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Simbelmynë: Mortality and Memory in Middle-earth

Abstract

Elegiac contemplation of the function of memory in Tolkien's Middle-earth, and the complex intersections of memory, loss, immortality, consolation, and creativity made flesh in Tolkien's depictions of the races of Elves and Men and their interactions.



SIMBELMYNĒ: MORTALITY AND MEMORY IN MIDDLE-EARTH¹

WILLIAM H. STODDARD

IN *The Two Towers*, as Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli ride to meet Théoden in Edoras, they pass a group of mounds covered with small white flowers. Gandalf comments, “Evermind they are called, *simbelmynë* in this land of Men, for they blossom in all the seasons of the year, and grow where dead men rest” (III.6.507). Later, in *The Return of the King*, Théoden himself is placed in another such mound, and its surface is covered with turf, from which more *simbelmynë* grows. His epitaph sums up his last ride as “out of loss, out of life, unto long glory” (VI.6.976).

This passage, and others in J.R.R. Tolkien’s writing, embodies a distinctively pagan conception of the fate of the dead. Despite Tolkien’s Catholicism, he could not envision the Men of Middle-earth, thousands of years before the birth of Christ, as having any thought or hope of salvation in the Christian sense. His Men have spirits that outlive their bodies—they can, for example, become ghosts, bound to Middle-earth by unfulfilled oaths—but the natural fate of those ghosts is to leave the world, and no one knows what happens to them then. The dying Aragorn, speaking to his wife Arwen, can only tell her, “I speak no comfort to you, for there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world” (Appendix A.1062).

But Tolkien also gives his Men an answer to this pain, and much the same answer that the pagans of the ancient world found: the worthy dead may live on in glory in the memory of their descendants. Théoden, dying on the Pelennor Fields, says, “I go to my fathers. And even in their mighty company I shall not now be ashamed” (V.6.842). Éowyn, trapped in Rohan, is driven to despair, even to seeking her own death in battle, by the thought that she will never have the chance to win renown.

This combination of sentiments was familiar in the ancient world, notably among the Greeks and Romans, with their celebration of individual worth and achievement. It gave rise there to a distinctive poetic form, the *elegy*, devoted to grieving for what was lost and praising its value. And that same

¹ An earlier version of this essay was published electronically at www.troynovant.com in 2004, and was presented at the Fortieth Mythopoeic Conference in 2009. I thank Robert W. Franson for his permission to present it and to revise it for *Mythlore*, and Janet Brennan Croft for her helpful suggestions on revision.

elegiac spirit fills Tolkien's Middle-earth, "wringing a moving elegy from his imaginary world" (Rateliff 67). Note, for example, Meriadoc Brandybuck's reply, after Peregrin Took says that hobbits can't live long on the heights:

But at least, Pippin, we can now see them, and honour them. It is best to love first what you are fitted to love, I suppose: you must start somewhere and have some roots, and the soil of the Shire is deep. Still there are things deeper and higher; and not a gaffer could tend his garden in what he calls peace but for them, whether he knows about them or not. I am glad that I know about them, a little. (V.3.870)

The casting of elegy as poetry is no happenstance. Now that free verse is prevalent in literary poetry, the older functions of poetry are often forgotten; but many of the traditional devices of poetry, from meter and rhyme to repetition to vivid language, act as aids to memory. Before writing was prevalent, a learned man who wanted to pass on his knowledge would compose a poem about it, to make it stick in the memory. And when poems were commonly sung, the effect was even stronger. Even now, it's a nearly universal experience to learn lines of a song without conscious effort, and sometimes even against the learner's wishes (as advertising agencies know!). Tolkien's world is full of poetry, and of people who quote it, or compose it; and much of that poetry is there to convey the memory of what has been lost, from Gimli telling of Moria's lost glory under the reign of Durin to Samwise Gamgee praising Gandalf's fireworks. Tom Shippey notes this of the Rohirrim specifically:

