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Tolkien Centenary Banquet Address

Glen H. GoodKnight

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Tolkien Centenary Banquet Address

Glen H. GoodKnight

As someone we all know, Bilbo Baggins, once said: “I hope you are all enjoying yourselves as much as I am . . . I don’t know half of you half as well as I should like; and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve.” Sincere compliments to the Conference Committee for making it all possible for us all to come to this “little party,” so long-expected and so well executed, and for having made dreams tangible for those here today. Intelligence, creativity, and good will know no borders. While we each may pronounce our English slightly differently, we each also speak the language of Tolkien, and in our diversity *here* we find unity. Sharing this experience together here with all of you from so many countries is a personal dream come true. I have held it almost as long as The Mythopoeic Society has been in existence – twenty-five years this autumn. For all these years I have dreamed that one day we would be here, in this noble city, seeing the places, and walking the very streets where John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and the other Inklings met, sharing ideas and fellowship, and shaping their greatest works.

In producing the Tolkien Centenary Issue of *Mythlore*, I had the pleasure of receiving and reading the many tributes to Tolkien that poured in. Each person’s comments were unique and yet there was a common bond that ran through all of them – the same bond that has brought us together here. We are all grateful to Tolkien for making our lives richer, more appreciative of good things great and small, for opening many new doors in our imaginations, recovering the sense of wonder, and for showing us that a transcending hope is possible. At those times when our lives become strongly intimidated by the daunting negative challenges presented to us, we can pause to recall:

Far above the Ephel Dúath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.

For Tolkien to have given all these gifts, and more, is no small accomplishment, and we are here to celebrate the genius of the man who had such clarity of vision.

One of the ways I have tried to honour Tolkien this year, and in the process create great pleasure for others and myself, was to organize weekly readings of his masterpiece: *The Lord of the Rings*. Since March a small group of about ten to fifteen people have met in my home every Sunday

afternoon, to take turns reading aloud from the book. These readings have been a reaffirmation for myself. Even though I am reading passages all the time, mainly as I edit *Mythlore*, it has been some years since I have read the story all the way though from beginning to end. We have made a wonderful discovery: in the act of reading *aloud*, Tolkien’s humour jumps out from the pages, mostly from the mouths and actions of the hobbits. Frequently the whole room will be filled with laughter as a certain passage is read. The latest incident was in the chapter “The Houses of Healing.” We see the healing hands of Aragorn bring back Faramir from near death. When Faramir awakes he says, “My lord, you called me. I come. What does the King command?” Then we see Aragorn bring back Éowyn from her dark dreams of despair. She opens her eyes to her brother, and says: “Éomer! What joy is this? For they said that you were slain. Nay, but that was only the dark voices in my dream. How long have I been dreaming?” When lastly Aragorn calls Merry by name:

And when the fragrance of *athelas* stole through the room, like the scent of orchards, and of heather in the sunshine full of bees, suddenly Merry awoke, and he said:

“I am hungry. What is the time?”

Tolkien takes us to the depths of fear and the heights of joy, and yet keeps us humble with smiles, knowing nods, and outright laughter.

A week ago, Sunday, in the readings we reached the point where Sam and Frodo escape from the Tower of Cirith Ungol. Those who were unable to come here are taking a two-week break, preparing a mailing for the Mythopoeic Society’s 25th Anniversary. We will resume a week from Sunday with three weeks more to read the climax and bitter-sweet denouement. What a rich six months this has been.

Twenty-five years ago, unwilling to abide the frustrating isolation any longer, I organized a picnic in a public park to celebrate Bilbo and Frodo’s Birthday. I was looking for people who might say “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.” I was *not* disappointed. We had games, a lore contest, a costume judging, a mathom exchange, birthday cake and plenty of mushrooms. The first discussion meeting was announced for the following month, and we then entered upon a long road, with many twists and turns, that brings us here today. That picnic twenty-five years ago has made the Mythopoeic Society the oldest on-going Tolkien-related organization and the very first devoted to either C.S. Lewis or Charles Williams.

Next month in September, twenty-five years later, we will again celebrate Bilbo and Frodo’s birthday, with costumes,

birthday cake, mathoms, and mushrooms. This time¹ will be very special as we will also have a slide show of highlights of these twenty-five years, and to crown the event, we will read the "Epilogue" to *The Lord of the Rings*. Those of you who have seen a copy of *Sauron Defeated*, know the bitter-sweet passage it is.

Over the years, as we all know, Tolkien has suffered literary and media detractors. Frequently they have described Tolkien and we his readers as Escapists. We know from his essay "On Fairy-Stories" he made a sharp distinction between the Escape of the Prisoner and the Flight of the Deserter. He asks the burning question, "Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?"

But I am thinking about a different kind of escape, or actually a different kind of "no escaping." An inescapable feeling that has brought us here together; has kept us reading and re-reading Tolkien many times across many years. To slightly adapt a page from C.S. Lewis' excellent short book, *An Experiment in Criticism*, will put it well.

If you find two people reading their fantasy, you must not conclude that they are having the same experience. Where one finds only danger for the heroes, the other may feel the "aweful." When one races ahead in curiosity, the other may pause in wonder. Reading a

particular story, one will ask "will the hero escape?" The other feels "I shall never escape this. This will never escape me. These images have struck roots far below the surface of my mind."

Tolkien's genius is that he, as sub-creator, creates a world where the reader is invited and permitted to let the power of his or her own imagination intermingle and effoliate the realm of Arda, in a way suggestively parallel to that in which the Valar contributed to the creation of the World. Tolkien sets the roots of subcreation in our own minds, and we also become through this participatory process myth-makers ourselves.

What a wonderful gift he received and then shared with us. I am unceasingly impressed by his life-long loyalty to his gift of vision – a vision of affirmation and "hope unlooked for."

Thank you Professor Tolkien.

Thank you to the Tolkien family for continuing, enriching and expanding this vision for we his readers.

Thank you all.

August 20, 1992

¹ The 25th Anniversary Celebration was held in September of 1992, at the stately South Pasadena Public Library, in Southern California. The highlight of this festive event was the Reading of the "Epilogue" to *The Lord of the Rings*, which is a very poignant passage.