

Introduction

This book departs somewhat from what I have written in previous years. The intention of writing about J. R. R. Tolkien came out of a time of rest, from a deliberate attempt to place everything of a research nature on hold. And that is what I did. For two to three months I abandoned myself to the pure delight of reading, or rereading, first *The Hobbit*, then *The Lord of the Rings*. During any free time I had, I returned to the reading of Tolkien's opus; it formed an oasis out of time, a magical space in itself; it modified the quality of my days, weeks, and months. A wonderful soul cloak protected me from the cares of the world, and yet allowed me to meet those cares more fully, making me wholeheartedly agree with W. H. Auden that "No fiction I have read has given me more joy." Putting the book down was partly an occasion of grieving.

I remember my previous experience of reading the book some thirty years ago as a youth of twenty-six. I had explored a lot of science fiction or fantasy (Madeleine L'Engle, Lloyd Alexander, and Ursula K. Le Guin stand out among them). Still, I read *The Lord of the Rings* only at my sister's insistence. And I remember the engrossing effect of reading it, and the sense of completion in putting the book down after the last page. I happened to have finished it just as my bus arrived at its destination in the mountains of Santa Cruz, California. I was still enveloped in a cloak of peace and awe. I got down from the bus and raised my gaze to the tall redwoods all around me, in a way that I felt meant looking at the "real" world, after having finished being in another world. And my mind was living in this contrast and telling me something like, "You are returning to this world, but you have just been in a world that is more real than this external one."

It was a pleasure to immerse myself in this space of otherworldly inspiration and delight for a second time. Concluding this second reading, I remembered reading Tolkien's biography two years earlier. I told myself that surely there is something more that Tolkien knew, or "something more that he was," that made it possible for him to write such a masterpiece; that conviction grew and found confirmation as I looked more deeply into his biography and work. It became only natural to try to honor such beauty by, well, . . .

researching it, and hopefully offering some new insights about this celebrated author and his enduring legacy.

No doubt the first Tolkien experience nourished further my love of myths and inspired me later to work on North and South American legends. I still carry this feeling in relation to the Iroquois *White Roots of Peace*, a legend that keeps informing my life, and about the confrontation of the Twins in the realm of Xibalba as we know them from the Mayan *Popol Vuh*.

And yet there is a substantive difference between what I mention above and the world Tolkien invites us into. The North and South American legends mentioned above are a legacy of the past, of other forms of consciousness remote from ours. What happens in Iroquois and Mayan myths or legends baffles the consciousness that is bound to the senses and purely material world, because it comes from a completely different form of consciousness than our postmodern worldview, the more so the further we go back in time. Tolkien, a contemporary, has written a legendarium to which the minds of many are inclined to give as much credence as to the world of ancient Native Americans, ancient Greeks, or modern native populations. His goal was to offer England the mythology he felt it was missing. He seemingly failed at this project, only to succeed instead in offering us a modern mythology accepted in all corners of the world.

Another attempt has accompanied me in what I have written, from the love of biographies. I have delighted in delving into the lives of famous people; delving until, hopefully, something emerges that is more than a flat portrayal on a two-dimensional page. until something emerges from between lines and words, at least for me. I would call it rising to a living imagination of the individual in the biography. Those are individuals who are not either quickly glossed over or exhaustively understood and shelved. Oftentimes these biographies arise from looking at a life from many angles; what comes from a certain biographer forms one facet while other views add yet other aspects. And if everything works effectively, something more than the sum of the parts emerges.

At times a controversy around an individual becomes the very key of entrance into his biography. One clear example of this met me in the biography of Black Elk, the Lakota Sioux chief and medicine man. How could so many clamor that his was an authentic and exclusive Lakota spiritual faith—and others be equally convinced of Nick Black Elk's

commitment to the Christian Catholic faith? The answer is, “Well yes, both/ and.” And that is why his personality is fascinating: because in himself he tried, and managed to quite an extent, to reconcile the terms of what is normally seen as an opposition at a cultural level. In his breast no such opposition existed. Such is the case of Tolkien too, as we will see him emerge from this essay. He was an avowed Christian, very much aligned with the Roman Catholic faith. And yet one cannot help but think that the label “Catholic” confines the grandeur of Tolkien. His mythology covers much of what is considered the pre-Christian or pagan worldview, in which he seems to be fully at home. At any rate, much of Tolkien’s imaginations and insights break free of dogma and cultural restrictions of one kind or another.

Tolkien seems to gather in himself a bundle of contradictions. A Christian, he is yet loved by many who have a New Age or pagan worldview, not to mention people with more secular affiliations. A traditionalist, even medievalist, yet he is the author of the myths that most grip the modern mind because of the relevance, even urgency of their themes. *The Lord of the Rings* could not have been written at another point in history; it could not better fit the cultural mood of the “end of history” as we perceive it all around us. Tolkien’s is not only one of the most read body of legends in modern times; people who read him do not tire of reading him over and again. I know one reader who has read the series forty times. It is true that, just as Tolkien has many admirers, he has very clear detractors as well. He does not take a comfortable middle-of-the-road position. Reading Tolkien requires, after all, the challenge of entering what he called a secondary reality, a created world with laws of its own. We readers must leave this comfortable reality of our senses to enter a new, challenging reality—but in another sense, we escape to better be able to return. His books are not for everyone; they require the willingness to step across a threshold, at least if one doesn’t love the epic literary genre at first.

What many don’t know is that Tolkien was as much a scientist in his scholarly pursuits in philology as he was a well-known author of fiction. And this, I would argue, as others have, is one of the major strengths of his work. Science—as applied to his understanding of language, myth, and culture—is allied to art to create something that is larger than either. And Tolkien was as much of a visionary as he was an “experiencer.” In other words, what he communicated was very often what he perceived in his mind’s eye. It

may sound perplexing to hear from him that he mostly did not *invent*, and that such was his best work. What did he mean by that?

