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How Russians See Tolkien

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How Russians See Tolkien

Abstract

The understanding of J.R.R. Tolkien in Russia is affected by two circumstances. One is that the general public is only familiar with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The other fact is that for the last 75 years cultural values and ethical rules have been methodically changed and replaced with communist ideology. So I'd like to divide readers of Tolkien into four groups: children, youth, general readers and the intellectual elite. J.R.R. Tolkien is of extremely great interest for children from 7 to 13. It seems that they enjoy their first meeting with true and really good fairy-story and explore this genre with care. The teenager's perception is superficial. It depends on their increasing political and social apathy and is usually connected with escapism. Passions for war role-playing games and for writing imitations are typical for this group. The general public is bewildered if in touch with Tolkien at all. Social consciousness doesn't have any scale of values fitting for *The Lord of the Rings*. Even literary criticism is extremely poor. Elite readers are familiar with other books by J.R.R. Tolkien together with Russian culture and world cultural traditions. So this group is interested mostly in Tolkien's linguistics, philosophy, theology, etc.

Additional Keywords

D. Andreev; Russian culture; Russian literature; visions

How Russians See Tolkien¹

Vladimir Grushetskiy

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We are extremely obliged to everyone whose care has helped us to get here. We are gathered here by the call of the Force that constantly sounds in our world. Its call was heard and strengthened by J.R.R. Tolkien. Our work on *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* translations from 1984 to 1991 have become a part of our lives. It has changed them, and we would like to think not only ours. It is nearly impossible to imagine that anybody could read *The Lord of the Rings* and be left unchanged.

The Russian audience understands Tolkien in a rather special way. First of all, fairy-stories as a literary genre have always been rare in Russia. I mean novels corresponding to the demands of Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" essay. These few were absorbed and lost in the large mass of folk-tales. So *The Lord of the Rings* immediately attracted attention for its novelty and brightness. Secondly, Tolkien remains known by general readers only as the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. His other books appeared in various issues of a rather small number of copies and are not widely known.

At first sight it's easy to find three different modes of readers' perception and accordingly three types of readers. The first group of readers includes people with a fresh perception whose abilities to connect with the "Secondary World" haven't been lost. They hear an echo of this "Secondary World" in *The Lord of the Rings* and enjoy it. This group is made up of children from 7 to 13. We have met them in schools, youth libraries and so on. We have seen a lot of children who have read and re-read the books many

times, children living inside Middle-earth and exploring it closely. I think some of them are skilled in its history, languages, geography, heroes' biographies possibly better than we are. It is clear that Tolkien's books mean more to them than ordinary fairy-tales. Numerous pictures and dolls show that. The deep influence of the book is revealed by the innumerable questions they ask. I don't know a better way to instil human ethical norms into children's consciousness. It depends on the fact that only a few authors were able to find the right tone for speaking to children about human duty, honour, generosity and dignity. For the last 70 years they were usually influenced by corporate or communist ideology.

As Tolkien himself remarked, the main question for children is, "Is he good or is he bad?", and the book never avoids this question. But, of course, they are interested in other things too. For example, we were asked a question which we were unable to answer. A 12-year-old girl asked us, what is the reason that two such different heroes as Sauron and Frodo had their fingers cut off with the Ring. I'll be very pleased if anybody knows the answer.

Teenagers from 12 to 19 have certain peculiarities of perception. Younger children are usually introduced to Tolkien by adults. If teenagers encounter Tolkien it is usually a result of their conscious decision. This choice is fully their own. Typically this kind of reader has broad views and heightened interests in intellectual studies. They are usually high-school or college students interested in the humanities though often enough they specialize in education studies,

¹ Editors' note: some revisions to this paper have been made by the editors.

mathematics or programming. Since 1982, when the first translation of *The Fellowship of the Ring* was published, more than one hundred Tolkien-clubs have been formed in Russia. Before the mid-80s they had not had any information about each other, and they had poor information about Tolkien himself. Since then there has been more or less regular contacts between Russian fan-clubs in the various cities and regions. Some fanzines have been published and a kind of specialized information network has been created. A number of conferences have been held and a strange thing named "Khobbitskie Igrishcha" ["Hobbit Games"] appeared. So it is possible to say that these groups of youth exist in "Tolkien's World" and spend considerable effort to be there. It is an extraordinary phenomenon. Until recently societies of this sort were only created in Russia under the control of the official authorities.

