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Power and Poetry in Middle-Earth

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Power and Poetry in Middle-Earth

Abstract
A response to criticisms of psychological shallowness and black-and-white morality in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Additional Keywords
Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*; Bonnie GoodKnight
J. R. R. Tolkien wanted The Lord of the Rings to be a "story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them." (I, ix) (All references to Ballantine edition.) If this is what a story must do, he has succeeded remarkably well. Not with all: some have come to it with different expectations of what a story should be and do. Since they were disappointed by it, they have naturally questioned its applicability or its truthfulness to life as they conceive of it.

These critics find it lacking in psychological interest and in complexity of motivation. For example, John Malcolm (Peter Dickinson), reviewing the revised edition in Punch, said:

But still it is a children's book: the one thing it does not rely on for its effects is an adult experience of the world, the reader's recognition that the writer is portraying an emotional truth about humanity.

Similarly, Matthew Hodgart in the New York Review of Books, while acknowledging Tolkien's skill in using the material of epic and saga, charged that "he brings everything down to the black-and-white of the fairy tales." In an argument reminiscent of Plato's Republic, he declared that Tolkien misinforms his readers about the moral nature of the world's inhabitants.

Tolkien appeals to the residual Christianity of our culture... and by posing the problems of life in terms of absolute good and evil, he gives a pseudo-explanation more satisfactory to the imagination than the rational explanations of liberal humanism can ever be. Alas, in this world there are no goblins or orcs...

Not that Mr. Hodgart is an orc-lover. Their existence would simply eliminate some moral dilemmas.

For these and other critics, there seems to be only one way of composing tribal lays, that of the modern novel. They expect a story to represent in faithful detail the psychological and moral complexities of life and the supposed intractability of many of its problems. The modern novel, it is said, "renders experience" or deals with "the human condition." Its subject is, as it were, Everyman, stranded without guidance in a world he did not make, unable to control his destiny, defeat his enemies, or shape the world a little more to his liking. If at last he yields, it is to what he imagines as absurdity, not to a power underlying all.

Habituated to this kind of fiction, some critics evidently believe that readers look to fiction for an image of "reality," and that it should therefore not misrepresent it and deceive them. But where Plato's "truth" was a doctored version, concealing the jealousies and quarrels of gods and heroes, Mr. Hodgart evidently wanted to show them "warts and all." He acknowledged the book's appeal to the imagination; he professed not to be deceived, but feared that others would be. Having, apparently, "rational explanations" to correct the book's errors, he found that they cannot prevail. Is there a way out of this dilemma?

There is no doubt that people are influenced by literature, or let's say simply stories. "The deepest truths of religion and philosophy had their first recording for the instruction of the peoples, not in the form of treatise, essay, or disquisition, but as epics, sagas and stories... That is to say, they did not seek to tell you things about the soul--which is the method of philosophy; but to present in great pictures that soul itself--which is the true method of art." So wrote one fantasist sixty years ago. Here is a critic who finds falsehood where I see truth; and undoubted falsehood is found in other stories. But if it attracts rather than repels, it does not seduce--pace Dr. Wertham--the wholly innocent or keep them spellbound forever. The world is always there as a check on fiction. To some it may indeed give evidence of the efficacy of evil. But I do not think stories can add to the wish to be illuded. Some will find illusion in spite of the evidence: Charles Manson did not care whether there are no Martians. So I would be slow to censor: I even believe, with Jules Feiffer, that trashy stories may be useful in childhood and are overgrown without harm.

And the good spell of other stories too is not lasting; but if it brings men together in delight, admiration or sorrow, it can sooner be renewed. As for teaching: in a sense stories cannot be a guide to the conduct of life, for they cannot name the decisive moment in anyone's life. It is always the present moment that is decisive. I think one brings, most often by far, one's knowledge of life to stories than the contrary.