Why has Tolkien's work endured to such an extent that even today, much to the chagrin of the critics of his "escapist" literature, he comes at the top of the list of the most-read works of English literature? Why have *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* movies become such box-office hits? Partly because Tolkien's work could be compared to a new sacred text, minor though it may be in comparison to ancient tradition. Still, one can read Tolkien on many levels; on the surface we can delight in the characters, the magic, the otherworldliness, the beauty of landscapes, the accompanying challenges, action, triumphs against all odds, and so forth. A second and third reading will show that there is unsuspected depth, a clever intricacy in the interlacing of events in chapters and books; there are amazing symmetries and connections; there are encompassing views of the ages of Middle-earth, and so forth. So, how could Tolkien achieve all of this?

Looking back at the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien commented that it was written slowly and with great care for detail, and finally emerged as a Frameless Picture: a searchlight, as it were, on a brief period in History, and on a small part of our Middle-Earth, surrounded by the glimmer of limitless extensions in time and space. Very well; that may explain to some extent why it "feels" like history; why it was accepted for publication; and why it has proved readable for a large number of very different kinds of people.¹

Further reflecting "on the wholly unexpected things that have followed its publication," he adds with what seems to have been a touch of surprise:

I feel as if an ever-darkening sky over our present world had been suddenly pierced, the clouds rolled back, and an almost forgotten sunlight had poured down again. As if indeed the horns of Hope had been heard again, as Pippin heard them suddenly at the absolute *nadir* of the fortunes of the West. But *How?* And *Why?*²

We will return to this puzzling letter at the end of our explorations.

The Lord of the Rings as a timely inspiration offered to humanity through an ideal, though certainly imperfect, instrument as J. R. R. Tolkien, summarizes everything I will

¹ Carpenter, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 413.

² Carpenter, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 413.

present here. I am calling this book *Tolkien's Lord of the Rings: Mythology, Imagination, and Spiritual Insight* because I want to add something to what we know of Tolkien that appears only tangentially here and there in his letters, in various essays, or through Tolkien's fictional characters. Tolkien could talk to the spirit of the time only in the way that spirit talks to spirit; an author needs a deep spiritual perception to lead people to a spiritual accomplishment of the size of *The Lord of the Rings*. And he needs to have a dimension of personal spiritual experience in order to put it onto paper in a convincing way. This book's main intent is to shed light on the sources of Tolkien's spiritual perceptions and the discipline with which he pursued them. It is the spiritual dimension of Tolkien's work that makes it a universal legacy.

Tolkien's biography acquires a whole new dimension when we fully examine what we know of his spiritual experiences. Some of those appear in his letters; others in veiled but highly consistent terms in his writings, especially some unpublished ones. So this is the first stage of looking at some phenomena: Tolkien's work as a scientific philologist and as a fiction writer forms another aspect; his deep perception of the link between languages, mythology, and culture; his clear understanding of what the human being can receive from the life of dream (big dreams, mind you), visions, and artistic inspiration; his discipline in working with all of these; and because it was an inner experience, what he carried from previous lives (at least one), however uncomfortably it lived next to his Catholicism.

Once we understand these foundations—the phenomena in Tolkien's life and work—then we can start to characterize what is present in his body of imaginations: the eons of earth existence and how they succeed each other; the Light and the Word and their role in the creation of the world. And then the endless sets of contrasts: the deathless Elves and the mortal men; Morgoth and Sauron; the varying ways time flows in the Shire, in Tom Bombadil's domain, in Rivendell, and in Lórien. Why is Tolkien so painstakingly specific in the way his created world works? Why does he go to such lengths in attaching appendices and cross-referencing all the parts of his creative work? Was it just what he admitted, a part of his exacting and pedantic nature? Or was there more?

There is definitely more if one looks to the work of Tolkien from the perspective of modern understanding of the spirit. There is genuine spiritual insight into deeper dimensions and connections of existence. Tolkien's work is deeply mystical or even esoteric, though he himself, quite rightly, would have shunned the term *esoteric*. His work was

primarily a consistent and coherent artistic creation; something self-contained. After all, he detested allegory and detested bringing the primary world (which includes religious views), into his created world. So maybe he just couldn't help but perceive more deeply into the depths of existence, all the while in pure artistic fashion. One of his reader's expression of appreciation particularly touched Tolkien. In his words,

by a strange chance, just as I was beginning this letter, I had one from a man, who classified himself as "an unbeliever, or at best a man of belatedly and dimly dawning religious feeling ... but you," he said, "create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp."³

This feeling could be echoed by many.

Exploring this mystical sphere is the last aspect of this work. There is a clear reason for the mark that Tolkien has left on people's hearts and minds. He puts us in touch with deep archetypes of existence. We may not know these, but we cannot fail to sense the deeper reality of what comes from Tolkien's work. Toward the end of the book we will explore how Tolkien leads us from artistic imaginations to deeper spiritual insights. There is so much that Tolkien has allowed us to fathom about the nature of free will and fate; life and death; evil and its role in the shaping of the world; the initiation toward the spirit, as in the examples of Gandalf and Saruman; the nature of the spiritual world. This attempt will be a way to marry art and science once more. After all, art and science were the foundation of Tolkien's work. And art and science can help us shed light on its furthest reaches.

To conclude, a word of thanks. This work was rendered possible partly through the life-long dedication of professor Verlyn Flieger to Tolkien's opus. Of all the references to Tolkien's work, all her books and articles have been central to my understanding, both of Tolkien and of *The Lord of the Rings*. They have directed me toward many additional lines of personal inquiry.

³ Carpenter, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 413.