As we are talking about Russia we should remember that generations lived in an all-embracing ideological atmosphere and were restricted to an extremely undistinguished literary production, because it belonged to the official "sacred" genre of "socialist realism". The appearance of *The Lord of the Rings* itself broke down the ethical norms that were passed by the ruling Party. This exceptional work based on the Christian ethics of its author was very timely although partly unexpected.

Certainly young people's passion for Tolkien contains elements of escapism, but I don't think this is a fault, as the author refutes this charge himself. Because Russia has existed until recently as a totalitarian state, Tolkien's words about a prisoner escaping from the walls of his prison have a special relevance here. The essence of escapism isn't so simple. It means the existence of "another" reality preferred by those who escape. From my point of view there are three possible forms of interaction between this "other reality" and "escapism". The first type is that the "escapist" is forced to attain to his "other reality" and so "his soul rises". The second is where a person tries to find a more comfortable place to live, that he tries to change his ordinary reality for something else which is placed "on the same level" and doesn't demand any inner work. The third type attempts to make a person worse.

There is no need to explain that *The Lord of the Rings* belongs to the first type and assumes higher norms of life than "primary" reality. So the word "escapism" does not have its abusive sense.

But I should say that most of the young audience is looking for action, and Tolkien's vast linguistic, philological and mythological background is rather difficult or boring for them. The depths of meaning are beyond their power of comprehension. "Khobbitskie Igrishcha", referred to above demonstrates that.

"Khobbitskie Igrishcha" is a role-playing game which continues over four or five days. Teams from various regions and cities gather together. The usual number of participants is between fifty and three hundred. Roles are chosen beforehand, but usually the war for the Ring becomes a main

theme and organizers are forced to work hard to prevent evil from winning. Often the course of play breaks from the outline of the book's plot. Hobbits are forgotten. Their place is filled by knights, kings, wizards, nazgûl and so on. The translator S. Koshelev, who was seriously interested in the "Inklings", noted in his foreword to the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis that

. . . the organizers of "Khobbitskie Igrishcha" have used Tolkien's profound philosophical epic . . . as a basis for an orienteering competition. I wouldn't wonder if some years later teams of boy- and girl-scouts find in the Siberian woods a way from the Fords-of-Beruna to Cair-Paravel . . ."

(Koshelev, 1991, p. 19)²

Apparently, decades of a totalitarian regime have influenced people's minds so greatly that even those who caught only its fall have certain difficulties in understanding a fundamental theme of *The Lord of the Rings* – an idea that any power contains primary evil.

So the young participants of "Khobbitskie Igrishcha" strive to establish by force their own ideas of justice. Certainly it leads to some troubling effects on the players' minds. They put down noble and generous impulses and stress physical strength, tricks and unscrupulousness in realizing their roles. Usually they turn to cruelty in "battles". Player's injuries are increasing steadily. It looks as though the aggression of the participants will increase if the very principles of such games aren't changed by their organizers, and if they don't get rid of the temptation of Power and the symbol of the Ring.

Tolkien's popularity in Russia depends on the fact that general readers gained access to his works when the social system of the whole country had been swept away, when old cultural values were being devalued and new cultural values were in short supply. Young people accept Tolkien's world because it's completely honest. The intentional contrast between Good and Evil makes it clear. It is easy to recognize Tolkien's world because it contains true elements of "another" reality. I believe this larger world exists at the same time as our ordinary world and parallels it. Some aspects of this "other world" are retained in human mythologies. It seems to me that the word "Faerie" is closely connected with a certain kind of "other reality". Authors of mythologies have only "reflected" it, as Tolkien has.

