setting, in order to convey something immediately recognisable in the context of his story, without attempting to mitigate the possibility of a racist interpretation. (I say "possibility"; it is grossly insulting to his readers to assume they automatically transfer their feelings about orcs to all the swart or slant-eyed people they encounter in the street.) Thus as Clyde Kilby (1977) recounts, when Tolkien was once asked what lay east and south of the Middle-earth of *The Lord of the Rings*, he replied:

> "Rhûn is the Elvish word for east. Asia, China, Japan, and all the things which people in the West regard as far away. And south of Harad is Africa, the hot countries." Then Mr. Resnick asked, "That makes Middle-earth Europe, doesn't it?" To which Tolkien replied, "Yes, of course – Northwestern Europe . . . where my imagination comes from."

(In which case, as Tolkien also admitted, Mordor "would be roughly in the Balkans.")

However, he reacted sharply to reading a description of Middle-earth as *Nordic*:

> Not *Nordic*, please! A word I personally dislike; it is associated, though of French origin, with racialist theories . . . The North-west of Europe, where I (and most of my ancestors) have lived, has my affection, as a man's home should; but it is not "sacred", nor does it exhaust my affections.

It is also, I believe, more Tolkien's material than his message. Consider that the races in Middle-earth are most striking in their variety and autonomy. Without suggesting that a clear-cut choice exists, is this an instance of ethnocentrism, or multiculturalism? Or even, given that most of the races are closely tied to a particular geography and

ecology, and manage to live there without exploiting it to the point of destruction − bioregionalism? Again, one of the subplots of *The Lord of the Rings* concerns an enduring friendship between members of races traditionally estranged (Gimli and Legolas); and the most important wedding in the book, between Aragorn and Arwen, is an interracial marriage. As usual, the picture is a great deal more complex than the critics perceive.

It is also true that Tolkien was deeply hostile to "modernity". I am as grateful as anyone for the benefits of modernity, but it is becoming very hard to celebrate their undiluted beneficence; to that extent, Tolkien's diagnosis, at least, is starting to look increasingly prescient. In any case, there is certainly no reason whatsoever to automatically associate modernity with progressive politics.

So let's turn now to some more serious charges, beginning with Tolkien's central and most unique characters: the hobbits.

II

With this audience, of all people, I don't need to catalogue the traits of hobbits: their fondness of food and drink, closeness to the land, hostility to machines, anti-intellectualism and inarticulateness. Though I will remind you of what one famous hobbit almost replied, when asked, "What is finer than flying?" Bilbo only allowed his native tact, not to mention caution, to overrule suggesting, "A warm bath and late breakfast on the lawn afterwards". "Nonetheless," their chronicler notes, "ease and peace had left this people still curiously tough". This being, in Shippey's words, "the notorious Anglo-hobbitic inability to know when they're beaten".

As Tolkien notes, Bilbo and Frodo were exceptional in many ways: their wealth, bachelorhood, and aestheticism. Sam, as a recently and exceptionally lettered gardener, was far more typical, or as Tolkien put it, "the genuine hobbit". But your behaviour had to be extreme to land you in any real trouble; for "The Shire had hardly any 'government'". The only real officials were the Mayor of Michel Delving, Postmaster and First Shirriff, plus various hereditary heads of clans.

Now it doesn't take any great perceptiveness to see in "these charming, absurd, helpless" (and not-so helpless) hobbits a self-portrait of the English, something which Tolkien even admitted, in an unguarded moment, to Clyde Kilby. Take the view in 1940 by George Orwell, and still instantly recognizable (albeit sadly altered in some respects), of a conservative people neither artistically nor intellectually inclined, though with "a certain power of acting without thought"; taciturn, preferring tacit understandings to explication; endowed with a love of flowers and animals, valuing privateness and the liberty of the individual, and respecting legality; not puritanical and without definite religious belief, but strangely gentle (and here we feel our losses in the 1980s), with a hatred of war and militarism that coexists with a strong unconscious patriotism. Orwell sums up English society as "a strange mixture of reality and illusion, democracy and privilege, humbug and decency".

With apologies to Tolkien, *plus ça change*. True, these attributes are inextricably mingled with ones (some) English have *wanted* to find in the mirror; none are eternal and immutable. Because they constitute a national fantasy, however, it does not follow that they have no social reality. Also, if I may be so bold, Tolkien's portrait is not altogether a flattering one; it includes greed, small-mindedness and philistinism.

But the kind of Englishness the hobbits embody is more particular than that. Although identifiably modern in many respects − and as several commentators have noticed, it is crucial that Bilbo and Frodo *be* modern, in order to mediate between ourselves and the ancient and therefore somewhat foreign world they inhabit − they also represent, as David Harvey (1985, p.114) puts it, "the archetypal pre-Industrial Revolution English yeomen", but even more specifically pre-the Conquest of 1066, before the hated Norman Yoke imposed centralized autocratic government, a foreign language and an alien cultural tradition, and the rootless cosmopolitanism of an elite Latin education − which, as Shippey has pointed out, culminated in among other things the creation of a "distinctive literary caste": the same caste that harried Tolkien throughout his life and after.

But whether Anglo-Saxon, feudal or modern, the hobbits' bucolic and organic "naturalness" clearly falls within the long tradition in English letters of nostalgic pastoralism or ruralism, celebrating a time "long ago in the quiet of the world, when there was less noise and more green". Listen to some of these titles and remarks, from the nineteenth and early twentieth century: Tennyson's *English Idylls* − William Morris's "fair green garden of Northern Europe" − the Poet Laureate Alfred Austin's *Haunts of Ancient Peace* (1902) (that could easily be a song by Van Morrison today: no coincidence) − Ford Madox Ford's *The Heart of the Country* − Henry Newbolt's *The Old Country* − Kipling's "Our England is a garden" − Maurice Hewlett's *Song of the Plough* − and there are many more, but you get the idea. In other words, there has long been a deep cultural gulf between England's (southern) "green and pleasant land" and her (northern) "dark satanic mills"; or as Martin Weiner (1985) puts it with an aptness all the better for my case because it is (presumably) unintentional, "The power of the machine was invading and blighting the Shire".

