

Enchantment in Tolkien and Middle-earth

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My intention here is to trace the effects of enchantment – largely as understood and defined by Tolkien himself – in both his creative life and the world of Middle-earth which resulted from it. I shall start by introducing the idea of enchantment itself.

1.

As is well-known, Tolkien set out his own literary programme, at least in broad outline, in “On Fairy-Stories”.¹ Not the least valuable aspect of this essay is its attempt to articulate the nature of enchantment – something which is remarkably rare, even in fat tomes with the words “Enchantment” or “Re-Enchantment” in their titles.² In contrast, intellectuals have been happy to discuss the subject of disenchantment at length. (It is central, for example, to the concerns and publications of the Frankfurt School and related critical theory.³) Even Max Weber, who was responsible for introducing the idea of “the disenchantment of the world” into modern discourse, had little to say about what enchantment is, or perhaps was.⁴ But that little, when added to Tolkien’s speculations and those of a very few others, allow us to formulate a reasonably coherent and accurate idea.⁵

That idea has three parts. One is that “Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose.” (The relevant contrast, which we shall not pursue here, is with magic – including modern magic, i.e., techno-science.)⁶ The second part, Tolkien’s definition of “the primal desire at the heart of Faërie”, is fundamental: “the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder.”⁷

To this we can add this Weber’s crucial insight that “The unity of the primitive image of the world, in which everything was *concrete magic*, has tended to split” – as a result of the process of disenchantment – “into rational cognition and mastery of nature, on the one hand, and into ‘mystic’ experiences, on the other.”⁸ In other words, enchantment ignores the split, deepened by Descartes but inherited by him from Platonic philosophy and thence Christian theology, between spiritual and/or mental subjectivity on the one hand and material objectivity on the other; it partakes of both.

Thus an intensive delineation of enchantment includes these characteristics:

- indispensably, existential wonder – which, as such, is useless in instrumental or utilitarian terms, but by no means therefore without effects; furthermore, enchantment is
- both ineffable and mysterious, on the one hand, and embodied, even carnal, and very precisely situated on the other;
- participatory, recalling the etymological meaning of “enchantment”: to be (to find oneself) in a song (the song which one is singing or to which one is listening); and finally, it is

- pluralist, in the sense that although an experience of enchantment may partake intensely of unity, completeness and infinity while it lasts, being also ‘concrete’ it always comes to an end. Viewed from “outside”, therefore, it is ongoing, incomplete, and potentially multiple.

An extensive delineation would include experiences of enchantment, as just described, arising out of such situations as these:

- nature (decidedly not in the abstract but particular and “real” places, things, animals, etc.);
- love (paradigmatically erotic love, but also maternal/ paternal, as well as friendship);
- ritual (especially but not only religious);
- art (all the arts, related to all the senses and faculties – including humour);
- sports (as in, feeling oneself to be in the game which one is watching...);
- food (as in, slow – as opposed to fast – food); and
- learning (in the sense of lore for its own sake).

The way this list cuts across most coherent categories to which we are accustomed signals that we are dealing here with a particular, even peculiar beast, whose distinctiveness – significant commonalities with other kinds of experience notwithstanding – should be respected.

2.

Now enchantment was a far from purely theoretical or programmatic concept for Tolkien. Two intensely personal experiences of enchantment took place in his life (to put it somewhat redundantly: enchantment by its nature is personal, *as well as* more-than-personal). Both of them massively influenced that life, including his life-work. I have taken the following accounts from Humphrey Carpenter’s biography.⁹

The first – characteristically linguistic for someone who was, in C.S. Lewis’s words, “inside language” – took place in 1913, when Tolkien was reading the *Crist of Cynewulf*, a group of Anglo-Saxon religious poems.

Two lines from it struck him forcibly:

*Eala Earendil engla beorhtast
Ofer middangeard monnum sended.*

‘Hail Earendel, brightest of angels / above the middle-earth sent unto men.’ *Earendel* is glossed by the Anglo-Saxon dictionary as ‘a shining light, ray’, but here it clearly has some special meaning. Tolkien himself interpreted it as referring to John the Baptist, but he believed that ‘Earendel’ had originally been the name for the star presaging the dawn, that is, Venus. He was strangely moved by its appearance in the *Cynewulf* lines. ‘I felt a curious thrill,’ he wrote long afterwards, as if something had stirred in me, half wakened from sleep. There was something very remote and strange and beautiful behind those words, if I could grasp it, far beyond ancient English.’