Familiarity with "another world" demands some special knowledge. Usually young people are poorly informed about such matters. Explaining their feelings about the book, they prefer to say: "It's my sort of book", or "The book isn't for me". Those for whom an echo of "another world" has an importance make their choice automatically, never troubling to think about their reasons.

Often there isn't any visible influence on a person's outlook on the world, but sometimes a deep interest in *The Lord of the Rings* leads to serious studies in linguistics and mythology, and so considerably influences their way of life.

The second type of audience consists of "experienced readers". They are used to reading but they have generally

² Russian quotations are translated by Vladimir Grushetskiy.

been trained in the “socialist realist” literary tradition. Usually they admit that Tolkien’s works are significant, but when they are reading them they feel an unaccountable irritation. Its source is clear enough. As I have said, fairy-story as a literary genre isn’t well known in Russia. Hence there’s no label to put on the text which defines a reader’s expectation. The book is discouragingly straightforward. The depths of sense haven’t been based on allegories, as was typical for Russian literature for half a century. Here, true significance returns to moral categories and the reader’s attention is turned to ontological aspects of Being almost by force. It is difficult to analyse and to discuss this kind of text, and it’s slowly producing a strange reaction. Literary critics (these are few, by the way) and reviewers and even some researchers and translators of Tolkien are tending to force their own ideas upon the author. His books are usually considered as allegories. So, Zerkalov explains that Tolkien has been forbidden in Russia for long years because of “the Darkness coming from the East” (1989, p. 81). Zerkalov asserts that the censors regarded this as a clear reference to the totalitarian system in the USSR.

Certainly the situation will improve if Tolkien’s books are published. They cannot be published legally because of the lack of hard currency for rights payments. That is our common problem with modern foreign literature. As a result, some “pirate” editions, as a rule badly translated, have appeared and a lot of information is unreachable for general readers. *The Biography* by H. Carpenter, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* and *The History of Middle-earth* are more or less known to a limited circle of researchers. The perceptions of the author’s intentions are fully dependent on his critic’s point of view. And the critics tend to declare: “Tolkien means that . . .” or “Tolkien hardly realized what he had written . . .” or even “though the author has asserted that, it’s quite different . . .” V. Murav’ev explains in his foreword for his own translation of *The Lord of the Rings*:

Though Tolkien denied it, the word “hobbit” grew from two words: “ho(mo)” [Latin] – “a man” and “(a ra)bbit”- English.

(Murav’ev, 1988, p. 14)

A few pages later we can find in the “Prologue” the author’s words that “Hobbits are relatives of ours”. Book 4 chapter IV is entitled “Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit”, so possibly we should think that hobbits are cannibals. But a more important factor is that the translator finds a kind of baseless approach suitable for “a story for children”. This approach is typical of a reader limiting Tolkien’s work by a particular theme or genre. Nearly all reviews, papers, forewords are similar in one point. Each of them relates in detail WHAT is written but never explains WHY.

The Ring of Power is an extraordinary symbol for Russia. Our present struggle for power is too far from the ethical base of the book, so if you want to be listened to it’s better to choose another subject.

Knowing how important *The Silmarillion* is for understanding *The Lord of the Rings* we were trying to publish *The Silmarillion* in Russian legally. It is a pity that our negotiations with HarperCollins were not successful. As

a result there have been two “pirate” editions and two more are in preparation. The evil of the Ring is distorting intentions. These translations are hardly fit for literary Russians and need serious editing. One of these versions is drastically abridged, and another contains some passages from *Unfinished Tales*. Remembering the troubles the author had with “pirate” editions in the U.S.A. in the 60s the Russian *Silmarillion* published in the same way cannot be counted as a good centenary present for the author.