The Lord of the Rings is a story, a work of art, to be distinguished from "rational explanations" of life's problems--and from works belonging to another mode of fiction. The modern novelist, finding no form in life, will have none in his art. He tries to write about Everyman, the man whose experience reaches no heights above the ordinary. But there is no "Everyman" in that sense. The fortunes of men are unequal. If we are concerned with behavior alone, then any man's life will offer a suitable case study. But if we want a story, we should remember that the story has a logic proper to story-telling, rather than a fidelity to the probabilities of real life. A story has to move its readers, and a deeply felt account of experience is not enough. Movement implies direction: a story has to concentrate its forces and give some kind of shape to its characters' fortunes. Readers--except, nowadays, the critics of novels--recognize this. They do not expect the nature or form of the hero's fortune to resemble anything they may reasonably expect. A story does not teach that. Rather, it offers a vision of human response to the gifts of fortune, good or ill. And gifts cannot be anticipated: that, I think, is the sense of "take no thought for the morrow."

Guidance is one of the most precious of gifts. In
fiction as in life, people must learn what their choices are likely to lead to, and they must at length achieve autonomy. In our time, which has been termed unheroic, there is no longer (it is said) any certain source of guidance. The traditional sources of wisdom have all proved inadequate: the only certainty is the inevitability of change. So the anti-hero has come to rule the novel; his tale is the negation of at least two of Heinlein's three story types (The Brave Little Tailor, Boy Meets Girl, The Man Who Learned Better). The idea has gotten about that fiction "renders experience." At least so one critic phrases it; he sees the modern novelist as writing with a new radical vision of experience, namely that "experience is not closed. If in certain extreme cases...the expanding process of conscience remains not merely unclosed but unclosable, that information is a more extreme mythic statement: experience cannot be closed."5

What precisely he means is hard to determine. That no lesson is ever learned once and for all? Or that no lesson can be known to be true? But certainly his concept of fiction begs the question. It neglects fortune, the writer's means of shaping a work of art. If the probabilities of finding one in the hero's (anti-hero's) world are reckoned, he can have no place in the story. Can the resulting work, in which providential events have no place or cancel each other out, have the power of moving a reader in the way Tolkien wanted his work to do? I think not; but fortunately fiction is not bound by the mere probabilities of "experience." All the great works of fiction that I know give their characters a chance to depart from the mean, to transcend mere likelihood.

As very few authors are, Tolkien is interested in the combinations of character and circumstance that call forth deeds. Without both, Frodo, Sam, and their friends would not be worth telling about. How do they grow to be doers of deeds, and what gives the occasion?

It is the fate of Middle-earth to have a real enemy in Sauron and in the creatures he commands--an enemy as real as hunger, cold, and pain. These beings are defined as enemies by their inability to understand good faith. Only an informed use of force (and other means) can liberate the world from this evil. The equation is balanced by giving the people of Middle-earth allies--the White Council--who have the needed strength and knowledge. Neither magic nor force can bring about Sauron's defeat; were this possible, the story would be robbed of its meaning. The "allies" can only offer guidance to a human effort.

The readers of the story are not deceived. They know that there are no orcs or trolls, no Great Enemy, no gods, demons, or wizards. What interests them in a story is the use which its persons make of their own powers, or the effect other powers have on them. What moves them is what it reveals about desire, its fulfillment or its frustration. (Most of the fiction that I find interesting fails somehow to be moving; amusing at best.)

Not all people have the same understanding of what they want, what must be done to get it, and what the obstacles are. The young, especially, believe--and are encouraged to believe--that the gifts of strength, intelligence, and good looks will get them all they wish for. In the stories they typically like, no problems are allowed to exist except those solvable by the use of these gifts. As they outgrow some of their illusions, they also outgrow the stories and poems that appealed to these.

The hobbits are not chosen for their task for any great strength or talents--though they do have more alertness and curiosity than the ordinary Shirefolk. Still, they are treated as equals by Gandalf, Aragorn, and others of the great. Their desires are treated as just and worthy of due attention, and they are shown what they must do if these are ever to be granted. With a minimum of hesitation, they choose to do what they must. In the end, with the great terror of the world removed, they can face without fear whatever dangers remain.

The story of how the four hobbits grow to be heroes provides, in the words of Robert Sklar, "a paradigm for action. It asks not who you are, or your pedigree, or your past associations but simply states: this is the task; are you willing to carry it through?"6 Well put, but I would correct the statement: this is what Gandalf does. A good wizard, by definition, has no credibility gap. His magical powers are only a sign of what he is; they cannot, in this kind of story, save people from the choices they must make. When he says a choice must be made now, so it must, and the occasion shows us how the other person's will works. From this derives the moral clarity of the work (to which some have given less complimentary names). The apparent lack of psychological interest
comes from the fact that its heroes indulge in no "games", no ulterior transactions (as Eric Berne defined them). Thanks to the guidance of Gandalf, they take effective action toward the achievement of real goals. Through choosing and doing they grow credibly, toward autonomy. When Gandalf departs from them, he can say:

"I am not coming to the Shire. You must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been trained for... You are grown up now... and I have no longer any fear at all for any of you."