...[In 1914] he wrote a poem [: ‘The Voyage of Earendil’]... This notion of the star-mariner whose ship leaps into the sky had grown from the reference to ‘Earendel’ in the *Cynewulf* lines. But the poem that it produced

was entirely original. It was in fact the beginning of Tolkien's own mythology.

The second experience occurred sometime in 1917-18:

On days when he could get leave, he and Edith went for walks in the countryside. Near Roos they found a small wood with an undergrowth of hemlock, and there they wandered. Ronald recalled of Edith as she was at this time: 'Her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes bright, and she could sing – and dance.' She sang and danced for him in the wood, and from this came the story that was to be the centre of *The Silmarillion*: the tale of the mortal man Beren who loves the immortal elven-maid Lúthien Tinúviel, whom he first sees dancing among the hemlock in a wood. ...Of all his legends, the tale of Beren and Lúthien was the one most loved by Tolkien, not least because at one level he identified the character of Lúthien with his own wife.

There is no need to belabour the importance of these experiences for Tolkien, and therefore for understanding his work. But it is permissible to speculate on that significance not only in a germinal, formative capacity but in relation to certain tensions – themselves perhaps creative ones; at least, betimes – which, I think, must have resulted from their juxtaposition with Tolkien's Christianity. As we have seen, enchantments, both theoretically and in Tolkien's own experience of them, include an inalienably "concrete" dimension which could, at the very least, cast doubt on their validity from the point of view of a theological commitment to a single and universal spiritual truth. More: a counter-commitment to experiences of enchantment could throw doubt in the other direction! Now I don't say these tensions are, in principle, unresolvable psychologically or even theologically; but it would be very surprising if they were not present and/or were inconsequential.

The context for such a discussion, not necessarily helpfully but probably unavoidably, is the presence of Catholic Christianity and/or paganism in Tolkien's work.¹⁰ In my view, notwithstanding a predilection for exclusivity stemming from the universalism just mentioned, this question can only be resolved satisfactorily by starting from the position of 'both-and' rather than 'either-or'. Then things can be noticed and said about which aspects of his fiction are more one or the other and, even more interesting, how the two passions interacted.

To return to Tolkien's two enchantments I have just reviewed, they relate principally and obviously, in the first case, to the "star" of Venus, whose intimate association with the female pagan deity of love and beauty – but of no less religious significance for that – long predates Christianity (all of which Tolkien was perfectly well aware of);¹¹ and in the second instance, to a passionate, including implicitly erotic, relationship – but no less spiritual for that – between two lovers. And without for a moment denying other perspectives, Beren and Lúthien were also, *qua* lovers, under the aegis of Venus.

So how did this sort of thing, integral to both Tolkien's life and his work, relate – almost certainly in both directions – with his Catholicism? I do not intend to try to work out the details here, because there are other things I want to concentrate on, but any attempt should certainly consider his carefully complex response in 1954 to a reader's criticism of Elvish reincarnation:

‘Reincarnation’ may be bad *theology*. . . But I do not see how even in the Primary World any theologian or philosopher, unless very much better-informed about the relation of spirit and body than I believe anyone to be, could deny the *possibility* of re-incarnation as a mode of existence, prescribed for certain kinds of rational incarnate creatures.¹²

There is also the nice distinction which Tolkien draws in his remark to Auden in 1965 that “I don’t feel under any obligation to make my story fit with formalized Christian theology, though I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief. . .”¹³

3.

Let us turn now to enchantment *inside* his literary creation. Much of what we can learn from doing so has already been discussed, but some key points become much clearer viewed from within Middle-earth.

The most important of these is the firm identification of enchantment – consistent with ‘On Fairy-Stories – as the paradigmatic experience, property and concern of the Elves. That idea is extensively introduced, in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Frodo is listening to the singing in the Hall of Fire in Rivendell.¹⁴ But it is driven home in connection with Lothlórien, “the heart of Elvendom on earth”. This is the place, by no means coincidentally, for the most explicit discussion of enchantment within the book:

Frodo stood awhile still lost in wonder. It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. . . . He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them. . . . On the land of Lórien there was no stain.