Of course the irony here is that by 1851 England was already the world's first urban nation, with over half the population living in towns. This has led many critics to see ruralism as *simply* a fantasy (in the unkind sense) − "a psychic balance wheel", in Weiner's words. But nothing, I'm afraid, is that simple.

The fount for social criticism of this sort is *The Country and the City*, by Raymond Williams (1985). It is an important and influential book, but one which I dislike. Let's try to put it to work in understanding Tolkien. Williams says that nostalgic "celebrations of a feudal or aristocratic order" embody values that "spring to the defence of certain kinds of order, certain social hierarchies and moral stabilities", which he implies act in defence of social injustices, and even blood-&-soil fascism. Perhaps this is the place, therefore, to

consider the politics (in the narrow sense) of Middle-earth.

Tolkien described his own political opinions as leaning to "Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control, not whiskered men with bombs) – or to 'unconstitutional' Monarchy." "I am not a 'socialist' in any sense", he wrote, "because the 'planners', when they acquire power, become so bad . . . the spirit of 'Isengard', if not of Mordor, is of course always cropping up. The present design of destroying Oxford in order to accommodate motor-cars is a case. But our chief adversary is a member of a 'Tory' Government." (The proposal referred to was a so-called relief road through Christ Church meadow – a very contemporary ring to that.)

Anarchism or libertarianism has a left/right instability that has always irritated both those wings, who like to have these matters cut-and-dried. No socialist, nor even democrat then, but neither in Tolkien is there a whiff of "blood and soil" fascism. And that is what we find in Middle-earth. One might say "subsidiarity rules OK" – that is, decisions seem indeed to be taken at the lowest possible level, closest to those who are most affected by them. Indeed, the Shire functions by a sort of municipal democracy. None of this, of course, applies to Mordor – an utterly authoritarian regime with a slave-based economy featuring intensive industrialism and agribusiness.

Raymond Williams continues:

> In Britain, there is a precarious but persistent rural-intellectual radicalism: genuinely and actively hostile to industrialism and capitalism; opposed to commercialism and the exploitation of the environment; attached to country ways and feelings, the literature and the lore.

This sounds generous, but here comes the big Reservation:

> in every kind of radicalism the moment comes when any critique must choose its bearings, between past and future . . .

Furthermore, "We must begin not in the idealisations of one order or another, but in the actual history to which they are only partial and misleading responses". Thus myth and revolution are *alternative*, not complementary responses to crisis.

This is nonsense: positivist about "history", essentialist in holding the political character of traditions to be inherent and fixed, and intellectualist in thinking that ideological and factual criticism is a sufficient basis for a political programme. Most unforgivably, it ignores the massive lesson that the left, by now, should have learned from Gramsci (or, failing him, Mrs. Thatcher): that people do not live by factual and historical bread alone, but also by ideas, values and visions of alternatives. The past feeds the future, as *myth* does revolution: something that Orwell understood better than many who have patronized him since.

What really matters now about the image of pre-Conquest England "as a free and equal rural community" benefiting from "a primitive freedom" and "the perpetual impulse of 'Nature'" (in Williams's excellent description) is not the extent to which things were actually otherwise – which is itself an interpretation rather than a fact, and may become mobilised as a resource in one political direction or another – but rather the *use* of such an image in the present. Within his own remit, Tolkien himself – old reactionary though he undoubtedly was, in the true meaning of the word – saw this very clearly. Indeed, his anti-positivism is bizarrely in tune with the best and most refreshing aspects of postmodern philosophy. "History often resembles 'Myth'", he wrote, "because they are both ultimately of the same stuff".

Of course, it is true that the defence of the "vanishing countryside" can become deeply confused with the defence of the old rural order. But it certainly *need* not. As Weiner notes, there have been "variants of ruralism to suit all political inclinations . . . Conservatives and Imperialists, anti-Imperialists, Liberals and Radicals." The meaning of such a myth is not written on stone. Today it is standing up to the bulldozers in Twyford Down and Oxleas Wood, while simultaneously encouraging defenders of the corrupt and undemocratic "Mother of Parliaments" that has sent them in; in the struggle between landowners and ramblers, it is claimed on both sides.

One contemporary writer, Fraser Harrison, goes straight to the heart of the matter:

> While it is easy to scoff at the whimsicality and commercialism of rural nostalgia, it is also vital to acknowledge that this reaching-out to the countryside is an expression, however distorted, of a healthy desire to find some sense of meaning and relief in a world that seems increasingly bent on mindless annihilation.

Accordingly, says Harrison, "it becomes meaningful to talk of 'radical nostalgia'". (The word itself means precisely *homesickness*.) It does express a truth of its own, which reflects an authentic and deeply felt emotion. The pastoral fantasy nostalgia invented is after all an image of a world in which men and women feel at home with themselves, with each other and with nature, a world in which harmony reigns. It is an ideal.

Tolkien himself listed as a primary function of fantasy *Recovery*, which he defined as the "regaining of a clear view". In a nice twist, his wonderful discussion of *escapism* in "On Fairy-Stories" even turns the tables on his "progressive" critics, who are confusing, he writes, and

> not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. Just so a Party-spokesman might have labelled departure from the misery of the Führer's or any other Reich and even criticism of it as treachery . . .
>
> For a trifling instance: not to mention electric street-lamps of mass-produced pattern in your tale is Escape (in that sense) . . . out comes the big stick: "Electric lamps have come to stay," they say . . . "The march of Science, its tempo quickened by the needs of war, goes inexorably on . . . making some things obsolete, and foreshadowing new developments in the utilization of electricity": an advertisement. This says the same thing only more menacingly.

Tolkien has put his finger here on the deep complicity of *social realists*, and socialist thought in general, with the scientific/technological/managerial state and its ideology

which it professes to be contesting. And given the nature of this monster, is it any surprise that by way of metaphoric contrast, Tolkien and so many other people have turned to nature?

III

That point brings me to the borders of the Shire. But we are still in Middle-earth. As Gildor said to Frodo, "it is not your own Shire. Others dwelt here before hobbits were; and others will dwell here again when hobbits are no more. The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out." And as Tolkien himself commented, "hobbits are not a Utopian vision, or recommended as an ideal in their own or any age. They, as all peoples and their situations, are an historical accident – as the Elves point out to Frodo – and an impermanent one in the long view."