(III, 340)

What can be said to one who finds both the good and the evil of this story exaggerated and incredible? For the good: are we to admit no archetypes to a story? It is, after all, fantasy, and may have wizards and good kings. Fantasy in some form has been a mainstay of literature from its beginnings, and it has rarely depended on literal belief in the marvels it presents. And the shape of character development is determined here by the need to do. For the persons of the story, fantastic forces and beings and the contrivances of fate are the fortune that they must deal with. The meeting of character with circumstance is what makes the story, and circumstances calling for the use of all one's powers make the best stories. It is the role of fantasy to supply them. As for the evil: again, this is fantasy, and may admit enemies that do not understand good faith. And do they not capture the imagination by what they are, the evil beings and the good?

Tolkien shows his characters--I am thinking mainly of the hobbits--as capable of action, unimprisoned by the past. They are moved to it as I have heard rumor of such: saints, hassidim, Zen masters...

The power by which Gandalf moves others to the performance of deeds and so to autonomy ("Thou art Gandalf, " he might say... ) is the same in our world as in Middle-earth. But deeds are by no means the whole story. Tolkien's characters live in a rich and varied world that is as fully realized as any in literature. How does its richness help them in doing their appointed work?

Some words of Robert Frost will introduce my answer: they are from his letter to The Amherst Student in 1935.

"Fortunately we don't need to know how bad the age is. There is something we can always be doing without reference to how good or how bad the age is. There is at least so much good in the world that it admits of form and the making of form... And not only admits of it, but calls for it... Anyone who has achieved the least form to be sure of it, is lost to the larger excruciations. I think it must stroke faith the right way. The artist, the poet, might be expected to be the most aware of such assurance, but it is really everybody's sanity to feel it and live by it. Fortunately, too, no forms are more engrossing, gratifying, comforting, staying, than those lesser ones... need nobody's cooperation: a basket, a letter, a garden, a room, an idea, a picture, a poem. For these we have--not to get a team together before we can play."

The work which men must do to ensure their survival does not often call on all their resources of body and mind. Responsibility is not--except in extreme circumstances--felt to be continual or all-demanding. There must be, and is, relief from it. But apart from the need for rest and sleep, relief is not found in inactivity. The faculties of mind and body demand to be exercised, to be engaged by something.

Lucky the man whose work demands all the resources he wants to put into it. But craftsmanship has been abolished from many occupations, and much of the world's work, necessary as it is, makes only the cruelest demands on the body. As Niall Brennan wrote:

"Any job where the mind is completely free can be not only tolerable but refreshing. But if the intellect is to be stimulated by it, this stimulation must be consciously sought. Uncomplicated manual labour is only beneficial to people aware of and with a use for their intellect. If the intellect is ignored, it becomes an open tip for every kind of mental garbage... The intellect cannot remain empty. It can either choose its contents or be filled without making its own selection..."

"This kind of completely manual work is fit only for morons or for students..."

"The hobbits of Tolkien's story are "students." It is their great good fortune to have a wealth of wholesome subject matter to study. They have the land and the people of the Shire, with their history, folkways, and complex genealogies. They have the whole rich history of Middle-earth, and many stories of the deeds of Men, Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, and other creatures and powers. This lore is nowhere "merely" decorative, but is an organic part of the history /Tolkien: "As the story grew it put down roots (into the past) and threw out unexpected branches..." (I, x)\ of the story. I have come to realize with what insight Tolkien has portrayed the forces which move and sustain the hobbits on their difficult journey."

"The mission of the Ringbearer and his friends is a wholly earnest affair. It calls at most times not for courage, but for sheer plodding determination. It is work that calls for no talents, only for what all men are given alike: a body (excepting, of course, the
accidents of infirmity and disease) and a will.