He turned and saw that Sam was now standing beside him, looking round with a puzzled expression, and rubbing his eyes as if he was not sure he was awake. ‘It’s sunlight and bright day, right enough,’ he said. ‘I thought the Elves were all for moon and stars: but this is more elvish than anything I ever heard tell of. I feel as if I was *inside* a song, if you take my meaning.’¹⁵

This experience constitutes just the healing reconnection with reality which Tolkien – contesting the charge of “escapism” – describes in his essay as “recovery” or “the regaining of a clear view”.¹⁶

Another important point about enchantment is made by Aragorn in his rebuke to Boromir: “‘Speak no evil of the Lady Galadriel! . . . There is in her and in this land no evil, unless a man bring it hither himself. Then let him beware!’”¹⁷ This is arguably the source of the danger Tolkien had in mind when he described Faërie as “a perilous land”.¹⁸ The clear implication is that any danger to mortals from enchantment lies principally not in the latter itself but in the relationship one has with it.

The description of the Company leaving Lórien – or rather, as they experienced it, Lórien withdrawing from them – brilliant evokes the desolation of disenchantment, the unbearable end (forever, it may seem) of just what gives one’s life its meaning:

For so it seemed to them: 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.¹⁹

(I am reminded here of the same thing happening at the end of another book in which enchantment figures importantly and poignantly, Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*: "It was not I who was going away, I did not have it in my power to leave Africa, but it was the country that was slowly and gravely withdrawing from me, like the sea in ebb-tide." This resonance seems to point to a truth about enchantment.²⁰)

Returning to the point about what we bring to enchantment, this condition points to the chief danger, I think, inherent in any significant involvement with enchantment: attachment, dependency, and ultimately addiction. (And the resonance here with the discourse of drugs – especially those which offer an intense version of enchantment, the ever-rising price of which often emerges later – is by no means coincidental.²¹) That, above all, is what can poison the purity, beauty and intrinsic value of enchantment. For enchantment, as Tolkien wrote, "represents love: that is, a love and respect for all things, "Inanimate" [*sic*] and "animate", an unpossessive love of them as 'other'."²²

So the corollary – which I make bold to assert would have obtained Tolkien's assent – is this: a healthy relationship with enchantment requires a *strong* ego, so to speak, with the ability to *do without it*.²³ And what is this but one aspect of the grit that Tolkien (and several of his characters) so admired: Northern courage, to coin a phrase? (If one seeks connections between "On Fairy-Stories" and his other great essay on Beowulf, this is surely one.)

My point is also discernible in the history of Middle-earth. As Théoden observes rhetorically, "however the fortune of war shall go, may it not so end that much that was fair and wonderful shall pass for ever out of Middle-earth?"²⁴ The seal of this poignant fate is (or at least is symbolized by) the mysterious link between the One Ring – Tolkien's master trope of power- and will-driven Magic and malevolence – and the Three Rings, one of which (Galadriel's) is the guarantor of the heart of Elvendom in Middle-earth, and thence its wonder and beneficence. Sauron's hand never touched the Three. Why is it, then, that with the passing of the One, their power too wanes?

This question preoccupied me for quite a while.²⁵ I found what I think is the answer, however, in a passage of Verlyn Flieger's *A Question of Time*. Flieger argues convincingly that the apparent perfection of Elvish enchantment is misleading – and doubly so, given the ambivalence resulting from Tolkien's own attachment to it – insofar as human beings, unlike Elves, cannot live in, as it were, a permanent state of enchantment; and any attempt to do so is doomed. Thus,

there is a concealed sting in Lórien's beauty. Its timelessness is not the unspoiled perfection it seems. Rather, that very perfection is its flaw. It is a cautionary picture, closer in kind to the Ring than we'd like to think, shown to us in all its beauty to test if we can let it go.

The Lord of the Rings is, among other things, a story about the ability to let go. The Ring is the obvious example.... The timeless beauty of Lórien is the deeper example.²⁶

I believe this is the theme underlying and uniting the One Ring, the Three, and us. It is a theme that includes but extends far beyond Tolkien's work, the province of all

religions and of none alone. Here, for example, are the reported words of the Buddha on his deathbed to his grieving friend and attendant (spoken from the perspective of one who has transcended such suffering but nonetheless, one feels, a little wearily):

“Enough, Ananda, do not sorrow, do not lament. Have I not formerly explained that it is the nature of things that we must be divided, separated and parted from all that is beloved and dear? How could it be, Ananda, that what has been born and come into being, that what is compounded and subject to decay, should not decay? It is not possible.”²⁷

4.