What is most striking about this larger world, that notwithstanding the ignorance of the hobbits about its reality and importance, encloses and sustains the Shire in space, as well as precedes and follows it in time? Certainly the variety, richness and consistency of its sense of place is extraordinary. The fact is that Middle-earth is more real to me (and I am certainly not alone in this) than many "real" places; and if I should suddenly find myself there (which would of course astound me – but not utterly) I would have a better idea of how to find my way about than if I had been dropped in, say, central Asia or South America.

But what is most striking about Tolkien's world – and this has been noticed by many readers, and even some literary critics – is its profound feeling for the natural world: geography and geology, ecologies, flora and fauna, the seasons, weather, the night-sky, and the Moon in all its phases. The experience of these phenomena as comprising a living and meaningful cosmos saturates his entire story. Even the various races of people are rooted to, and unimaginable (both to themselves and us) without, their natural contexts. As Sam said of the Elves in Lothlórien, "Whether they've made the land, or the land's made them, it's hard to say . . ."

Tolkien obviously had a particular affection for flora. I counted 64 species of non-cultivated plants specifically mentioned in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* – surely an unusual number for any work of fiction – in addition to his own nine invented (or discovered) kinds. But pride of place, obviously, goes to trees. Every forest in Middle-earth has its own unique personality. And none more memorably than the green city of Caras Galadhon in Lothlórien.

Tolkien does not romanticize nature, however. Angela Carter points out in another connection that the wood in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is

> *the* English wood. The English wood is nothing like the dark, necromantic forest in which the Northern European imagination begins and ends, where its dead and the witches live . . . For example an English wood, however marvellous, however metamorphic, cannot, by definition, be trackless . . . But to be lost in the forest is to be lost to *this* world, to be abandoned by

the light, to lose yourself utterly, an existential catastrophe . . . Nineteenth-century nostalgia disinfected the wood, cleansing it of the grave, hideous and elemental beings with which the superstition of an earlier age had filled it. Or rather, denaturing those beings until they came to look like those photographs of fairy folk that so enraptured Conan Doyle.

All good stuff, but its interest here lies in how it *doesn't* apply to Middle-earth. In fact, such "denaturing" of Elves was exactly what Tolkien held against Shakespeare. The hobbits may go rambling through an English wood of a day's outing, but as any reader of *The Hobbit* could tell you, wandering off the path in Mirkwood definitely amounts to an "existential catastrophe". Tolkien made no attempt to prettify "the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth."

Individual trees figure importantly too: the Party Tree, Old Man Willow, the White Tree in Minas Tirith – to say nothing of the two cosmogonic trees of Telperion and Laurelin. And, of course, hobbits were not Tolkien's only unique creation; he also gave us Ents, and Treebeard.

When asked the cardinal question in any kind of war – in fact, the question that is itself (however discreet) the first act of war (however polite): "Whose side are you on?" – Treebeard replies,

> I am not altogether on anybody's *side*, because nobody is altogether on my *side*, if you understand me: nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves nowadays.

It is easy to hear the voice of Tolkien himself here. He freely acknowledged his own "tree-love", writing – perhaps in view of his own "totem tree", a birch in his front yard – to the *Daily Telegraph*, not long before his death, that "In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies".

He even referred to *The Lord of the Rings* as "my own internal Tree". But not the only one. "I have among my 'papers'," he once wrote, "more than one version of a mythical 'tree'". The reference, or application, to his Niggle's surviving painting "Leaf", but a tiny fragment of the Great Tree of his ambition, is obvious.

He was well aware, of course, of the hallowed place of trees in mythology and folk-lore everywhere. But his personal involvement with trees, combined with their mythic resonance, produced an extraordinarily vivid depiction. Tolkien's trees are too vulnerable ever to be *just* symbols.

And there was an historical dimension too. He would have well aware that (as W.G. Hoskins put it), "From rising ground England must have seemed one great forest before the fifteenth century, an almost unbroken sea of tree-tops with a thin blue spiral of smoke rising here and there at long intervals". Middle-earth's own Old Forest was itself already only a survivor of vast forgotten woods . . . And at the opening of the story in *The Lord of the Rings*, even such remnants are on the edge of doom. Fangorn is threatened by Saruman, who "has a mind of metal and wheels, and does not care for growing things". And if that were not enough, "it seems that the wind is setting East, and the withering of all

woods may be drawing near". For in what remains of the green garden of Middle-earth, has re-appeared the Ring of Power. "The Ring! What shall we do with the Ring, the least of rings, the trifle that Sauron fancies?" Elrond alone permits himself any irony, even as he too, as do all the good and great, acknowledges his helplessness.

Here we must tread carefully, for Tolkien has warned us repeatedly against an allegorical or topical reading of his story. (I'm sure you all know his words well. He also once wonderfully complained, "To ask if the Orcs 'are' Communists is to me as sensible as asking if Communists are Orcs".) And he is right. He had worked hard to create a literary artefact that precisely *isn't* "allegorical or topical" – and very wisely, as we shall see. Without suggesting that the meaning of the Ring is thereby exhausted, however, I shall avail myself of my right as a reader to perceive "applicability" – a particular application that is, I believe, forcing itself upon us daily.

Consider that the Ring epitomises the strongest economic and political form of power in Middle-earth, which threatens to dominate all others in one vast autocratic realm. There are apparently no limits to its power in the material realm; true, it cannot create beauty or understanding or healing, but it rules over the three Elven Rings that can. And from *their* point of view, its transformative power is entirely destructive. Furthermore, this potential will be realised to the full once the Ring is entirely under the control of Sauron.

Needless to say, if "the Ring is taken, then the Shire will be no refuge." Indeed, in the first book of *The Lord of the Rings*, it becomes apparent that Tom Bombadil alone is unaffected by it. Although not (in my opinion) Tolkien's most felicitous character, Tom Bombadil clearly represents, in Tolkien's own words, "the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside". But the point about him here is that as Galdor says, "Power to defy our Enemy is not in him, unless such power is in the earth itself. *And yet we see that Sauron can torture and destroy the very hills.*" That fact becomes brutally clear in Frodo and Sam's agonizing journey to Mordor. I will spare you the full description of the desolation before Mordor: "a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing", where, in Frodo's words "Earth, air and water all seem accursed".