On occasion, early in their adventures, the hobbits are inclined to make a "hobbit walking-party" of their journey. The presence of danger soon puts a stop to that. They are not free to act frivolously and so to jeopardize their mission. But at all times--except Frodo's final journey to the mountain--their healthy natural curiosity is awake. Not fully at first, but it is untrained and purposeless. But every incident of their adventures stimulates it further. At times it becomes downright disconcerting.

"Mercy!" cried Gandalf. "If the giving of information is to be the cure of your inquisitiveness, I shall spend all the rest of my days in answering you. What more do you want to know?"

"The names of all the stars, and of all living things, and the whole history of Middle-earth and Over-heaven and of the Sundering Seas," laughed Pippin. 'Of course! What less?'" (II, 280)

Virtually everybody in the story is interested in stories and songs, and the book is rich in verses of many kinds, from folk rhymes and rustic songs to highly wrought lyric, prophetic, and narrative pieces. Their use by the persons of the story has at all times an air of naturalness and spontaneity. Parallels can be found in the romances of William Morris and E. R. Eddison, but not with this range of effect. Tolkien's verses, in their variety, are always well suited to the occasion and to the singer or speaker. Song and story are ingrained in the character of those who make them or pass them on. There are some who have little or no use for art, and at times other forces are stronger, but such variation should reveal all the more clearly what use poetry has in Middle-earth.

W. H. Auden has distinguished the serious--"that which is given to all men alike, and that which is commanded of all men alike"--and the frivolous: "To the degree that a vocation or profession requires some gift, it partakes, for him who is able to practice it, of the nature of a game, however serious the social need it serves." But the situation of a man without any gifts is scarcely imaginable. No creature as complex as man has only the irreducible minimum of body and will. Even one who is crippled in body, intellect, or one or more of his senses can know that the world has far more richness of form than will ever require his responsible attention. For all but the most unfortunate, there is room for play of the body and the mind. The gifts of body and mind which men--and animals--have demand to be exercised, or they will atrophy. And when they wither, can any being survive?

The mind cannot remain empty--and when a physical task leaves it idle, it can find satisfaction in the forms, natural and man-made, within its reach. To men bearing responsibilities, art in the widest sense offers a means of bearing them with grace. It has this use for the people of Middle-earth as for us.

For when the mind has not been stimulated and enriched by art, how long will it remain able to accept responsibility? I doubt if the hobbits could have performed their task if this civilizing grace had been denied them.

Robert Frost offers yet another way of talking about it. In a letter of 1924, he examines the notion that "the style is the man":

Style in prose or verse is that which indicates how the writer takes himself...I am not satisfied to let it go with the aphorism that the style is the man.... His style is the way he carries himself toward his ideas and deeds. Mind you if he is downspirited it will be all he can do to have the ideas without the carriage. The style is out of his superficiality. It is the mind skating circles around itself as it moves forward.

So art complements work. Art by itself cannot provide direction; but it offers, as an added grace, the possibility of "skating circles" without which a direction might not be sustained. The failure to understand this use of art brings with it a doomsday mentality that seems all too common among our pundits. A pundit, by definition, is concerned with how bad the age is.

A great deal could be said to clear Tolkien of the charge of psychological naiveté. His heroes' growth to a stature worthy of the gifts they receive is complex, subtle, and individual. But others have already done the job: Marion Zimmer Bradley, for one, in her essay "Men, Halflings, and Hero Worship." It would be tedious to follow the hobbits through every stage of their journey, but I want to show some of the various and changing ways in which they use and understand poetry and stories.

Interested as Frodo and his friends are in other peoples and lands, their knowledge at first is limited. The songs, too, which appear in the first chapters of the story, have a cheerful, homely quality. They accord perfectly with the sheltered life of the Shire. The courage of the hobbits has not yet been tested.

By luck more than anything they avoid the Black Riders who have come to the Shire. The morning of departure comes, and they set off into the Old Forest. Soon it becomes clear that they are unequal to the obstacles confronting them. Frodo tries a song--"For east or west all woods must fall"--but the song fails instead. The power of Old Man Willow seems impossible, but rescue comes just in time.

The power of Tom Bombadil is as near as can be to pure art. He achieves all his effects (except the rescue from the barrow) without apparent labor. While they are at his house, the hobbits are freed from the burden of responsibility. They become artists without even willing it. Such are Tom's and Goldberry's powers of enchantment that Frodo finds himself speaking in verse, and at supper the hobbits find singing easier than talking. Tom's own speech is, of course, artistic: verse or cadenced prose. And his stories, ranging over the whole history of Middle-Earth, are so spellbinding that his heroes lose track of the passage of time.