But it has happened now, and the readers’ attitude to the author and *The Lord of the Rings* is changing. It is now becoming impossible to look on the books as a simple “fairy-story” or even a philosophical fairy-story. As the author himself maintained, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* were planned as a duology. It’s my opinion that taken as a whole they show the evolutionary ways of mankind through the idea of Transmyth. Tolkien’s desire to create “a mythology for England” based on Christianity leads to more significant results. For example, Jung’s archetypes are traced clearly in his narration.

I’m now going to discuss a comparatively small group of readers whose wide knowledge and deep comprehension are sufficient to distinguish several levels of understanding.

The plot of the narrative is not new. A story where a journey leads a hero to wonderful adventures has been a favourite plot for Chinese authors since the Middle ages.

Christian moral norms determining a hero’s behaviour are nothing strange either.

The distinction between Good and Evil is traditional for fairy-stories.

The real wonder is the true sub-creative activity of Tolkien himself. Middle-earth is a brilliant example of “sub-created reality” which can be developed successfully only in the space of mythical existence. It demands a person knowing the very roots of mythological worlds, a person with the mythologically-oriented consciousness peculiar to visionaries.

I dare say that Russian readers have some advantage over other readers. It’s significant, I suppose, that we had in 1991 a book by another visionary (he’s Russian) at the same time that the complete translation of *The Lord of the Rings* appeared in Russian for the first time. It is more interesting that both books were written at the same time. The books have much in common, though any contact between the authors was quite impossible. The Russian visionary Daniil Andreev wrote his book in one of Stalin’s prisons in 1950-1956. The book I’m speaking of is named *Roza Mira* – “The Rose of the World” (1991). It is not fiction, not fantasy nor a philosophical system. It presents the author’s vision of the spiritual space of mankind. This large work is aimed against two evils – one of them is a world war, another is a worldwide tyranny, as the author himself expressed them. Andreev introduces the term “metaculture”. It’s a two-pointed pyramid which consists of a number of worlds with “other realities”. On the one point of it is a demiurge – the white leader of his people; on the opposite is a dark demon who keeps his own country – but he is an eternal usurper of other countries and people. The author’s point of view on

metahistory is significant too. The term “metahistory” means that human history observed in ordinary reality depends on historical motions developing in other dimensions of planetary space inhabited by other races. Among these beings there is a level inhabited by a race remarkably similar to Tolkien’s Elves. Andreev considers those beings are “older brothers of Men”. They are our teachers, inspiring human fantasy. The Elven world has passed into the human unconsciousness but it hasn’t become unreal. Tolkien’s point of view on Elves declared in his essay “On Fairy-Stories” is wonderfully close to that of Andreev.

There are a lot of other coincidences. Some fragments from *The Rose of the World* are nearly word-for-word the same as in *The Silmarillion*, especially those concerning gods and angelic powers. Sometimes it seems that some words have not been invented, but have been “heard” from “another world”. Elvish “Ennorath” – “Middle-earth” is phonetically similar to a term “Enrof” or “Enroth” used by Andreev for our Earth and all its spiritual planes.

Both authors agree about the nature of Power. Andreev believes that any Power is demonized by its origin. So any form of Power – totalitarian state or democracy – contains evil. An idea that the roots of evil would grow anew in this world if human power is not limited by ethical control is a repeated theme of Andreev. I think that has much in common with Tolkien’s fundamental ideas. Let’s reflect on the fact that two rather dissimilar authors have been so deeply interested in fundamental questions of human existence at the same time and have proposed such similar solutions.

Tolkien wrote:

The peculiar quality of “joy” in successful Fantasy can . . . be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth . . . But in the “eucatastrophe” we see in a brief vision that . . . may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world . . .