Do we not see just this blighted industrial wasteland today in Eastern Europe and Russia? And could we not find its equivalents elsewhere: in poisoned rivers and even whole seas; clear-cut and slashed and burned acres that were once rainforest, richest in life anywhere on the planet; smoking, reeking cities where life, by contrast, is cheap? This process has a name, by the way. The Greek *oikos*, which gives us *eco*, means house or abode; the Latin *caedere*, to kill. Hence, *ecocide*. (And the combination of Greek and Latin only confirms that no good can come of it.)

Professor Shippey (1982) has observed of the Ring that "it is a dull mind which does not reflect, 'Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'." And he shrewdly reminds us that the Ring is addictive in a very modern way. But this interpretation can be further tightened up with no loss of meaning, indeed with some gain. It needs no

allegorical special pleading or stretch of the imagination to see that our Ring is that malevolent contemporary amalgam of three things: the power of the nation-state – capitalism in the form of transnational economic muscle – and scientism, or the monopoly of knowledge by modern technological science. Like Tolkien's Ring, there are apparently no limits to its potential mastery of nature (certainly not those of Mercy); and once it is on the finger of its collective principal servants – that is, completely removed from any democratic accountability – there will be no way to control it at all. (Those servants have no wish to control it; rather, to feed it.)

There is precious little control as things are, of course. Sporadic public protest and non-governmental organisations worry away at its edges and fight "the long defeat", but always under the shadow of "that vast fortress, armoury, prison, furnace of great power, Barad-dur . . . secure in its pride and its immeasurable strength". (And not the least because, in a twist even Sauron never thought of, almost everybody – even those who will suffer the most by its adoption, even those who are already living in ways that constitute the solution to its terrible problems – seems so seduced by the monster's hand-maidens in advertising and the media that they can hardly wait to sign up. Addictive indeed.)

Tolkien has been accused of a simple-minded moral Manicheism, simply pitting good against evil. This charge is bizarrely wide of the mark. One of the glories of Middle-earth is its messy pluralism; the alliance against Mordor is only just cobbled together (thanks mainly to Gandalf) among people with drastically different agenda. *The Lord of the Rings* celebrates difference and defends neutrality. These are precisely the things that are jeopardised by Sauron, who seeks to turn all Middle-earth into one vast and homogenous entity, under his all-seeing Eye that might remind us not only of " single vision", in Blake's words, but Foucault's alarm-call about the insidious growth of institutionalised knowledge-as-power: "Where religions once demanded the sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves, calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge". (And let us recall that Saruman's thirst for knowledge at all costs was precisely what baited Sauron's trap in which he was caught.)

The social and human brutalization this entails absolutely cannot be separated from the ecological. Sauron's own strategy recognises this fact: be sure to destroy your victims' natural habitat, and with it their way of life, before remaking it and them in your own terrible image. Such deprivation is of course proceeding apace. At home, it's true, our rivers haven't yet started catching fire, like the pitiable Cuyahoga in Cleveland; but "They're always a-hammering and a-letting out a smoke and a stench, and there isn't no peace even at night in Hobbiton. And they pour out filth a purpose; they've fouled all the lower Water, and it's getting down into Brandywine." When, that is, rivers and streams aren't disappearing altogether, due to overabstraction (an apt word for it!) by the water companies newly privatised and protected by the government.

Given that trees were Tolkien's special concern, however, I

will merely note that whereas forests once covered sixty percent of the earth's land surface, they now cover less than six – and in England, roughly *half* of the already decimated ancient woodlands still present in 1945 have since been destroyed. But for anyone who knows hobbits reasonably well, I think I can bring it still closer to home. There was an obscure report last year, tucked away in one of the Sunday broadsheets, entitled "Wild fungi face extinction as pollution threat increases". It seems that wild mushrooms are dying out across Europe; in Holland 91 species have disappeared and another 182 are on the verge of extinction; in Germany the number of chanterelles taken annually has dropped from several thousand pounds to a few hundred, while in Britain the once common cep can now only be found in remote parts; ditto the wood blewits. The cause? Increased levels of nitrogen and sulphur in the air, and heavy metals leaching into the soil. One ecologist said "mass extinctions" were now imminent, and that the consequences for trees, vital symbiotes for fungi, were unknown, but he feared the worst.

Given that the New World Order can apparently dispense with the material attributes of nature, what hope for moral or aesthetic arguments? As Richard Mabey writes (1984, pp. ix-x), these "are now seen as, at their best, sentimental and impractical, and at their worst – it is a favourite phrase – 'purely subjective preferences'. Somewhere along the line many deep and widely shared human feelings have become regarded as a devalued currency". Or as Fraser Harrison powerfully puts it (1984, pp. 170-1),

> throughout these years, nature has nevertheless prevailed as the richest source of metaphor concerning the human condition. It is in this sense that I believe we can claim to have our own indispensable *cultural* need of conservation . . . Apart from all other consequences, the loss of each species or habitat from the countryside amounts to a blow struck at our own identity.

Yet such a position continues to be the target of critical cynicism. Keith Thomas (1983), for example, has written that "the cult of the countryside" beginning in the eighteenth century was "in many ways a mystification and an evasion of reality . . . The irony was that the educated tastes of the aesthetes had themselves been paid for by the developments which they affected to deplore". And the historian Ludmilla Jordanova goes farther (1987). Western capitalist society, she argues, sentimentalises animals and plants in order to systematically destroy them without facing the fact. "'Man' never left centre stage; nature has never been, and will never be, recognised as autonomous".

A gloomy outlook indeed! But it should be possible, without being branded a traitor, to reply, "It ain't necessarily so". That is, cultural conservationists are *not* necessarily cultural conservatives (in the pejorative sense). In fact, not even cultural conservatives are. Tolkien's position, for example, has acquired a new and distinctly radical meaning – or at the very least, potential meaning – as the crisis which partly motivated its writing has deepened and widened.