I also recently ‘discovered’ a book by a Canadian philosopher, Jan Zwicky, which throws valuable light on the subject of enchantment generally, as well as specifically in relation to the work of Tolkien.²⁸ (It also corroborates some of my own thinking on both counts: always welcome, in the absence of unshakeable self-confidence.)

Zwicky counterposes “the lyric” – which is more-or-less cognate with ‘enchantment’ – with the technological. Thus,

Lyric coherence is not like the unity of systematic structures: its foundation is a heightened experience of detail, rather than the transcendence (excision) of detail.

Lyric springs from love, love that attends to the most minute details of difference; and in this attention experiences connection rather than isolation.

It is poignant, and musical.

Lyric value is a species of teleological value: it perceives things exclusively as ends. In this, it is genetically distinct from utility.²⁹

In contrast, the technological is instrumentalist. It sanctions exploitation, which “occurs when a thing becomes identified with a particular role in ‘the story of (Western European) (human) progress’; roughly, when it becomes a commodity; when it is used in the absence of a perception of what it is.”³⁰

Recall, in this connection, Frodo’s lyric experience of a tree while entering 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.”³¹ As Zwicky says, “The experience of ‘presence’ precludes exploitation.” But then she adds – introducing a critically important third term – “Though it does not preclude use. There is a sense of ‘use’ which is, we might say, *domestic*, and of a significantly different character from exploitation.”³² To continue with the example of trees and humans, the industrial clear-cutting of whole forests, many of them ancient, is exploitation – (one is reminded of the felling of whole groves to feed the insatiable fires of Orthanc) – whereas coppicing, pollarding and selective cutting, such as surely is practiced by hobbits, is domestic use.³³

Now life utterly without enchantment or lyric would hardly feel worth living, or even, perhaps, be livable. As Zwicky puts it,

Lyric springs from the desire to recapture the intuited wholeness of the non-linguistic world, to heal the slash in the mind that is the capacity for language.

But as language-using creatures, it is of our essence that that gap cannot be permanently healed. The recognition that it cannot is the source of lyric's poignancy.

Poignancy comes after yearning. It is the essential emotional colouring of lyric thought.³⁴

And, beyond a doubt, that of Tolkien's work. "It is a fair tale, though it is sad, as are all the tales of Middle-earth."³⁵ However, we humans are not Elves, so we cannot *live* in Lothlórien. As Flieger notes, "An important impetus for [Tolkien's] subcreation was his uneasiness with the twentieth century, his desire to escape it, and his knowledge that such escape was only partly (and then only imaginatively) possible."³⁶ Or as Zwicky puts the matter:

Lyric strives for the whole in a single gesture, yearns for a wholeness with the world that, as language-users, we cannot sustain.

It is both the sadness and strength of thought that it can see beyond what drives it, the sadness and the beauty of human being that it can comprehend the incompatibility of its essence with its most fundamental desire.³⁷

That does not, of course, mean that we must therefore be Orcs, left only with technological exploitation! This is where the concept of the domestic comes into its own:

The domestic accepts the essential tension between lyric desire and the capacity for technology.

In this acceptance, it mediates.³⁸

And, she adds,

Domesticity lives without absolutes – including absolute clarity.³⁹

In relation to Tolkien's great work, however, all this seems relatively clear, at least. For what are the hobbits – and thus, by Tolkien's own admission, humans⁴⁰ – if not *domestic*? And what else does the book as a whole end with – quite deliberately, we may be sure – when Sam returns home to his wife and child, evening meal and fire?⁴¹

As usual, Tolkien *gestures*, without the least didacticism (or in his terms, allegory),⁴² to the deepest existential realities of human life, with its challenges and what we have to face them with: chiefly, courage, hope, and an appreciation of what is small and apparently insignificant; and above all, the bitter-sweet poignancy that is our peculiar gift.

