

TOLKIEN AND HIS CRITICS: A CRITIQUE

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I want to consider the work of J.R.R. Tolkien in terms of its reception, which combines remarkable popular success with extraordinary critical hostility.¹ What are so many readers finding so rewarding in these books that so many professional literary intellectuals think is so bad? The solution to this riddle, I suggest, arises out of the meaning and values of his work as apprehended by both sets of readers, constellated around the idea, values and projects of modernity - something which Tolkien's alternative, "re-enchanted" world fundamentally questions. Crucial too, therefore, are various aspects of what has come to be called postmodernity which, taken together, imply a passing of modernist hegemony. To put it crudely, then, I intend to use postmodernism to defend the contemporary meaning of Tolkien's anti-modernism against his numerous Marxist, materialist, psychoanalytic and structuralist critics. But I shall also use the issue of re-enchantment to criticize postmodernist secularism. I finish up with a few suggestions about both criticism and the writing of fantasy which arise out of this approach.

Without suggesting a comparable importance, a certain parallelism with Tolkien's famous lecture on Beowulf has emerged in the course of my own essay, except that this time, the story is contemporary literature, and the irritatingly atavistic and intractable monster at its centre is *The Lord of the Rings* itself. I too am going to suggest that the latter's critics too have missed its point, and have done so for reasons which turn on their own relationship of complicity with modernity. For this purpose, Tolkien's most important text is his profound essay "On Fairy-Stories".

Their doubts are evidently not shared by the reading public. *The Lord of the Rings* (first published in 1954-55) has so far sold about fifty million copies world-wide. This makes it a candidate for the biggest-selling single work of fiction in the twentieth-century. *The Hobbit* (1937), stands at about 40 million. And one could add the considerable sales, now perhaps over two million, of his dark and difficult posthumously-published epic *The Silmarillion*. His books have been translated into more than thirty languages, including Japanese, Catalan, Estonian, Greek, Hebrew, Finnish and Indonesian. Furthermore, Tolkien has outlived the 60s counterculture in which he first flourished; as a now unfashionable author, he still sells steadily. In England, for example, since figures began to be kept in 1991, his books have been taken out of public libraries around 200,000 times a year; he is one of only four "classic authors" whose annual lending totals exceed 300,000 (well ahead of Austen, Dickens and Shakespeare). *The Hobbit* spent fifteen years as the biggest-selling American paperback, and *The Lord of the Rings* has been (and still is) the most valuable first-edition published in this half of the 20th century.²

In other words, we are talking about a massively popular and successful publishing phenomenon, all the more so when one of the books in question is half-a-million words long, and neither involves any money or explicit sex - two ingredients now normally considered essential for bestsellers - let alone cannibalism, sadomasochism, serial murder or lawyers. (And how many of those will even be in print half a century after publication? The fate of Jackie Collins's *The Valley of the Dolls* beckons.) Of course, without its sheer unlikeliness - an epic centred on a race of three-and-a-half-foot high creatures and a magic ring, *etc.* - the

success of *The Lord of the Rings* would have much less literary interest; but given that unlikeliness, it should have a great deal.

This popular success was recently confirmed in Britain by the largest survey of readers ever conducted there, sponsored by Waterstone's books and Channel 4 television. Over 26,000 readers were asked to choose the most important books of the century. *The Lord of the Rings* came undisputed first. It was followed in second and third places by Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*. Such a result was not as anomalous as it first appears: both authors, one from a conservative perspective and the other from a socialist, were deeply concerned by the direction of modernity. So too, evidently, are many readers.

As if confirmation was needed, the Waterstone's poll was followed by a survey by the Folio Society of its members (in April 1997), 10,000 of whom voted *The Lord of the Rings* their favourite book. (Interestingly, in a vote about the favourite books of under-16's by 11,000 bookshop customers and viewers of the TV programme "Bookworm", *The Hobbit* came fifth but *The Lord of the Rings* did not figure at all – thus confirming, I think, that it is not essentially a children's book.)³

The Critics

Yet this reception has been accompanied by an equally remarkable critical disdain. Primarily, there is silence. A few examples: Margaret Drabble's *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985) gives Tolkien exactly thirteen lines out of 1154 pages; Drabble and Stringer's *Oxford Concise Companion to English Literature* (1996; more than 650 pages) has twelve lines; in Saunders's *Short Oxford History of English Literature* (1994; 678 pages) there is no mention at all.⁴ I cannot see how this can be described as other than an unconscionable dereliction of duty on the part of people whose profession is supposedly to comprehend literature.