Nearly all the poetry that is quoted is strongly elegiac, one might note: in a culture with no written records that is a major function of poetry, at once to express and to resist the sadness of oblivion. It has the same function as the spears that the Riders plant in memory of the fallen, as the mounds that they raise over them, as the flowers that grow on the mounds. (97)

But the poems of Middle-earth are even more effective in preserving memory than those of the primary world. Middle-earth has a longer history than the primary world: 3021 years of the Third Age, 3441 of the Second Age, and an unspecified number in the First Age, going back to the first awakening of the Elves. The events of the First Age, more ancient than any actual history, are not merely hinted at in fragmentary lines, but recalled in a great corpus of poetry, which names the heroes of that time and recounts their deeds, so that Frodo and Sam, crossing into Mordor, can discuss Beren and Lúthien's struggle against Morgoth. And unlike ancient human epics telling of the kingship of Gilgamesh, the conquest of Troy, or the civil war of the Kurus and Pandavas, these songs are true in every detail. Indeed, as Agan says, "In these moments of song, the *LotR*

seems to open a portal or passageway through which the characters may simultaneously glimpse both their current situation and the ancient past of the Elder Days; as such, song creates an in-between place where characters achieve a kind of visionary moment" (47). So Middle-earth's heroes could hope to be remembered and honored ages after their deaths.

Sabo calls attention to the presence of ruins in the cultural landscape of Middle-earth (93), and to Tolkien's modeling of places such as the Barrow-Downs (97–101), Weathertop (101–102), and the burial mounds of Rohan, covered with *simbelmynë* (102–105), on archaeological remains in the primary world. She focuses in particular on the function of burial mounds in preserving the memory of the dead: "In general, ritual moments devoted to the veneration of ancestors symbolically erase the gaps of time, linking the present moment with a claim to the past and hope for the future" (104–105). All this supports the theme of this essay. But Tolkien's ruins have a key difference from archaeological sites in the real world: Almost none of them are relics of a forgotten or utterly perished past. When the Fellowship come to the Gates of Moria, for example, they find an inscription in *tengwar*, which are still in use, in an Elven language in which five of them are fluent, referring to Celebrimbor and Erebor, who are part of known history; even after 5,710 years, the primary mystery about the inscription is how to read the riddle of *Speak, friend, and enter*. This and virtually every other abandoned site is part of the history known to Tolkien's characters, and more often than not is the subject of a song that one of them remembers and sings on the spot.

The single most important reason for this, of course, is that there is more than song to preserve those ancient memories. Middle-earth has living witnesses to its own ancient history: the Elves, the Ents, and Tom Bombadil. For example, when Elrond speaks of the war of the Last Alliance against Sauron, Frodo exclaims in astonishment, "I thought that the fall of Gil-Galad was a long age ago," and Elrond replies,

So it was indeed. [...] But my memory reaches back even to the Elder Days. Eärendil was my sire, who was born in Gondolin before its fall; and my mother was Elwing, daughter of Dior, son of Lúthien of Doriath. I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories. (II.2.243)

With such witnesses at hand, the accuracy of the songs is less likely to drift over time. New songs are written—Bilbo Baggins writes his own account of the voyage of Eärendil—but their hearers may always include someone who knows the true tale, or even lived through it, and can protest at changes.

This in fact seems to be an essential role of the Elves in the world Tolkien imagines. On Tolkien's own account, one of the functions of fantasy, or

faerie stories, is to envision the gratification of desires that cannot be fulfilled in the primary world. The Elves fulfill many such wishes. But over and over, Tolkien comes back to Elvish memory. It seems that Tolkien envisions the existence of such a memory as gratifying a deeply felt human need.

One of the most compelling scenes in Peter Jackson's film version of *The Lord of the Rings* has Elrond showing his daughter Arwen a vision of her future as Aragorn's wife (*The Two Towers*, scene 38). He summons up for her an image of Aragorn's dead body, referring to it (in Tolkien's own words) as "an image of the splendour of the Kings of Men in glory undimmed before the breaking of the world" (taken from Appendix A, "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen," 1063). What makes that statement so moving in that context? At least in part that Elrond himself lived before the breaking of the world, and saw the Kings of Men of that time. Their glory truly cannot die, as long as Elrond lives to remember it.