REFERENCES

- ¹ In J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, edited Christopher Tolkien (London: Unwin Hyman: 1988). The original essay was first delivered as a lecture in 1939, and first published, revised and enlarged, in 1947. See also my “Magic vs. Enchantment”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14.3 (1999): 401-12.
- ² To pick just two recent examples: David Ray Griffin, *Re-Enchantment Without Supernaturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) and Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantmen: British Occultim and the Culure of the Modernt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). These could be multiplied many times.
- ³ Principally the work of Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse.
- ⁴ The original phrase was Schiller’s.
- ⁵ Especially R.W. Hepburn, ‘Wonder’ and Other Essays (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984).
- ⁶ See my “Magic vs. Enchantment” and my *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*, 2nd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), ch. 3.
- ⁷ “Fairy-Stories”, 49, 18.
- ⁸ H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991), 282; my emphasis.
- ⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* [George, Allen & Unwin, 1977], pp. 64, 71; 97. But cf. T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* [GA&U, 1982], pp. 183-85; and Verlyn Flieger, *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Road to Faërie* [Kent State U. Press, 1997], pp. 148-49.
- ¹⁰ For two good papers with contrasting emphases, see Ronald Hutton, “The Pagan Tolkien”, forthcoming in the proceedings of the ‘Tolkien 05’ conference which took place at Aston University, 11-15 August 2005, and Stratford Caldecott, “Christianity and Literary Culture: The Case of J R R Tolkien”, unpublished paper from a talk given at Regent’s Park College, 15th November 2005. (See also Hutton’s “The Inklings and the Gods”, ch. 7 in his *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* [London: Hambeldon and London, 2003].)
- ¹¹ See *Letters*, 385.
- ¹² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 189.
- ¹³ *Letters*, 355.
- ¹⁴ *The Lord of the Rings* (henceforth *TlotR*), Book 2, chapter 1.
- ¹⁵ *TlotR*, Book 2, ch. 6.
- ¹⁶ “Fairy-Stories”, 52-54; cf. “The Light of Holiness: The Healing Power of Tolkien’s Narrative” by Fr. Guglielmo Spirito, given at the Exeter College conference.
- ¹⁷ *TlotR*, Book 2, ch. 7.
- ¹⁸ “Fairy-Stories”, 9.
- ¹⁹ *TlotR*, Book 2, ch. 8.
- ²⁰ Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa* (New York: Random House, 1970 [1937]), 381.
- ²¹ See Aldous Huxley’s still superb essay “The Doors of Enchantment”.
- ²² From MS. 9, Tolkien Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford, quoted by Verlyn Flieger, *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Road to Faërie* (Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), 247.
- ²³ Cf. Tolkien’s related assertion that “The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make” (*Fairy-Stories*, 51).
- ²⁴ *TlotR*, Book 2, ch. 8.
- ²⁵ It was posed to me, with his usual uncomfortable perspicuity, by Michael P. Winship.
- ²⁶ *Question of Time*, 112.
- ²⁷ Quoted in Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 26. I once gave a short talk to the Tolkien Society in which I suggested, tongue in cheek, of course, that Tolkien was actually a Buddhist; nonetheless, there is a serious point here, which I have tried to make above. Patrick Curry, “On Hobbits and Elves: or, Took and Baggins Again”, Helen Armstrong (ed.), *Digging Potatoes, Growing Trees*, vol. 3 (Telford: The Tolkien Society, 2001), 48-51.
- ²⁸ Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
- ²⁹ *Lyric*, 120, 126, 134, 158.
- ³⁰ *Lyric*, 222.
- ³¹ *TlotR*, Book 2, ch. 6.
- ³² *Lyric*, 222; emphasis in original.
- ³³ I am grateful to Tom Shippey for pointing out this relevance of this contrast.

³⁴ *Lyric*, 230.

³⁵ *TlotR*, Book 1, ch. 11.

³⁶ *Question of Time*, 257.

³⁷ *Lyric*, 284, 534.

³⁸ *Lyric*, 258.

³⁹ *Lyric*, 524,

⁴⁰ “The hobbits are, of course, meant to be a branch of the specifically *human* race (not Elves or Dwarves)...” *Letters*, 158, n.

⁴¹ I am grateful to Sue Bridgwater for pointing out this obvious and important point which I had somehow managed to miss.

⁴² *TlotR*, “Foreword to the Second Edition”.