

INTRODUCTION

Deep roots in a time of frost, then. Or, as seems more likely, fire. But in either case, the roots of J.R.R. Tolkien's work run deep indeed. It will outlive that of most of his contemporaries and successors, and promises give succour to people we will never know in their own dark times. My own concern is with one aspect in particular: its enchantment, both as a theme in the work itself and as an effect on its readers. I have gone into some detail about enchantment in the essays that follow which I won't repeat here, but you won't go far wrong if you remember that it is first and foremost about wonder. (I'm sorry for some repetition in the essays themselves, by the way, but it's unavoidable when they often address and return to the same themes.)

Enchantment was also a prime concern for Tolkien, and he contrasted it sharply with magic, or will. With good reason, the Ring of Power is a magic ring, and the most powerful magician in Middle-Earth was, of course, Sauron. He was also the most technologically advanced one. There is no contradiction here; our magic, so to speak, is modern technoscience. ('Magic' and 'machine' most probably share the same root in Proto-Indo-European: **magh*, meaning 'to have power'.)

Tolkien's term for enchantment was *Faërie*, meaning both the place where you go when you are enchanted and the state you are in when you find yourself there. It is a fundamentally non-modern place and experience.¹ And the central figure in and of *Faërie* is the Elf. Indeed, he asserted that 'the Elves are there (in my tales) to demonstrate the difference between the two', that is, magic and enchantment.² The Elves not only practise enchantment as their art, they embody it.

Now it is interesting to speculate on the Elves' mythic and literary provenance, and as a practising Catholic, Tolkien was brave to give a major role to such theologically ambiguous beings, 'perhaps the only creatures to whom the [Christian] Model does not assign, as it were, an official status', as C.S. Lewis put it.³ Certainly they are radically different from the diminutive winged imps of Shakespeare and J.M. Barrie, being 'a race high and beautiful...the People of the Great Journey, the People of the Stars.'⁴ But my chief interest has always been not origins or influences but something Tolkien reminded us not to forget in his essay on fairy stories: 'the effect produced *now* by these old things in the stories as they are.'⁵

I can certainly recall their initial effect on me. I enjoyed the early chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* (perhaps having been prepared unawares by reading *The Hobbit* at an early age), but the first moment of enchantment was the Company's, and my, encounter with Glorfindel. Meeting Gildor earlier provided a foretaste, of course, but this was the full-blown thing, attended by that strange sensation of deep familiarity with someone or something new. Flickering, flashing, shimmering and, in the final test, shining: these are all phenomena, I subsequently discovered, that often attend enchantment. But why did Glorfindel, and later Elrond and Galadriel, affect me so strongly? And why did I so readily recognise it?

¹ See my essay 'Enchantment and Modernity', pp. 76-89 in *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 9 (2012), accessible at <http://arrow.monash.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/monash:85446> (click on 'View').

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2006): 146.

³ *The Discarded Image*, quoted in Laura Miller, *The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008): 272.

⁴ *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix F.

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2006): 128.

One way to understand the importance of Elvish enchantment is negatively, where they are reduced to a caricature or absent altogether. The Elves in Peter Jackson's films are the former: almost without exception camp, Aryan and slightly fascist, more arrogant than wise and self-important than dignified. Overall I must reluctantly agree with Christopher's Tolkien's melancholy verdict on the films: 'They eviscerated the book by making it an action movie for young people aged 15 to 25.... The chasm between the beauty and seriousness of the work, and what it has become, has overwhelmed me. The commercialisation has reduced the aesthetic and philosophical impact of the creation to nothing.'⁶ Orcs and wargs are inflated into grotesque monsters but apparently we aren't ready for Faramir as genuinely noble, nor Treebeard as genuinely wise. And then there is Jackson's clumsy meddling with not only characters but plot, even when it wasn't needed in order to convert the books into films. Did he actually think he was a better storyteller than Tolkien? Or was he simply determined to leave his 'mark' all over it?⁷

As for absence, consider the TV series of 'Game of Thrones', based on the books by George R.R. Martin. It supposedly shares the same genre as *The Lord of the Rings*, and it does indeed share skilled storytelling, but there is no equivalent to Elves in 'Game of Thrones'. Not coincidentally, it is obsessed instead with will, including magic, power – political, social and sexual (the misogyny is breathtaking) – and violence, culminating in sadism and torture. The same is true of countless other 'fantasy' books, TV series and video games. Now these things are present in Middle-Earth too, albeit less crudely; but they are not there nihilistically, for their own sake. Rather they coexist, to quote one of Tolkien's definitions of enchantment, with 'a love and respect for all things, "animate" and "inanimate", an unpossessive love of them as "other"'.⁸ The contrast is the point, and without it there is no point.

But isn't there something stupendous about what 'Game of Thrones' shows us? To be sure. It is the sheer intensity, scale and consequences of our own restless and unappeasable desires: for security, for power, for status, for sensation. But after these have been denied or even fulfilled (although never for long or enough), without that unpossessive love like grace, which cannot be managed or controlled, somewhere in our lives, everything else threatens to become meaningless.