Memory seems essential to the nature of the Elves. They are a race of singers and poets, and their best poets are skilled beyond human measure; but all of their narrative poetry seems to be history rather than fiction. Tolkien never describes an Elf making up a story. In this, at least, they resemble the Fair Folk of older legends, who are unable to create, though they also recall the ancient identification of the Muses as the daughters of Memory. Writing a novel such as *The Lord of the Rings* could well have been unimaginable to an Elven minstrel.

Tolkien also shows Legolas, on the long pursuit of Merry and Pippin's captors, resting not in sleep, but in his dreams, with open eyes, and in the night, rather than lying down, he walks to and fro and sings to himself (III.2.429). What is he dreaming of? Even human dreams are often memories, in fragmentary form; being consciously entered, Elven dreams must be less fragmentary, and Elves can dwell in them more fully than human beings can, so that whatever memories they hold are closer to a living, present experience. (Aragorn, partially of Elven descent, is able to experience a comparably living memory of Arwen during his stay in Lothlórien, suggesting that in a measure he shares this gift of his remote ancestors.)

In his letters, Tolkien remarks on the more general conservatism of the elves, going so far as to call them "embalmers" (*Letters* 197). He says that "they desired some 'power' over things as they are (which is quite distinct from art), to make their particular will to preservation effective: to arrest change, and keep things always fresh and fair" (*Letters* 236). That power was embodied in the making of the Three Rings, which thus, even though not touched by Sauron, were an embodiment of elven pride and elven temptation. In Rateliff's perceptive statement, "Their ideal would be for the past to continue into present time and beyond, continually enriched but never passing away" (87).

There has been much speculation about the nature and functions of the Three Rings. Tolkien was never very explicit about them, and may not have

resolved the matter fully in his own mind. But there are hints in his writing that add up to an oddly consistent pattern. In brief, the Three Rings were the means of preserving the past, each in a different modality.

Gandalf is the bearer of *Narya*, the Ring of Fire. This fits in with a number of Gandalf's other traits: his ability to create light and hurl fire at his foes, his skill at fireworks, and even his love of smoking and blowing smoke rings. But there's more to it than that. When Gandalf first arrives in Middle-earth, Narya's former bearer, Círdan the Shipwright, gives Narya to him, saying that "with it you may rekindle hearts in a world that grows chill" (Appendix B.1085). And this is exactly what we see Gandalf doing—for example, reawakening Théoden from helpless old age to heroic courage.

In the traditional symbolism of the occult, the element of fire is linked to the spirit, and symbolizes it. So Narya's link to fire may be only secondarily concerned with controlling the physical element. Its primary function may be—indeed, Círdan comes close to saying explicitly that it is—preserving the spirit of the past: the spirit of a man's youth, as he grows old, or the heroic spirit of the First Age, as Middle-earth grows old.

This slant of interpretation is even more helpful with Elrond's ring, *Vilya*. Vilya is the Ring of Air, and it is hard to say that Elrond has much to do with air in the literal sense. His most notable feat of magic is the destruction of the Black Riders by calling up a flood, which sounds as if he ought to wield the Ring of Water. But in the same traditional symbolism, air is linked to the intellect, and Elrond is the greatest loremaster in Middle-earth. And in Tolkien's own mythology, air is the domain of Manwë, the Elder King of the Valar, and is linked to articulate speech and hearing and to poetry, all forms in which knowledge can naturally be embodied. So Vilya can be taken as preserving the knowledge and memory of the past, and as enabling Elrond himself to do so.