In a limited way, Tom is their ally. The hobbits have received material aid. Their fund of "useless" knowledge--bees and flowers, the ways of trees, and the strange creatures of the forest--has been greatly enriched. But while Tom is Master within the limits he has set himself, he will and can not take any responsibility for the fate of Middle-earth. If the hobbits looked for magical means that would make their peril vanish, they were disappointed.

They go on, through adventure, misadventure,
and deadly peril. They are now fully caught up in events whose long history they must learn, and the poems that appear in the story now have a different tone. Fragments of ancient legend appear: Gil-galad, Tinuiel. And at a time when the travelers' strength is overtaxed, remembrance of Bilbo's old adventure and Sam's poem "The Stone Troll" have a salutary effect. His friends look on Sam with surprise and respect.

They find rest, healing, and the enchanting power of elvish song at Rivendell, and after great perils again in Lothlórien. Of the character of Elves it is difficult to speak. Much of it is only adumbrated... or gets lost in translation... but clearly they are 'a bit above our likes and dislikes.' One senses a kind of art pour l'art decadence, except among the Elflords: the Elves are slow to accept responsibility for the world's affairs. Their strength and their inaccessibility seem to be in balance. Men cannot expect magical aid from them in their ordinary affairs—which the mission of the Fellowship, of course, is not. At the end, the Elves put forth their strength. The hobbits have lost the guidance of Gandalf, and when the Fellowship is scattered at Parth Galen, they are on their own. But fortune is with them: they find aid and guidance on their separate ways. Their experiences give them a new understanding of stories and of men.

Pippin, like the others, has tended to take Gandalf for granted, even after learning something of his powers. At last, seeing him confront Denethor, he begins to look and to wonder. There is more to the wizard than he suspected. And after the interview comes this insight:

Pippin glanced in some wonder at the face now close beside his own, for the sound of that laugh has been gay and merry. Yet in the wizard's face he saw at first only lines of care and sorrow; though as he looked more intently he perceived that under all was a great joy: a fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing, were it to gush forth. (III, 34)

This latent power is akin to Tom Bombadil's, with this difference. Within his little world, Tom is the unchallenged Master, and to those who enter it he can offer the relief of pure frivolity, pure art. He is like a grasshopper for whom it is always summer. Gandalf is nowhere master; he is a steward with a heavy burden of responsibility. But, as we may learn from "Leaf by Niggle," Tolkien does not allow the ant in the fable to win the argument. The whole man is both worker and artist. The labor which Gandalf performs and to which he calls others must be done without hesitation: no excuses are allowed, and no distractions may intervene. Yet his example also shows that work can and must be informed with a knowledge of the shape of the world—including a just estimate of oneself and the limits of one's role. Only so can it be performed with grace. That is a lesson which Denethor has not learned.

But why doesn't Gandalf use his power to set a kingdom laughing? Because, I believe, it would have been a distraction. He was needed, and was sent, as the Enemy of Sauron. When his job was done, he departed. To exercise the power of pure art was no part of it. If he had used it, people would have been moved, but they would not have known to what purpose.

Frodo and Sam, after many dangerous experiences, arrive at the very threshold of Mordor. As they pause to rest, their talk turns to the subject of stories and heroes. By then, Sam has learned something about the nature of stories.

"The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been landed in them, usually--their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on..." (III, 407)

Not in modern novels, we don't. But The Lord of the Rings is such a story. If I seem to stress the didactic passages, it is not from a belief that the story exists for the lesson's sake. It has been a delight, above all--but it has also been a help in understanding what people may do and suffer. It has reminded me that stories are to be told. And I found the occasion to share the story and my understanding, needing no words but those of the story itself. No work of art could do more. I cannot believe that this story fosters any illusions. The poetry and the power of Middle-earth can be found here, in the Primary World; acting on human desires, they could make heroes of... anyone. And that is a heartening thought...

A version of this paper was read at the Tolkien Conference at Belknap College, Center Harbor, N.H., Oct. 18-20, 1968.

NOTES

1. Punch, 251 (Nov. 16, 1966), 755