In his conversation with the wise-woman Andreth, the Elf Finrod Felagund tells us how our disenchanting obsession with use, method and technique (whether material or spiritual) appears to Elves. He asks her, 'do you know that the Eldar say of Men that they look at no thing for itself; that if they study it, it is to discover something else; that if they love it, it is only (so it seems) because it reminds them of some other dearer thing? Yet with what is this comparison? Where are these other things?'⁹ Where indeed? For there *is* another world, but as the enchanted realise, to quote the poet Paul Valéry, it is *in this* world, and only there. Or rather, here. Thus what the Elves, as enchantment, have most to offer in healing the Earth's wounds, not least those resulting from the domination of Men, is 'the restoration of the *love of Arda*'.¹⁰

⁶ In an interview in *Le Monde* on July 9, 2012: <http://www.worldcrunch.com/culture-society/my-father-039-s-quot-eviscerated-quot-work-son-of-hobbit-scribe-j.r.r.-tolkien-finally-speaks-out/hobbit-silmarillion-lord-of-rings/c3s10299/#.UXMsj0qCVBI> (accessed 6 July 2014).

⁷ It's true that Cate Blanchett, Vigo Mortensen and Ian McKellen are excellent, but they are excellent actors.

⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major*, extended edition, ed. Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins, 2005): 101.

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1994): 316.

¹⁰ *Morgoth's Ring*: 343; author's emphasis.

There is no point in repeating anything here that is in the essays, but there are a few things I want to add. One is that I have known for some time that Tolkien's distinction between magic (including modern science) and enchantment, although fundamentally sound, needs more work.¹¹ In particular, does it leave the old Earth magic of healing, nurturing and protecting life in the same category as the biotech industry, Big Pharma and so on? That doesn't seem right.

I think the answer is that they do indeed have something in common, namely to effect a change (or stop one) in the primary world. Beyond that, though, they diverge sharply. For example, a shaman and a wildlife management biologist both want to ensure the well-being of a population of animals. But the former does so through techniques of focussed empathy and draws upon local knowledge and tradition which respect those animals as fellow-subjects and independent agents, whereas the latter works through objectifying the animals and drawing upon scientific knowledge (statistical, biological, ecological) that treats them as purely instances of universal laws.

Another example: a biodynamically-grown tomato results from working with the natural world, respectfully and with minimal interference in its own intentions and processes. (Intentions need not be conscious, let alone solely human.) A genetically-engineered tomato, in contrast, results from treating it as a thing to be manipulated entirely for our benefit in ways whose only limits are technical.

Working with nature allows room for relationships with it, so questions of ethics are present from the start. So is the potential for enchantment, revealing the intrinsic value of those other beings and processes. Dominating and exploiting nature as a mere object for us to treat in any way we want starts with disenchanting it, and destroys any wonder of the other that may inconveniently arise along the way.

The first approach to the world is also open to enchantment in another way. In order to experience the world as a reindeer does, and thus know what a reindeer knows, the shaman becomes one while also remaining a man. That is pure metaphor, the royal road to enchantment. And eating a biodynamic tomato invites you into the ancient story of life on Earth, including humans, alongside her many other hungry children. The GM tomato, on the other hand, enrols you willy nilly in the modern narrative of humans as masters and conquerors of life on Earth, who is now to be their slave. Not much enchantment there.

I believe this difference is another version of the old distinction between *magia* ('natural' or 'white' magic) and *goeteia* (necromantic or 'black' magic). Both are still magic, but very different kinds.

I also want to mention something important which nonetheless took me an embarrassingly long time to realise. (There is a character in José Saramago's novel *All the Names* who is lying on his bed having a conversation with the ceiling, as you do, and at one point he says, 'I'm not stupid', to which the ceiling replies, 'No, you're not, it's just that you take a long time to understand things, especially simple things...') I mean the internal and essential link between enchantment and what Tolkien identified as his story's real theme: 'Death and the desire for deathlessness'.¹² This is what prevents a concern with enchantment from becoming ultimately frivolous.

What is the nature of the link? Respecting both death and enchantment, it consists of learning to let go – or refusing to let go. Tolkien contrasts the existential situation of humans as 'the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race "doomed" to leave and

¹¹ As Geoffrey Cornelius, Liz Greene, John Michael Greer, Clay Ramsay, Marlene Roeder and Suzanna Saumarez insisted. I can be stubborn so I'm grateful for their persistence. Tolkien himself was aware of this point; see *Letters*: 199.

¹² *Letters*: 246, 262.

seemingly lose it', as against that of Elves: 'the anguish in the hearts of a race "doomed" not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete'. The temptation facing us humans is therefore what Tolkien called 'serial longevity', or trying to literally live forever, and confusing that with the immortality that may or may not await us on the other side of the grave. And it is a mark of Tolkien's humility that of the latter there is only, he writes, 'Hope without guarantees'.¹³

That's not enough for those who demand certainty and security, of course, and the dream of 'endless serial living' haunts Western culture well beyond a few cryogenic, cyborg and transhumanist extropian fantasists.¹⁴ It terminates in the ghastly unlife of a Ringwraith, virtually disembodied, hopelessly endless, fearing death yet craving it: not the fulfilment of immortality, but its parody.