So a little humility seems in order. Can one really comfortably speak for *reality*, and dismiss all outrage at the desecration of nature by those of middle-class provenance as necessarily *affectation*? (I myself cannot deny such origins; nor that I never feel so sane and reverential as when I am in the company of broad-leaved trees, the taller and older the better. But I would utterly deny anyone else's right or ability to infallibly disqualify my experience in such a way.) And in any case, wasn't the overall social *reality* one of all-too human inconsistency, paradox and confusion, as well as (rather than simply) unadulterated hypocrisy? I would also question (except of course as a bold rhetorical move) the use of the word *never*. If "never has been" is already debatable, how much more so is "never will be"!

Ironically, the permanent human possession of centre stage is increasingly coming under question. In the struggle over the fate of irreplaceable primary old-growth forests in North America, for example, the contestants are increasingly polarised between "humanists" (in this case the logging industry and its supporters) and "deep ecologists" (often under the aegis of the organisation Earth First!). For the former, as Robert Pogue Harrison so elegantly writes (1992) – rather belying the messiness of the fight: two activists for Earth First! have already been blown up by a car bomb, apparently planted by a Christian fundamentalist pro-logger –

> there can be no question of the forest as a consecrated place; as a place of strange or enchanting or monstrous epiphanies; as a natural sanctuary. There can be only the claims of human mastery and possession of nature – the reduction of forests to utility . . .

John Fowles has put it more bluntly:

> We shall never fully understand nature (or ourselves), and certainly never respect it, until we dissociate the wild from the notion of usability – however innocent or harmless the use.

(And even more certainly, I would add, never revere it.) Nor is Tolkien wanting here, for that is just what Frodo experienced in Lórien: "He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself". Or as Gimli rhetorically asked Legolas, "Do you cut down groves of blossoming trees in the spring-time for fire-wood?" Sadly, we do.

Such an insight or plea is a hard one to make, in the face of more obvious, powerful and immediate considerations. One is easily accused of "indulging in fatuous romanticism". But the survival of anything worth the name "nature" – and therefore of whatever it means to be human in relation to nature – looks increasingly likely to depend on the success of just such a case. With the entry of this dimension, however, we are at the very edge of Middle-earth. To be precise, we are still in Tolkien's world, but we have been brought up short by the Sea.

IV

This shore marks the literal and symbolic limit of both the natural world – itself enfolding the Shire, of course – and the domination, actual or potential, of the Ring. Thus, as Legolas recalled when he first heard the gulls at Pelargir, "The Sea! . . . Alas! for the gulls. No peace shall I have again under

beech or under elm". Or as Frodo replies, when Sam comments of Rivendell that "There's something of everything here", "Yes, something of everything, Sam, except the Sea". As Tolkien himself said:

> There are other things more grim and terrible to fly from than the noise, stench, ruthlessness, and extravagance of the internal-combustion engine. There are hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice . . . And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death.

And in a letter:

> I suppose there is applicability in my story to present times. But I should say, if asked, the tale is not really about power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness. Which is hardly more than to say it is a tale written by a man!

Part of his "message", he once added, was "the hideous peril of confusing true 'immortality' with limitless serial longevity. Freedom from Time, and clinging to Time . . . Compare the death of Aragorn with a Ringwraith." "Endless serial living" – what a wonderful phrase! especially in its chilling kinship, unforeseen by Tolkien, with the "serial killing" of our own day. And from the same land comes its perfect embodiment, the practice of cryogenics – that is, freezing the body immediately after physical death, in the morbid hope of subsequent revival, thanks to the literally unstoppable "progress" of science. (As someone who shares with Tolkien "a heartfelt loathing" for Disney and all his works – but also because the point would have been useful, as a marker of the vast difference between their works – I recently learned with regret that the tale of Walt Disney's frozen head is apocryphal.)

Of course, it is one thing to assert and appreciate the profound value of limits (as unfashionable in this century as it is prescient), and quite another to do so when faced with the ultimate personal Limit (so far as most of us know). Tolkien was very well aware of this, and in fact saw it as one of the keys to his beloved *Beowulf*. He called it

> the theory of courage, which is the great contribution of early Northern literature . . . It is the strength of the northern mythological imagination that it faced this problem, put the monsters in the centre, gave them victory but no honour, and found a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage . . .

As a Christian, of course, Tolkien believed that the victory of the monsters was illusory, or at least, not final. *The Lord of the Rings* contains repeated hints about "more than one power at work", beyond even that of the greatest in Middle-earth, namely Sauron; that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring; about "chance-meetings", and "luck". But as Shippey says, "Mordor and 'the Shadow' are nearer and more visible." There is no question of luck or chance interfering with the exercise of free will, and at almost any point in *The Lord of the Rings*, things could have gone disastrously wrong. Indeed, what finally gave this power the opportunity to intervene at the crucial last hurdle, when Frodo is standing at the Crack of Doom, was his and Sam's stubborn persistence;, plus their free exercise (and Bilbo's before them) of "Pity, and Mercy". Without that, there would have been no Gollum, and Frodo would have claimed the Ring.

"Pity and Mercy" sum up why I have chosen to call this third sphere (after culture and nature) ethics. They also bring us to the question of the Christian (or otherwise) nature of *The Lord of the Rings*. Of Tolkien's own Christianity there is no doubt, but the uncomfortable relationship between that religion and nature – no time for that. The important differences between Catholicism and Protestantism – nor that. Only what Tolkien described as the "monotheistic world of natural theology" of Middle-earth. He maintained that *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.

Now it is a curious and important question why Tolkien should have *wanted* to cut out all references to religion in "a fundamentally religious work"; we shall return to it. First, and at the risk of impertinence, I want to contest this description of *The Lord of the Rings* as economical with the truth; or at least, seriously inadequate.

True, it is nominally monotheistic. At the top is God, called "the One". But as Tolkien admits, He "indeed remains remote, outside the World, and only directly accessible to the Valar or Rulers. These take the place of the 'gods', but are created spirits . . ." The One only directly intervened in history once, and that was in the momentous reshaping of the world in the Second Age. There is never the slightest suggestion that He would do so again.

The Valar, also described as "the Guardians of the World" and (interestingly) as "powers", are somewhat more present. They have at least visited Middle-earth, and one in particular – Elbereth – is the object of song, prayer and supplication in *The Lord of the Rings*. This, it seems to me, introduces a real element of polytheism into the picture, which therefore cannot, by definition, be *fundamentally* Christian.

