

Iron Crown, Iron Cage: Tolkien and Weber on Modernity and Enchantment

Patrick Curry

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973) almost certainly never read the social philosopher Max Weber (1864-1920), yet their diagnoses of modernity, as well as its opposite and perhaps its remedy, were tantalizingly similar. Combining their insights results in a powerful and, in some respects, new perspective which I would like to introduce here. And my starting-point is their strangely shared choice of symbolism which my title encapsulates.¹

I am aware, of course, that Tolkien's fiction cannot be reduced to his views. Nonetheless it is idle to pretend that those views are not in his fiction and cannot be inferred from it, together with his letters and essays. With that in mind, let us recall that the most powerful evil figure in the entire history of Middle-earth is Morgoth, the fallen Vala, of whom even Sauron the Great was originally only a servant. I further take it as significant that the ultimate token of the legitimacy and authority of Morgoth's rule was his iron crown, containing the three stolen Silmarills. (And note that the iron holds the Silmarills, not the other way around.) Finally, respecting this part of the story, and leaving aside Morgoth's eventual defeat by the remaining Valar, the only occasion when that crown ever slipped was when Luthien Tinuviel danced its wearer into a trance and then sleep: in short – and the word is both unavoidable and, as we shall see, important – when she enchanted him.

Next we must turn to Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories", where he introduces a seminal distinction between magic and enchantment.² Pointed out the confusing uses of the first term, he suggested that "magic" should be reserved for the exercise of power and domination, using the will, in order to bring about changes in the "Primary World". Whether the means employed are material or spiritual is ultimately a secondary consideration. Sauron is "the Lord of magic *and* machines".³ The ultimate symbol of magic within Tolkien's literary world is, of course, the One Ring; again, as we shall see, the 'one' is important.

Enchantment, in contrast, “produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter”. It is “artistic in desire and purpose”, and its purpose is “the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder”.⁴ I take “realisation” here to be doubly meaningful: both to make wonder real and, I suggest, its ultimate meaning: to realise that whatever is experienced as wonderful *is* really so. So, oversimplifying but not egregiously so, the hallmark of magic is *will*, whereas that of enchantment is *wonder*.

Let us turn to Weber. In the world of social and political philosophy, Weber is perhaps best-known for his statement that “The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment [*entzauberung*] of the world.’ And what brings about such disenchantment? Is it knowledge of the truth about ourselves and the world? No, it is the “belief” – note, the belief suffices – “that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service.”⁵

Here it is important to note that to master all things by calculation requires a master calculus, or more generally principle, truth and/or value from which to derive and by which legitimate such a calculus. If there is more than one then the possibility of incommensurability between different phenomena arises – this one amenable to this calculus but that one only to that other – and thence ultimate incalculability. In other words, in the exercise of power-knowledge, or what Tolkien called “Magic”, there can only be *one* Ring of Power, and only one hand (as Gandalf reminds Saruman) can wear it.

When sufficiently institutionalised and thence pervasive, the result of rationalisation – and this is as close as Weber ever actually got to defining enchantment positively – is that “The unity of the primitive image of the world, in which everything was *concrete magic*, has tended to split into rational cognition and mastery of nature, on

the one hand, and into ‘mystic’ experiences, on the other. The inexpressible contents of such experiences remain the only possible ‘beyond,’ added to the mechanism of a world robbed of gods.”⁶

Now although Tolkien’s analysis of enchantment is richer than Weber’s, we can use the latter’s point about wonder as both concrete and magic (that is, enchanting) to refine Tolkien’s point about its “realisation”: enchantment is making it possible (by art) to realise that the world we experience, and/or some part thereof, is *already* wonderful. Wonder is not something we do, create or add to the world; that would be magic. And it is not a wholly ineffable or otherworldly ‘mystic’ experience; whatever that may be, it is not enchantment.

Another key point is that magic in the sense intended here of the will, control and power – including the ever-increasingly abstract and impersonal empire of modernist magic – is necessarily monist; whereas enchantment, because it is particular, sensual and open-ended, is necessarily plural.

This means, for example, that the way (whether “back” or not) to enchantment cannot proceed through a return, collective or individual, to theism; not, that is, as long its practice conforms to the theological exigencies of a one true God. Indeed, according to Weber, the imperative to calculate, organise and rationalise was originally a religious impulse with its roots in monotheism and especially, in the modern Western world, Protestantism. Whereas the Puritan wanted to work in such a calling, however, “we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.” Here again, the resonance with Tolkien’s romantic antimodernism, with its hatred (the word is not too strong) of industrialism and fear for the future of the natural world, is entirely apt.⁷

In the view of the Puritan divine, Weber continued, “care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the ‘saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment’. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.” This has become the dominant metaphor for Weber’s analysis of modernity.⁸

He concluded, “No-one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development, entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.’”⁹ (We can almost hear Tolkien cheering in the background.)