The common ground shared by enchantment and death is suggested by the fact that when the One Ring of Power is destroyed, the Three Rings of healing also fade. A friend insisted that I get to grips with this the strange and counter-intuitive connection, and then I read and grasped Verlyn Flieger's point that '*The Lord of the Rings* is, among other things, a story about the ability to let go.' The Ring, as she says, is the obvious example, but the 'timeless beauty of Lórien is the deeper example.'¹⁵ And life itself is the ultimate instance. This is what links Tolkien's three great themes of death, enchantment, and magic.

In the meanwhile, the situation while we live is just as described in the opening of *The Lord of the Rings*: the Elves are still passing over the Sea, enchantment is always leaving us, power-magic is threatening to dominate everything, and we are constantly faced with the joyless prospect of the Dominion of Men. So we must learn to be able to live in the 'grey and leafless world' of disenchantment if and when need be. It's not easy, but unless we can both welcome enchantment without perverting it with any agenda (Boromir's mistake) *and* let go when the time comes, it is not safe with us, nor we with it. As Aragorn warns Boromir, it is what we bring to enchantment that makes it dangerous.

Third, a word on the limits of enchantment. It is highly significant that the fate of the world at the end of the Third Age turns not on Elves, or even Men, but on hobbits. True, Frodo and Sam are unusual hobbits, even Elf-friends, while Gollum is barely still a hobbit at all. (Gollum is surely Tolkien's contribution to the cast of the most distinctive characters in twentieth-century fiction.) But taking hobbits for the moment to be 'a diminutive branch of the human race',¹⁶ they – and more to the point, we – are *not* Elves, and cannot finally live as them. We may visit *Faërie* and be visited by it, if so blessed, but we cannot stay there.

The final question regarding enchantment then becomes: what is a way of life that makes it welcome and honours its presence, but also recognises that it (or we) cannot stay for long, and helps us to let go and live without it when necessary? This is where the hobbits – loving embodied and embedded life in all its messy, imperfect glory, capable of defending it with 'courage in a tight spot', preferring peace to explosions and green to black-or-white – come into their own.¹⁷ We moderns have a great deal to learn from them, starting with the urgent

¹³ In this paragraph, *Letters*: 246, 284, 237.

¹⁴ *Monsters*: 153. For a brilliant analysis of this dream-cum-nightmare in Western philosophy, see Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, transl. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Aine O'Healy (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁵ The friend was Michael Winship. Verlyn Flieger, *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997): 112.

¹⁶ *Letters*: 406.

¹⁷ Courage: what the hobbits suspected Saruman lacked, compared to Gandalf. See my reflections on the hobbits as 'domestic' in 'Enchantment in Tolkien and Middle-earth' below.

need to ‘go back, slow down’.¹⁸ Hobbits were into Slow Food, and all the other Slows, well before they were a movement.

Finally, I want to clarify the connections between the sections that follow. It is my perception that all enchantment is ultimately rooted in nature. I mean the living more-than-human natural world which includes, but vastly exceeds, ourselves. To justify this claim would take far more time and room than I have here, but enchantment is always an embodied and emplaced experience. At the same time, it is also completely spiritual and mysterious. The result is wonder in, and as, sensuous particularities, or what Max Weber called ‘concrete magic’.¹⁹ So too, properly understood, is nature. Fittingly, Tolkien described Elves as not supernatural but ‘natural, far more natural’ than ourselves.²⁰ As the Elves are of Arda, so is enchantment of the Earth.

What of the section on literary criticism? The critical hostility and incomprehension that Tolkien’s work has largely met with, in such striking contrast to its popular reception, stems from what I call ‘modernism’. Ironically for a worldview that prides itself on being rational, modernism is viscerally suspicious of enchantment. Like Gollum upon tasting the life-giving Elven waybread, its adherents splutter, ‘Ach! No! You try to choke poor Sméagol. Dust and ashes, he can't eat that.’ For, confirming the elective affinity of enchantment and nature, the modernist is equally allergic to the experience and even concept of the natural world as alive, animate, and a subject in its own right. It is only allowed to have meanings that we humans deign to give it.

Meanwhile, those with power – the corporate warlocks, technoscientific wizards and spokesmen for ‘Knowledge, Rule, Order’²¹ – set about remaking the living world in just that disenchanted image: meaningless but useful, a thing to be manipulated for profit but without its own intrinsic value. But this is also why so many readers love Tolkien’s work: it awakens us, with a thrill, from the deadening spell of modernism. Modernist disenchantment is the real fantasy, compared to which Middle-earth is reality itself.

¹⁸ Teresa Brennan, *Globalization and its Terrors. Daily Life in the West* (London: Routledge, 2003): 39.

¹⁹ H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991): 282.

²⁰ *Monsters*: 110.

²¹ The mantra of the collaborator Saruman, evidently the model for so many of our politicians.