Other aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* point to the same conclusion. For example, there is evidence of an active animism: the manifestation of the mountain Caradhras's displeasure in snow; the herb *athelas*, that makes the air sparkle with joy; the reflection of Sauron's attack in a great engulfing cloud, and the subsequent change in the winds prefiguring the turn of the tide in the battle for Minas Tirith . . . This, and much else, is contained in one of Tolkien's most marvellous passages, when the Captain of the Nazgûl confronts Gandalf before the ruined gates of Minas Tirith, in the moment when the cock crows, welcoming only the morning, and "as if in answer there came from far away another note. Horns, horns, horns. In dark Mindolliun's sides they dimly echoed. Great horns of the North wildly blowing". And after the battle, "A great rain came out of the Sea, and it seemed that all things wept for Théoden and Éowyn, quenching the fires in the City with grey tears". The

"as if" and "it seemed" here are plainly a sop to rationalists. When Tolkien writes that "Tree and stone, blade and leaf were listening", he does *not* mean it metaphorically.

Polytheism and animism are, of course, pagan by (Christian) definition, and the celebrations of 1420 are a veritable pagan feast. (One could almost say "orgy".) On Midsummer eve – not just any old day in the year – "the sky was blue as sapphire and white stars opened in the East, but the West was still golden, and the air was cool and fragrant . . ." This is the setting for the symbolic marriage (and its subsequent consummation) of the King and his bride, Arwen Evenstar. It comes as no surprise that 1420 became famous for its weddings, and in an inverse "wasteland" effect the land too is restored to fertility. Young hobbits, you will recall, sat on the lawns under the plum-trees and ate, "until they had made piles of stones like small pyramids, or the heaped skulls of a conqueror, and then they moved on."

There are other interesting complications I can't go into: the practice of reincarnation among the Dwarves, for example, which Tolkien defended in reply to a Christian reader who felt he had "overstepped the mark". True, quasi-Christian grace and prophecy appear in *The Lord of the Rings*, along with tantalising traces of Christ-like attributes on the part of Gandalf and Frodo. But divination, long a *bête noir* of the Church, figures too; and in any case, all these things have far older lineages than their relatively recent Christian versions. That also applies to Eärendil. As the Morning and Evening Star, the brightest *star* in the heavens – namely, Venus – and the emblem and icon of Elbereth, his goddess of feminine compassion, Eärendil has antecedents considerably older and more precise than either angels or Mary.

It could even be said that Tolkien's religious mythology is, in one major respect, not supernatural at all, but humanistic. As Zipes has pointed out (1979), "Tolkien raises the small person, the Hobbit, to the position of God, that is, he stands at the centre of the universe . . . The spiritual world manifests itself through the actions of the redeemed small person".

None of this is intended to denigrate the Christian elements in Tolkien's work. Indeed, none of the elements I have found should be taken as somehow trumping or cancelling out the others. (I am not suggesting, for example, that *The Lord of the Rings* is either "really" or "unconsciously" pagan.) The point is the extraordinary richness and complexity of the work. And when we turn to how and why Tolkien wrote what he did, the point emerges clearly that its syncretism, including (indeed requiring) the elimination of "practically all references to anything like religion" (as we now understand it) was a conscious and deliberate decision.

The clue to this lies in Tolkien's old exemplar, the author of *Beowulf*. In his British Academy lecture (1936), Tolkien characterised the poem as "a fusion that has occurred at a given point of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion". Living in such a time, when paganism (including its "Northern courage") was succumbing to the new religion – but unevenly, and unpredictably – its author had responded to this dilemma by suppressing the specifically Christian. Is it surprising, then, that Tolkien should decide to emulate the Beowulf-poet, and see to it that "the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism"? For he was undoubtedly keenly aware that he too lived at a given point – the other end of the same historical epoch, the "post-Christian" to *Beowulf*'s "pre-", when once again there was no single clear and over-arching set of values. Christian, pagan, humanist and many other values mix and collide; there is no single criterion by which to judge between them that is even nearly universally accepted, yet none of them is unaffected by the others. (For that reason one cannot meaningfully speak of a "return" to any of them.) And the same applies politically, socially, philosophically . . . If there is one dictum that sums up this situation – and incidentally suggests a positive response – it must be Joseph Schumpeter's: "To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian". And it is entirely fitting, if ironic, that it is Schumpeter's civilised man, not his barbarian, who now embodies the pagan virtue of "Northern courage" that Tolkien so admired. As part of the same process, the green of leaves which used to signify barbarism is now well on its way to becoming the sign of a society sufficiently civilised to value nature.

Tolkien "realized the absurdity in post-Christian days", in Richard L. Purtill's words (1984), "of attempting original myth". His solution was to attempt a re-creation through literary myth. In some remarks in a letter about the Arthurian myth, he finds it (he says) not only "imperfectly naturalised" (more British than English) and over-generous with *faerie*, but

> For another and more important thing: it is involved in, and explicitly contains the Christian religion.
>
> For reasons which I will not elaborate, *that seems to me fatal . . .* (I am speaking, of course, of our present situation, not of ancient pagan, pre-Christian days . . .)

Thus Tolkien needed Frodo and the hobbits not only to give his disabused modern readers access to the ancient heroic world of Middle-earth but also as a mediation, like *The Lord of the Rings* as a whole, "between pagan myth and Christian truth" – and between that Truth and modern myth.

Actually, with his usual extraordinary attention to detail and consistency, he even implied this point within *The Lord of the Rings*. For already in Frodo's day, "Gone was the *mythological* time when Valinor (or Valimar), the Land of the Valar (gods if you will) existed physically in the Uttermost West, or the Eldaic (Elvish) immortal Isle of Eressëa; or the Great Isle of Westernesse (Númenor-Atlantis)." The gods, whose judgement was (effectively) perfect and final, were no longer available; the seas were now bent, and anyone setting sail in search of the "ancient or True West" will simply return to their starting-point. The old "straight way" was gone, and with it all "straight sight".