Finally, Galadriel's ring is *Nenya*, the Ring of Water. Now Galadriel does have some magical involvement with water: the Mirror of Galadriel is made of water, and the Phial of Galadriel that she gives to Frodo is filled with water. The traditional link between water and the emotions can also be seen in Galadriel's ability to make her sympathy known, for example, to Gimli, and more generally in her insight into the feelings and desires of others.

Mythologically, water and vegetation are tied to each other. Galadriel is the agent of the Shire's renewed fertility after the death of Saruman. As part of that renewal, a mallorn tree grows in the Shire, like the mallorn trees of Galadriel's own domain of Lothlórien.

Lothlórien is portrayed as a realm in which, not merely the memory, but the life of the Elder Days is still preserved. Even its light has a different quality than light elsewhere, and the passage of time is different (in a way compared by Legolas to the flow of a stream). So it might be suggested that Nenya's special

power is to preserve the actual life of the Elder Days, and even to hold back time itself.

Describing the hobbits' first meeting with elves on their journey, Agan writes that "In fact, the hobbits' encounter with Gildor and the Elves serves as a conduit through which they stand on a kind of portal between the ancient past of Story/song and their own imperiled present" (50). But later in their journey, in Lothlórien, Sam Gamgee comments, "It's sunlight and bright day, right enough. [...] I thought that 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" (II.6.351).

All this is very schematic; it's not likely that Tolkien worked out anything so abstract and logical. The links between water and time and emotion and life and vegetation work like the separate strands of a cord, none of which extends for its full length—to borrow one of Ludwig Wittgenstein's more memorable images. It's perhaps fitting to apply a model from Ordinary Language philosophy to the writing of an actual philologist who knew from professional experience how one meaning of a word could give birth to another. And this kind of associative thinking may be appropriate to fantasy; most schools of magical practice have rested on vast systems of correspondence of just this kind.

In her critical study *A Question of Time*, Flieger discusses Tolkien's ambivalent view of the elves:

[T]here 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. (112)

On one hand, Tolkien affirms that new life and new growth can only come out of death. The ruin of the Shire creates the opportunity for Sam Gamgee's renewal of it, aided by the last of Galadriel's magic, and including the growth of the only mallorn outside of Lothlórien. The past is not meant to linger on, holding the bridge of time against the future. But on the other hand, Tolkien shows the past with all the beauty and all the poignancy he can invest it with, to make the regret for its loss as deep as possible, so that we understand fully what price we are paying for our new growth. The feeling is like that of Robinson Jeffers's line

I sadly smiling remember that the flower fades to make fruit, the fruit rots
to make earth.

("Shine, Perishing Republic," line 3)

Middle-earth itself conveys this sense for many of its readers. For if it had really existed, then its loss would be deeply painful to contemplate: the departure from the world of many kindred races, including the race of elves in whom humanity is, in a sense, perfected, and of the magic that the elves and wizards embodied. The ultimate outcome of Middle-earth is to fade away, into our world, with its wonder lost. And as part of that fading, the living memory of the First Age is gone, leaving only books of ancient lore.

Tolkien adds to this with a peculiar shift of narrative perspective, of a kind that Sabo remarks on in discussing the portrayal of Lake Town in *The Hobbit*:

Here Tolkien projects his narrative into the story's future, when the present Lake-town will have become yet another archaeological place. And he surrounds it with the sort of folkloric beliefs that we often find in the real world, where tales may be woven around the ruins of ancient places, sometimes tales of haunting and of dread. (97)

Sabo notes that Tolkien uses this same trick of perspective in *The Lord of the Rings*, notably in his description of Arwen's grave, which is evoked in Peter Jackson's scene of Aragorn's eventual death. That is, having invited the reader to step back into the narrated past, he invites the reader to share the perspective of that past on the all but unimaginable gulfs of time yet to come . . . on whose far side live the readers of his story, like the Fellowship looking back on Lothlórien as it fades into the past behind them.

