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Editorial: Learning from Tolkien

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LEARNING FROM TOLKIEN

Many of us can share anecdotes about ourselves on our coming to read Tolkien, or our first reaction to it. I first read The Hobbit and The Lord of The Rings in 1957-58 when I was a Junior in High School. I had been a quiet and introspective adolescent, who had begun an enjoyment of science fiction, and I had as friends a small group of science fiction readers at my high school. I was nearly the last one in the group to read Tolkien. I had neither much read nor much liked fantasy before then, having absorbed our culture's general distaste of all things 'unreal'.  In particular I had not, and could not, put aside and enjoy our "realistic" problems. I also was very reluctant to start a work with The Hobbit as a kind of prelogical to the main body, three volumes long, my attention span up to then capable only of the short stories in science fiction magazines. The Hobbit had a quality to it I had never read before, and sufficiently motivated me to go ahead and take the plunge. All the time the others in our small-coliterie of about eight were encyclopedically, talking about all I was to yet meet: the Narguil, Bombadil, Moria, Rohan, Gondor, and Mordor.

I count the reading of The Lord of The Rings as the first in the series of experiences that one would call pivotal; one of those larger-than-life things that you know will affect you from then on. I won't try to give a detailed description of my initial reaction to Tolkien. For many reasons I was not equipped to handle what I was reading, being defensively not very aggressive, more sheltered than not, and naive Tolkien reached me, but much of it by-passed the intellectual process and went directly to the subconscious where the impressions were weighed in the balance by a kind of inner sense of honesty and objective reality that seems to naturally reside there.

Tolkien captured a quality I had never read before, yet my inner-knowing identified it. My imagination was excited. I eagerly read all the other-world fantasies available, but they didn't quite have that certain essence and quality Tolkien had. Then one of the friends in the group recommended the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis. My adolescent snobbery was reluctant to "lower myself" to read children's books. I had justifiably The Hobbit on the basis of a prelude.) But my imaginative curiosity could not be restrained. It was to discover the secret and incommunicable thread of delight in Lewis' Narnia books and soon after in the "Ransom" trilogy, which I had only known before in Tolkien. It was not until years later that I found that Lewis and Tolkien were very close friends for all of their adult life. From Lewis' other writings, he introduced me to several writers who also had this thread of special "joy."

One of the very major things that impress me about Tolkien is his innermost and deep integrity and the evident world-view expressed in his writing. A man who took fourteen years to finish his magnum opus, his world-view, is the furthest from the "hack" writer that I can think of. It is obvious he wrote neither for fame or money. For me, the way, owe a great deal to C.S. Lewis, for it is highly probable without his agency that we would have never read Tolkien. It was Lewis who unceasingly urged and prodded Tolkien to submit The Hobbit to a publisher. Tolkien was sure no publisher would be interested. Lewis had told us that his best friend was a "perfectionist and procrastinator," and that "you have no idea what laborious mid-wifery we got the Lord of The Rings out of him!" I sense that Tolkien wrote The Lord of The Rings because he had to. That is an inner sense kept in him going to express a distilled version of all the experiences and knowledge and learning that life had poured into him. He created, much in the same way that all artists create: to bring out and say, what is very real to them inside. What he has in his world-view is an impression or written Tolkien to ask what is the meaning behind his work, he has denied any hidden meaning. He has to say this to politely put down the imperious blindness of the question. Those who ask have missed the gloriously subtle while inspecting the detailed trees. Tolkien is right; there is no hidden meaning. The meaning is in the experience of reading. Some find it; some do not.

I have wondered what he must have felt when back in the middle 50's he was greatly praised and suddenly made popular. Then again I wonder what he thought when his books finally came out in paperback, and there occurred what we call now the "Tolkien phenomenon" or explosion, and people wrote articles in popular magazines wondering what was happening to their children. He probably finds his youthful admirers in America incomprehensible, since I think he probably has not kept up with the social and political changes in this nation in the last fifteen to twenty years, nor is it that important to him. In this regard the real essence of his work has not been grasped in our chaotic condition, and who could blame him, with all the sophomoric popularization that has gone on. But what he has to say is comprehended by many here, will have many healthy reverberations in ways we do not yet fully know.

To me, The Lord of The Rings is a sustained impersonal and professional statement of the man's personal philosophy and belief. What is implicit  in The Lord of The Rings is explicit in his essay "On Fairy-Stories." When I first read Tolkien, it was the prolonged sufferance of Frodo and the later resultant joy, that helped me break an all-embracing sense of bitter cynicism and adolescent sense of futility, and made room in my mind for the possibility of eucatastrophe. For that I shall be eternally grateful.