V

With that, I have come to the edge of the "third sphere" in

Tolkien's world (if one can speak so of something so vast and open-ended). There are of course endless loose ends. (Is Tom Shippey, for example, soft on Orcs?) But what really remains is to emphasise the overlap, or rather synthesis, of the three nested considerations – culture, nature and spirit – that I have identified. That synthesis, I believe, is what guided Tolkien himself, and still embodies the modern meaning of his work.

Out of the mirror of Englishness, for example, Tolkien picked not only the obviously appropriate – a love of nature in general and flora in particular – but native traditions of frugality, self-sufficiency and community. And it could be argued that the strongly implicit and tacit sense of the sacred that Tolkien conveys is peculiarly English.

But the interaction of "nature" and "spirit" is particularly potent. As Sam says deep in Mordor, recalling Galadriel's seemingly fantastic offers earlier, "If only the Lady could see us or hear us, I'd say to her: 'Your ladyship, all we want is light and water: just clean water and plain daylight, better than any jewels, begging your pardon.'" What haunts his thoughts is "the memory of water; and every brook or stream or fount that he had ever seen, under green willow-shades or twinkling in the sun . . ." Meanwhile, the growing ravages of the Ring on Frodo are having precisely the reverse effect: "No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire." So much for the supposed other-worldliness (and tweeness) of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is in fact a work in which a deeply sensual appreciation of this world is interfused with an equally powerful sense of its ineffability. This is actually a movement within the story of *The Lord of the Rings*: from the simple, sensual appreciation of Pippin's bath song – "Oh! Water hot is a noble thing!" – to a deeper and truer appreciation of these things, in which their aesthetic, spiritual and (literally) vital dimensions are indissolubly one.

The vision at the heart of *The Lord of the Rings* is therefore indeed one of "The cosmos as a whole . . . an organism at once *real, living* and *sacred*" (Mircea Eliade). But it goes farther, because *while* we live, the sacred – although it extends "beyond the limits of the world", via death – is meaningless without its natural embodiment. (Or worse! since Tolkien identified the obscenity of "endless serial living" as one such attempt.)

Finally, this world-view is not simply opposed to "a positivist, mechanist, urbanized, and rationalist culture", but grafted onto some native cultural traditions whose survival-value has been (sorely) tried and tested. Without that, *The Lord of the Rings* would have remained a fantasy indeed. But just as Frodo and (in the end) Sam are no ordinary hobbits, so Tolkien envisages not a passive acceptance of English society as it is, but its rather radical transformation. (And note too that the efforts of the aristocratic and artistic Elves to merely preserve are explicitly doomed to failure.)

In short, Tolkien's work urges *a new ethic, based on the resacralisation of life, and the lineaments of life* – good earth, clean water, plain daylight – *that is deeply rooted in the local culture*. Nothing less will enable us to destroy the power of the Ring.

Such an ethic is no substitute, of course, for a political programme and determined local action; but then again, without it they will certainly fail. Nor is it all as ambitious as it perhaps sounds; all that is needed is for the "resacralisation" to become sufficiently widespread and powerful – *whatever* its class (or other) origins – for its effects to make a difference. A new church is not required.

Richard Mabey has seen this point clearly (1984). In response to the crises of industrial society, he writes:

> increasingly the shape of the most promising alternatives is emerging out of what we loosely call "the rural tradition". That . . . may begin to succeed as a movement in the real world if we recognise that the experience of nature is not exclusive to a particular place or moment, a way of life or position of privilege, but is an aspect of all our individual lives and of our collective history.

And "collective" here means just that: everybody, even (potentially) your city-dwellers whose direct experience of nature is minimal, and whose "yearning for a relationship with nature and the land [is] based, not on ownership or labour, but on simple delight and sensual and spiritual renewal". For they too – despite their hopelessly middle-class, inchoately nostalgic, inauthentically "suburban and half-educated" character – are in search not only "for a modern role for the countryside", but for themselves. As Fraser Harrison puts it, recalling a remark of Hazlitt's that Nature is a kind of universal Home, "what must be conserved before anything else is the desire in ourselves for Home – for harmony, peace and love, for growth in nature and in our imaginative powers – because unless we keep this alive, we shall lose everything."

Just so, and that brings us (finally) back to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as the literary artefacts with which we started out. For here is the answer to the charge that Tolkien was writing for or on behalf of a cosy elite; that his work was ideological in a strict and pejorative sense. The "desire for Home" may cut out many, but it certainly does so in no simple way that follows from class, race or gender. True, those principally feeling and actually acting on behalf of such a desire may be middle-class in origin; but the same may be said of those leading virtually every modern revolutionary movement (including those identified as Marxist). It does not follow that the benefits will be confined to people like themselves – or do others not need, let alone appreciate, clean water, good air and healthy food? And that applies to more "frivolous" things too. It is those who sneer at the middle-classness of ecologism who most patronise the masses.

In fact, as we have seen, any bias built into Tolkien's books works against a highly educated or literate, and to that extent privileged readership; if they have an "average" or "typical" reader, it is just such an object of critical scorn as the humble city-dweller I have just described. So what is he or she getting from these books, and how, while the loremasters are engaged on weightier matters?

Let us recall Tolkien's belief that fairy-stories offer, "in a peculiar degree or mode, these things: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation . . ." When I first read *The Lord of the Rings* at the age of sixteen, after an unwitting preparation thanks to *The Hobbit*, seven years earlier, I was overcome with the unmistakable sense of having encountered a world that was more real than the one I lived in; or one, at least, whose reality was much more concentrated. Accompanying this feeling was the equally odd one of inexplicable familiarity with that world. And finally, there was a definite sense of loss when I had finished, which (combined with delight and curiosity) impelled me to immediately recommence reading it. None of this was a unique experience on my part; to a greater or lesser degree, *The Lord of the Rings* has affected many readers in just this way, and it deserves some attempt at understanding.

Let's look at the "sense of loss" first. It is actually well-described within the book itself, at the point where the Company is setting off in their boats on the Silverlode, when it seemed to them that "Lórien was slipping backward, like a bright ship masted with enchanted trees, sailing on to forgotten shores, while they sat helpless upon the margin of the grey and leafless world." This deprivation, with its unwilling return to a "grey and leafless world", can actually be hard to bear. Or again – and it is no coincidence that this incident also involves Lothlórien, "the heart of Elvendom on earth" – when Frodo was walking up Cerin Amroth, he felt that "When he had gone and passed again into the outer world, still Frodo the wanderer from the Shire would walk there . . ."

