

## ON READING TOLKIEN

(For the Plaza-Scholars Forum)

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In *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth & Modernity* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2005), one of my chief concerns was to understand the depth and breadth of the appeal of his work. It still seems to me that while its literary production has been almost exhaustively examined, relatively little time and thought has been expended on its reception.<sup>1</sup> Dare I suggest that the latter is at least as interesting, worthy and difficult a challenge? What follows is a brief meditation on how one might take it up and go further than we yet have.

Simplifying radically, I argued that the appeal of Tolkien's work – particularly *The Lord of the Rings*, which remains his most read and loved book – grows out of its recognition of both readers' fears respecting modernity and their hopes for what might survive it, itself made recognisable and accessible through a masterfully crafted story.<sup>2</sup> (Please note that this is not an allegorical reading; it merely avails itself, as Tolkien explicitly allowed, what his readers find to be the books' applicability in their own experience.)

I further suggested that those fears and hopes find three broad forms in *TLoTR*, each nested within the next and all much older than modernity itself: human community, symbolised by the Shire; the living natural world, Middle-earth itself; and ultimate spiritual values, the Sea. As the book opens, all three are under severe threat from the power of Mordor, the only 'modern' state in Middle-earth, with all its chief marks: a highly organised political and bureaucratic ruling apparatus, an industrial economy, and techno-scientific research – funded and directed, as is much of ours, with a view to military applications. And as the book ends, each domain has survived – albeit only just, and ambiguously. (What will 'the Dominion of Men' bring? It doesn't sound promising.)

I also briefly discussed (in chapter five) the power of narrative, storytelling, and mythopoeic fiction: a set of closely-linked ways of worldmaking which have been largely expelled by the modernist-influenced literary profession to the so-called genres, leaving, as Tolkien noted, a large adult audience hungry for 'fairy-stories' (and one that will understandably settle for ersatz fascimiles if that's all they can find).<sup>3</sup> After all, narrative is essentially how we experience our own lives, both individually and collectively; and if it comprehensively breaks down, we break down with it. Of course, a breakthrough is possible too; but that then becomes the basis of a new narrative.

Putting the elements of this analysis together, then, we might say *TLoTR* enables readers (or those readers who do not subscribe to modernist hegemony and are not cowed by its opinions) to find their own fears and hopes addressed in a compelling narrative that doesn't analyse, lecture or patronise them but shows them

truths about themselves and the world. It then becomes *our* story, and its truths become personal and emotional ones.

It appears from the (lack of) critical response that this approach has filled a much-needed gap, but I persist in thinking it has much to recommend itself. I don't feel it has all the answers, however, so let me gesture towards what might take it farther, or deeper. That is signalled by something that many people (including myself) have remarked upon: the extraordinary reality of *places* in *TlotR*. Tolkien's places are simultaneously two things that modernity maintains are mutually exclusive and has tried hard to keep apart. On the one hand, they are fictional and imaginary, or rather 'imaginal' – thus conceding nothing to the modernists' peculiar insistence that imaginary = unreal or untrue.<sup>4</sup> You cannot take Easyjet to anywhere in Middle-earth. Yet its places also feel thoroughly real; each one has its own particular and unmistakable sensuous qualities and indeed personality. (As I have long insisted, Tolkien's nature is not only nonmodern and therefore alive and agentic, but nonanthropocentric: humans are definitely not its only persons.)<sup>5</sup>

What hasn't yet been realised in relation to Tolkien, however, is the internal or constitutive link between place and his mythopoetic narrative. That link is obvious, really: everything that happens in the story happens in a particular place, but not in such a way that it could have happened anywhere or nowhere: in other words, the so-called objective 'view from nowhere' (or everywhere) that modernity so prizes. Rather, in keeping with life in a nonmodern world, every event is constituted by and inseparable from its place, just as every place is constituted in turn by what has happened there. They are mutually mapped. (But remember that the actors are not restricted to humans or humanoids, or even to biological organisms.)