(Tolkien, 1988b, p. 64)

Artists (or writers) who bring a gleam of “another reality” into our world were named “messengers” by Andreev. His definition is:

“A messenger” is an artist in the wide meaning of the word who shows for others the highest Truth and the Light gleaming from supreme worlds.

(Andreev, 1991, p. 174)

Tolkien and Andreev spent their lives reclaiming for myth its former significance. Myth arises and grows during human history as a reflection in human minds of “another reality”, the reality of many-dimensional planetary space in the form of a “Secondary World”. So a harmonical non-contradictory picture of the world wouldn’t be reached by adding national mythologies.

It also includes some key principles of esoteric doctrine of special meaning for Tolkien as they are corroborated by the plot reiterations in *The Silmarillion*.

So, Morgoth declares Arda his own kingdom and world harmony is broken by wars. Fëanor takes the Silmarils for his own and the straight ways of Elven evolution are bent.

Beren refuses the possession of the Silmaril, overcoming

Death itself. Eärendil returning the Silmaril redeems the sin of the whole people.

Elendil dies looking for the Ring. Boromir falls holding out his hand for the Ring. Frodo refuses to possess the Ring, saving the World.

The simple idea that the world’s troubles and evils have their sources in selfish motives is older than Christian precepts. However, it frightened Tolkien no more than the abyss of time which opened for him behind the words of “Eärendil, brightest of Angels”. Our world has many dimensions – or, possibly, it would be better to say “many mansions”. “Other realities” interconnect and interact with our ordinary world; Primary Evil in human history is a search for Power – these fundamental ideas allow us to put Tolkien into the rare and glorious fellowship of “messengers” whose names forever remain in the history of human culture. They constantly come into the world to restrain evil once more when darkness and perils are growing. Lewis’s words about a person who has always felt Logres inside Britain and the complicated nets connecting the worlds could be applied to Tolkien.

The English theologian Blackmoor said that the twentieth century is bringing back the Devil for authority. If he was right then inevitably Tolkien, Lewis or Williams came to unmask Evil and return true values to the World.

Andreev, naming the different Gifts of “a messenger”, said that one of them is an ability to contemplate “another world’s” views. Could we guess that Tolkien’s views of Middle-earth grew as a result of such an ability? Andreev declares that a true artist, beginning his creation here, in our ordinary world, continues his work “after death” in “another world”. I think we can see that remarkable idea in Tolkien’s *Leaf by Niggle*.

It’s a pity that Tolkien’s “small prose” isn’t known to Russian general readers. Possibly this is because they are difficult for the public to understand. The literary critic Gopman wrote in his afterword to an edition of Tolkien’s “small prose”:

And only a person who understands the necessity to strive [with evil], even not by himself possibly, in spite of its likely tragic result, for a person himself, that person only may win . . .

(Gopman, 1991, p. 299)

Here Gopman named one more group of Tolkien’s readers who definitely accepted him immediately. That is, people who began their struggle with the socialistic totalitarian state in the USSR in the 70s despite the possibility of disastrous results for themselves personally and who were later called “dissidents”. For such people, working in the spiritual underground, Tolkien’s books were (and still are) a remarkable way to influence a person’s mind, training an individual in certain ethical ideas. They saw two key ideas in *The Lord of the Rings*: that any ordinary farmer can work in his small garden in peace while he’s guarded by Rangers – Dúnedain; that Good and Evil are the same at all times, and a man should find his own side in distinguishing between them.

As a rule, these ideas aren’t articulated after reading the

book for the first or even second time, although they are especially significant for the present situation in Russia. The ordinary farmer is definitely forgotten in the larger scale of economical or geopolitical events. In turn, an ordinary farmer often loses his moral compass, and is unable to decide what is Good for him and what he ought to do. Tolkien's

books provide a clear moral and ethical standard.

Russian readers need a fairy-story because, in Tolkien's own words, "it is one of the lessons of fairy-stories that on callow, lumpish, and selfish youth peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom."

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