That passage ought to remind us of another one, from the glory days of Edwardian children's literature: ". . . wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest a little boy and his bear will always be playing". If, Dear Reader, that sort of thing makes you want (like Dorothy Parker) to fwow up, Tolkien's is less likely to for a number of reasons. First, it is less important in the context of the book as a whole. Second, it is embedded in a much more sombre (and distinctly adult) view of life, with the monsters very nearly if not quite dead-centre. Third, it is important to notice that at the end of his tale, and various hints about other worlds notwithstanding, Tolkien returns us firmly to *this* one: at the Grey Havens, after the departure of Frodo and Gandalf, Sam "stood far into the night, hearing only the sigh and murmur of the waves on the shores of Middle-earth, and the sound of them sank deep into his heart". We stand with him. As his own definition of Recovery implies, Tolkien's *"evangelium"* permits only a "fleeting glimpse of Joy" in *this* world, not permanent transportation to the next. The nostalgia he engenders, therefore, is finally redirected back into our own lives here.

In my view, Tolkien's work awakes precisely that longing for Home, in which "pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness". And being a boy (or girl) is not a necessary prerequisite.

What about the sense of hyper-reality? And how could one feel it to be almost intimately familiar, upon the first reading of a book supposedly about a very different place and/or time? Here I think the word "mythology", so over-used in connection with Tolkien, is actually useful. Carl Kerenyi (1951) defined the stuff of mythology as:

> an immemorial and traditional body of material contained in tales about gods and god-like beings, heroic battles and journeys to the Underworld – tales already well-known but not unamenable to further reshaping. Myth is the *movement* of this material . . .

Furthermore, "Myth gives a ground, lays a foundation. It does not answer the question 'why?' but 'whence?'"All this fits Tolkien like a fine glove, and he could have supplied a clear answer to Kerenyi's rhetorical (and slightly plaintive) question, "is an immediate experience and enjoyment of mythology still in any sense possible?"

His incorporation into *The Lord of the Rings* of English and "Northern" cultural traditions, including the mythological, was not just a calculated strategy; it was unavoidable for a man so thoroughly steeped in them. But they give his work a tremendous advantage over that of others, possibly otherwise similar, because those traditions still live. Thus, if I had been able to articulate my early experience of familiarity adequately at the time, I would have said it felt not so much like a discovery as a *re*-discovery, a reconnection with something that I now see is a *living* tradition. It does not just embrace the myths attached to England as somehow a preternaturally "green and pleasant land" (although that counts too).

The result, it seems to me, is the same sense of wonder that Keats experienced upon encountering Chapman's *Homer*, for the same kind of reason in relation to our Greek cultural heritage; only Tolkien has performed this service (with infinitely less thanks), in relation to that of "North-west Europe", for later, larger and less "literary" generations. And again, none the less or worse for that! Amanda Craig recently quoted *Private Eye* to the effect that *The Lord of the Rings* appeals only to "computer programmers, hippies and most Americans" (1992). She nicely puts this to work, observing that "The fact that Tolkien's world appeals to computer programmers is possibly less a sign that it is infantile than that he developed a hypnotic style and narrative which quickens the reluctantly literate as well as the devoutly bookish. Few writers in any century can claim the same."

As for the hyper-reality of Middle-earth, one would have to be a pretty unreconstructed positivist to say that such things as mythologies, let alone cultural traditions, are somehow less real than say, the proverbial table; or even to say that they did not contain, however coded, a great deal of *emotion* in the form of accumulated human experience: hopes, wishes, fears . . . Tolkien's books present a highly distilled and concentrated (albeit also highly selective) version of just that.

This analysis accords with Tolkien's own experience of writing *The Lord of the Rings*, in which it "grew", he "was drawn irresistibly" toward certain things, and "discovery" felt much more the case than "invention". If one reacts as reader in the manner I have described, it is impossible to feel

that this was mere rhetoric designed to enhance his creation. And Middle-earth was emphatically not "created": certainly not, at least, in the fashionable modern sense of creation *ex nihilo*. It was a *co-creation*, in partnership with some very old and durable cultural materials. It would be unduly extravagant – or worse, fundamentalist – to say that he literally discovered Middle-earth. But neither did he simply invent it.

Whether his books are defined as quest or fairy-story or "myth" and "low mimesis" and "irony" all embedded deeply in romance, they are certainly story-telling of a kind long unfashionable as an adult genre. But giving "mythic" its full cultural and historical due due allows us to see Tolkien's uniqueness more clearly. Within the baggy genre of "fantasy", for example, it is what raises *The Lord of the Rings* above even well-written books that however embody a more purely personal mythology, like David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus* and Mervyn Peake's Gothic "Gormenghast" trilogy, and Freudian-fantastic fables by Angela Carter (1985); let alone meretricious fiction like Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding*, a kind of literary "Twin Peaks".

The only books I can think of that seem strictly comparable to *The Lord of the Rings*, in the terms in which I have analysed it here, are Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. They too draw their power from a profound and startlingly fresh connection with mythic aspects of the Judaeo-Christian cultural tradition (though not of course Tolkien's unique "Northern" contribution). And they have also presented literary critics with intractable problems, who are usually obliged to treat them, in the end, as *sui generis*. Except maybe for Hoban's, they could also all be described as life-works.

This is Tolkien's true company of peers. He is saved by his deep and tough roots in a particular cultural soil from the extraordinarily deracinated (and therefore shallow) universalism of *Star Wars*, with its bargain-basement Jungian archetypes, eulogised by Joseph Campbell; and by his brilliant re-creation of myth from the ghastly death-in-life of Disney's imitation, with its plastic grass and "genuine replica" fairy castles.

His books, and along with it his many readers, are fully deserving of critical respect – even a little passionate attention. They are not only a cry (as Marx said of religion) from "the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions", but a plea for what I have called the resacralisation of life. That plea gleams with an ancient hope: peace within and among people, and between people and nature. Indeed, Tolkien's own personal epitaph might be the parting words to Aragorn or *Estel* from his mother: "I gave Hope to the Dúnedain, I have kept no hope for myself."

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