Add to this the fact that, as Bruno Latour cogently argued in his book of the same title, *We Have Never Been [Entirely] Modern* (1993) – indeed, we have been nonmodern for tens of thousands of years longer than we have been (partially, incompletely, temporarily) modern – and it becomes legitimate to speculate that the power of place-as-story and story-as-place goes very deep in the psyche of the human animal, and is never very far from the surface. Aboriginal Australian songlines are only the most obvious example; an equivalent, however effaced, fragmented or suppressed, survives within every indigenous culture in the world. And don't forget, 'Westerners' too once were – and in some important if frequently overlooked sense, still are – indigenous people. (Suspiciously frequently: it jars with the Programme.)<sup>6</sup>

My conjecture, then, is that *TLotR* reawakens readers from the deadening and indeed, often deadly spell of modernism and its pathological narrative of 'Knowledge, Rule, Order', in the words of the quisling Saruman. It throws open the windows and doors of our self-made prison and lets in the light and smells and sounds of embodied life, enchanting and perilous. It is a call to *live* life, as we used to, and reminds us – coming out from under the Shadow, as the book ends – that notwithstanding everything, we still can. (Hence Fraser Harrison's marvellous term which I borrowed, 'radical nostalgia'.)

We need reminding, most of us. That's understandable: we are such busy, forgetful, fearful creatures. So perhaps my hypothesis also makes it understandable why many of us regularly (whether the interval is one year or several) reread *TLotR*. It's not because we don't know what's going to happen next in the story! The point of doing so is rather that it has become a *ritual*, one that renews our sense of life and of being alive. And I use the word 'ritual' advisedly, because that is something else that secular modernity, in particular, has tried to eliminate, tarring it with the brush of

irrationality, emotion and so on. Ritual is still central to religion, of course; but there it is controlled and managed by each religion for its own soteriological purpose.<sup>7</sup>

Like enchantment,<sup>8</sup> however, with which it is intimately associated, ritual has an older, wilder existence, again under the sign of animism: a hundred, a thousand, who knows how many different gods, inhering in each place, moment and event, and each with an appropriate ritual to enable mutual recognition, respect and negotiation. That's how you do it in *Faërie* – that is, *this* world when it is enchanted (just as Tolkien defined it in 'On Fairy-Stories'). As Mark Dickinson says, '*féerique*... nods to the old ancient universe that prevails here on earth wherever human beings are not in control'.<sup>9</sup> (Which, may I point out, and as the Earth often forcibly reminds us if ongoing social chaos doesn't suffice, we *aren't*.)

I hope others may feel inspired to consider Tolkien's work along these lines, and to develop it further. To do so, however, will require leaving what seems for many to be the more comfortable grounds of literary criticism, historical research and theology for the wilder shores of anthropology, philosophy, and the ecohumanities. Adventures are nasty disturbing things, of course, but there is the promise of treasure. (Even if destroying the Ring is another matter altogether.)

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> An exception is Tom Shippey's excellent *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> I should also mention in this connection Tom Shippey's important *Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000). The best single work I know on modernity is Stephen Toulmin's *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press: 1990).

<sup>3</sup> An aside: in 'Tolkien and his Critics: A Critique', pp. 81-159 in Thomas Honegger (ed.), *Root and Branch: Approaches Towards Understanding Tolkien* (Zurich/Berne: Walking Tree, 1999; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 2005) I wrote of 'the professional literary, critical and academic world' that 'Tolkien's name in such circles is the kiss-of-death' (p. 79). That remains largely true. Cf. the *Guardian's* literary critic Nicholas Lezard's recent remark: 'of all the means for professional suicide that are available to the writer, expressing affection for Tolkien is one of the most effective' (3.4.10).

<sup>4</sup> I borrow this term (if not its neo-Platonist baggage) from Henri Corbin.

<sup>5</sup> This understanding is central to the 'the new animism' in anthropology – see Graham Harvey, *Animism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) – and in philosophy – see Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See at least these two excellent books: Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Myhtellers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998), and Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> See my essay, unpublished at the time of writing, 'Enchantment and Modernity'.

<sup>8</sup> Several papers on enchantment in this context can be accessed on my website – [www.patrickcurry.co.uk](http://www.patrickcurry.co.uk) – under Papers -> Tolkien.

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<sup>9</sup> Review, forthcoming in *The Fiddlehead* (Spring 2011), of *An Athabaskan Iliad: This Is What They Say: Stories by François Mandeville*, translated from Chipewyan by Ron Scollon (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009).