Why is memory so important to Tolkien? Bearing in mind his cautions about allegory, we can still see circumstances in his life that would have made him aware of the issues of loss and memory. First, of course, was his mother's early death, which left him orphaned while still a schoolboy. But also important was his experience of the Great War, when, as he wrote, all but one of his closest friends died.²

The end of *The Lord of the Rings* gives a series of events that, in Tolkien's wording, is "applicable" to this situation. Frodo, back from the War of the Ring, but wounded beyond healing, rides to the Grey Havens, taking Sam Gamgee with him, and by Gandalf's arrangement meeting Merry Brandybuck and Pippin Took there. And in the company of Gandalf the wizard and of many elves, Frodo leaves Middle-earth, going where his friends can never see him again. He leaves with Sam the manuscript of the Red Book, telling the story of his adventures, so that Sam can preserve their memory. And with it, Sam rides back to the Shire, to rejoin his wife and daughter and go on with his life—just as many soldiers,

² See also the discussion in Shippey 164–168, and the more general history in Garth.

Tolkien among them, came back from the war to go on with their own lives, grieving for the friends they had lost. As Wilfred Owen wrote,

Your voice sings not so soft —
 Though even as wind murmuring in raftered loft —
Your dear voice is not dear,
Gentle, and evening clear,
As theirs whom none now hear
Now earth has stopped the piteous mouths that coughed.
 ("Greater Love," lines 13–18)

On one hand, Tolkien believed that his friends had gone on to eternal life, and, he must have hoped and trusted, to salvation. But, on the other hand, they had gone, and he could not follow. And whatever his own faith, his writing gives eloquent expression to the perspective of the natural man, who sees only the departure from the world. His elves refer to death as the Gift of Men, but they don't know where men actually end up when they leave the world. When Aragorn is on his deathbed, Arwen, who gave up elven immortality to marry him, tells him that the Gift of Men is hard to accept and that she can understand why men wanted to share elven deathlessness.³

Tolkien's writing is filled with the sentiment of heroic memory. All the mortal races of Middle-earth love to tell of their ancestors and of the great deeds of the past. Their cultures are based on the sense that the dead can live on in memory. The flowers of *simbelmynë*, growing on the burial mounds of the kings of Rohan, offer a symbol for this kind of immortality. But the race of elves raise it to a higher level, beyond anything to be found in the real world. For a mortal man who befriends an elf may be remembered forever, or as close to forever as is possible within the natural world, and more vividly and completely than any human memory can achieve. The elves offer the closest thing to immortality that natural men can hope for; and the thought of this everliving memory might seem a comfort to anyone who had lost someone they loved, and had to live on without them. This elegiac power is one of Middle-earth's greatest wish fulfillments, or in Tolkien's word *consolations*—but it's a consolation most needed by those who had suffered real losses.

And, in a further level of this sense of elegy, Middle-earth itself is a symbol of loss. Tolkien's stories of it are filled with one loss after another, long before the War of the Ring: the destruction of the Two Trees, the loss of the *silmari*ls, the departure of Lúthien, the downfall of Númenor, the removal of the Blessed Realm from the physical world. In the time of the War of the Ring, the last remnant of the Elves are leaving, and taking with them the memory of its

³ See also Shippey's discussion of this scene, 177–8.

past. Its mortal races can no longer hope to live on in first-hand memory that could be shared with their descendants; that memory is in Elvenhome, inaccessible to them. And as the last elves depart, there will be no one left to remember those descendants, even in such a remote realm. As Rateliff says,

every wonder he creates is predestined to be destroyed, every race and creature he invents doomed to fade into extinction, every city and culture to pass away utterly, leaving behind no discernible trace. (68)

Tolkien asks the reader to accept, as a supposition of the story, that Middle-earth is our own world's past, forgotten except for one ancient manuscript, the Red Book. And in accepting that, even as a supposition, we are accepting the supposition that we are among those bereft by the departure of the Elves, and the invitation to mourn for them (as Rateliff's thesis implies). And that mourning provides an outward and visible form for our own griefs and losses, as I suppose it must have for Tolkien's.

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