Without going into any detail, I should add that Weber’s account proved very influential on subsequent social theory. It was taken up the founders of Critical Theory, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School, and in particular by the first two in their book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944): a brilliant and unsettling account of modernity – “the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster” - whose chief weakness is that if everything is really so hopeless then what did its authors hope to accomplish?¹⁰

More recently, the spirit of Critical Theory passed into the work of Michel Foucault.¹¹ It has also surfaced in more orthodox branches of the academy such as World System Theory, whose proponents give substantial empirical as well as theoretical flesh to the bones of Weber’s suggestion that although modern science has powerfully accelerated the pace of rationalisation, it is only “the most important fraction, of the process of intellectualisation which we have been undergoing for thousands of years...”¹² Frank and Gills find the origins of this process in 1500 BCE.¹³

Now at this point I propose to do something guaranteed to make even the most hardened postmodernist blanch and turn to the symbolism of iron.¹⁴ Of course most of them haven’t ever tried to come to grips with Tolkien’s “perfectly sincere, perfectly impossible narrative”, so I have the edge there.¹⁵ And why would I do so? Because it is just possible that Weber’s and Tolkien’s choice of metaphors may not be entirely random but rather

meaningful in a way that a few thousand years of cultural reflection might throw some light on. Also, of course, subaltern discourses marginalised by modernity can by their alterity reveal the *aporias* of a dominant ideology. (There, that should hold them.)

Hesiod suggested that the ages of humanity have descended in quality from Golden to Silver to Bronze and finally Iron, an unpleasant and brutish period in which we are obviously still living. Persian religious literature apparently concurs. The Bible describes God's instrument of punishment as a "rod of iron" (Psalms 2:9 and Revelation 2:27). And the nails in Christ's cross were, of course, made of iron. (They were purportedly used in the early medieval crown of Lombardy, but note the difference between Charlemagne's and Morgoth's crowns: the latter made of iron but the Emperor's of gold containing, in a narrow band, the iron.)

Another characteristic of iron is more positive; it has long been held to protect against the hostile magical powers of witches, necromancers and vampires. (Hence an iron horseshoe over the threshold.) This not only points to the importance of context, to which I shall return in a moment. It also serves as a reminder to be wary of accepting the claims of our iron age secularism at face value, for the same reason that we should beware the claims of scientism (a closely related phenomenon) to be without prejudices, assumptions or untested and untestable ultimate values. That is, modernity is indeed programmatically disenchanted and disenchanting, but it is nonetheless, as Horkheimer and Adorno perceived, thoroughly magical: "In the enlightened world, mythology has entered into the profane. In its blank purity, the reality which has been cleansed of demons and their conceptual descendents assumes the numinous character which the ancient world attributed to demons."¹⁶

Probably the fundamental mythic association with iron, underlying these attributes, is Mars, long held to be a 'malefic' planet which is co-extensive in cultural astronomy with the Graeco-Roman god of war and all that that entails: will-power and its correlates the martial virtues: courage, personal power, the ability and willingness to push something through by main force. The shadow-side of these attributes are not far away, of course: savagery, brutality, callousness.¹⁷

The centrality of the will here, in either case, emphasises the appropriateness of the choice of iron to invoke the modern empire. The contextual nature of Martian virtues/vices, however, warns us not to see iron as essentially or necessarily negative. Following up this hint suggests that the modernist monism of the iron cage/ iron crown is a result its attempt to usurp the authority of the other deities and replace their messy agonistic plurality with a single, well-ordered – or rather, ‘properly managed’ – empire: ‘Knowledge, Order, Rule,’ to quote Sauron’s stooge Saruman, but actually ruled, of course, by One Ring.

This point is susceptible to more precise elaboration: Mars-Ares takes much of his nature (in the best fashion of discursive definition through mutually defining terms of opposition) from the planetary deity he forms a pair with: Venus-Aphrodite. Here surely is mythopoetic confirmation of the wisdom of both Tolkien’s and Weber’s decision to counterpose the iron ‘Magic’ of modernity with enchantment. For where do the roots of the latter lie if not with the ancient (pre-Olympian) goddess of love and beauty, whose power to enchant was respected and feared by even the most powerful of the other gods?¹⁸ Is not her power precisely that of enchantment, and is not her love “concrete magic”, in which the most precise and tiny physical details of the beloved acquire the most mysterious moment? And note that the Graces, patronesses of the arts, were Aphrodite’s attendants.¹⁹ How appropriate, then, that Morgoth’s crown only slipped, and he thereby lost a Silmaril, under the spell of Luthien Tinuviel as she danced. (In this considerable sense, if in no other, Tolkien was arguably a feminist.)

In conclusion, then, we can say that the contemporary triumph of modernist magic – the world system, driven by will and ruled by iron – cannot be doubted, but it is not unqualified. In the interstices of the grid, among places and people (especially ‘small’ people) overlooked by power, and even, I daresay, in the hearts of many of its servants, enchantment still lives. It is a precarious existence, of course, and cannot (as I have said) compete directly with Magic using the latter’s weapons without thereby becoming the Enemy itself. As Weber too pointed out, an intellectually driven pursuit of romantic irrationalism, being programmatically willed, simply extends the bounds of disenchantment.²⁰

All that can effectively be done is to protect enchantment where it already exists; to make it possible to perceive it, and encourage people to do so, where it exists but has not yet been noticed, which is the duty and privilege of art, but also education²¹; and to refuse and expose the great modern lie in which Enchantment is tacitly replaced with its power-driven simulacrum, Glamour.²²

Beyond that, the only hope we have is that “evil will oft evil mars”. We are now fast approaching the day when the last tonne of fossilised coal is burnt and nature – the *fons et origo*, deified/ personified as Venus-Aphrodite, of autonomous enchantment – will reassert herself against Nature plc, an insensible set of external manageable resources to be manipulated by power-knowledge.²³ The former nature is the one we directly experience: a sensuous, “wild and multiplicitous otherness” in which we find ourselves and which we find within ourselves.²⁴ (Despite other more obvious Earth deities such as Gaia, I am emphasizing the importance of Venus-Aphrodite here on the grounds of the integral connection between erotic love and nature, as well as between aesthetics and nature.²⁵ It is also worth recalling that Tolkien defined the principal goal of enchantment, as practised by its exemplars the Elves, as “the adornment of [E]arth, and the healing of its hurts”.²⁶ Adornment is, of course, precisely the *métier* of Aphrodite.)

The more we cling to the latter ‘nature’, however, the more terrible that re-assertion will prove. But one may hope that before then, there might be a more general disillusionment with modernist magic and the power of iron, thus opening the door, at least, to a more widespread rediscovery of what is useless but makes life worth living – and perhaps even, in the end, possible.

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this paper was given at the “Tolkien 2005” conference at Aston University in August 2005.

² 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, somewhat enlarged, in 1947. See also my “Magic vs. Enchantment”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14.3 (1999): 401-12. See also Verlyn Flieger’s important explorations of *faërie* in Tolkien’s work in *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World*, rev. edn (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2002) and *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Road to Faërie* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997).

³ J.R.R. Tolkien., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1981), 146; my emphasis.

⁴ *Tree and Leaf*, 49-50, 18.

⁵ H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991), 155, 139. (Weber’s use of the word ‘magic’ here is loose and therefore ambiguous.)

⁶ *From Max Weber*, 282 (my emphasis).

⁷ See my *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (London: HarperCollins, 1997; second edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

⁸ Although it may well be that a better translation is “iron shell” [*stahlhartes Gehäuse*]; see Peter Pels, pp. 26-27 in “Introduction: Magic and Modernity”, pp. 1-38 in Birgit and Peter Pels (eds.), *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 182.

¹⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1994 [1944]).

¹¹ And not its putative heir, the neo-rationalist Jurgen Habermas.

¹² *From Max Weber*, 138.

¹³ Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills, *The World System: Five hundred years or five thousand?* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁴ I gratefully acknowledge key suggestions for this section by Liz Greene.

¹⁵ Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 46.

¹⁶ *Dialectic*, 28.

¹⁷ Reflecting differing cultural values, Mars was more positively portrayed and highly valued by the Romans than was Ares by classical Greeks, for whom the latter god’s blind fury could inspire contempt as well as fear.

¹⁸ Only Athena, Artemis and Hestia were immune to Aphrodite’s spells.

¹⁹ See Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

²⁰ See Nicholas Gane’s excellent *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

²¹ Brian Rosebury, in *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 177-78, finds my account of enchantment too directly involved with the Primary World. But a successful, i.e. enchanted Secondary World results in seeing the Primary World in a fresh and different way, which is just what Tolkien called “recovery” (*Tree and Leaf*, 53).

²² See my “Magic vs. Enchantment”.

²³ See my *Defending Middle-Earth*.

²⁴ See David Abram’s superb *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

²⁵ On which see Ronald Hepburn, *‘Wonder’ and other Essays* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984]).

²⁶ *Letters* 151-52.