The other principal critical response, which comes no closer to an attempt to understand, has been vitriolic abuse. In Walter Schepp's catalogue (1975:52), Tolkien has been accused of being "paternalistic, reactionary, anti-intellectual, racist, fascistic and, perhaps worst of all in contemporary terms, irrelevant." Goldthwaite's recent book on "Make-Believe" (1996:218), claiming to be "A Guide to the Principal Works", dismisses *The Lord of the Rings* - the most developed, sustained and influential of such works (even if you don't happen to like it) - as "Faerie-land's answer to *Conan the Barbarian*". Otherwise good critics don't seem to be able to cope with Tolkien at all, and even his own biographer (Et tu, Brute?) has fatuously opined that "he doesn't really belong to literature or to the arts, but more to the category of people who do things with model railways in their garden sheds."⁵

There are certainly dissenters - Shippey, Elgin, Attebery, Le Guin, Swinfen, Rosebery, Flieger and Filmer to name some - but the high quality of their work must not be confused with its degree of influence in the professional literary, critical and academic world and its publishing outlets. Indeed, in Tolkien's case the two seem inversely related. This goes beyond mere unfashionability; Tolkien's name in such circles is the kiss-of-death.⁶ The extreme nature of these responses is thus as fascinating as Tolkien's popular success. Since my book concentrates on the latter, I am mainly concerned here with the critical phenomenon. So let us consider the justice of the charges, and try to determine what lies behind them.

For reasons that will, I hope, become clear, I am going to call the dominant intellectual reaction to Tolkien, and the values that drive it, "modernism". There are other possible terms; one, with considerable overlap, is "humanism". It is no coincidence that

David Ehrenfeld, in his brilliant book on *The Arrogance of Humanism*, is able to read and learn from Tolkien in a way that none of his modernist/humanist critics apparently can. Unlike them, Ehrenfeld does not subscribe to the cult of reason, especially science; accepts the reality and indeed necessity of limits; and prizes what we are fast losing in the current "spectacle of global waste and destruction" (1978:255).

It will be noticed that my examples nearly all fall politically left-of-centre. There are two reasons for this. One is that there seem to be more relevant critics of that political persuasion than right-wing or conservative ones; Tolkien failed the "PC" test well *avant la lettre*. The second is that characteristically, the latter have mostly been content to call it a matter of taste and leave it at that. Their general view was perhaps best summed up by the poet John Heath-Stubbs, with that perceptiveness and unfairness required by all the best *bons mots*: "A combination of Wagner and Winnie-the-Pooh."⁷ There are thus fewer arguments with which to engage.

Whatever other reasons remain, however, they do not include any right-wing agenda on my part. Indeed, a crucial part of my motivation is the way Tolkien's critics' simple-minded dogmatism actually betrays their own ideals, many of which I share. And I make no apology for writing with some animus. If it were true, as one irenic Tolkien scholar (Timmons 1996:11) believes, that "narrow-minded and hostile views are best countered through sound analyses of the author's works, rather than by bellicose rebuttals", then given such work by the authors just mentioned, the attitude I have been describing would not still hold sway. Of course, my polemic may not succeed either; but that is no reason to refrain from disturbing a cozy and fraudulent orthodoxy.

It is also relevant that another meaning of "animus" is animating soul or feeling. The ignorant arrogance I am contesting here was never better summed up than by Roz Kaveney (1991), who concluded in an article on Tolkien's centenary that his books are "worth intelligent reading, but not passionate attention." Precisely the opposite conviction drives this paper, and the book (Curry 1997) to which it is a companion piece.

Homage

It was only after much the greater part of this paper had already been written that I discovered its full and proper theoretical context in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's superlative *Contingencies of Value*.⁸ Consider this: Smith (1988:17) dares to point out that "the entire problematic of value and evaluation" - as distinct from that of interpretation - "has been evaded and explicitly exiled by the literary academy." As we shall see in what follows, in the case of Tolkien (and there must be many other possible examples) this ban has allowed an axiologically pathological intellectual culture to flourish, where "interpretation" is actually driven by a tacit evaluation which cannot be brought out into the open and properly discussed.

Second, Smith (1988:25) calls into question the "claims and judgements of literary value made by or on behalf of what may be called *noncanonical audience*, such as all those readers who are not now students, critics, or professors of literature and perhaps never were and never will be within the academy or on its outskirts." Just such claims and judgements are second nature - indeed, are indispensable - to the shoddy work of Tolkien's critics.

Third, as she writes,

What is being missed here is that there is a politics of personal *taste* as well as a politics of institutional evaluation and explicit evaluative criticism. This resistance is displayed, moreover, not only by conservative members of the literary academy but

also by those who are otherwise most concerned to indicate the political implications of these issues; and the revulsion of academics and intellectuals at the actual literary preferences, forms of aesthetic enjoyment, and general modes of cultural consumption of nonacademics and nonintellectuals - including those whose *political* emancipation they may otherwise seek to promote - has been a familiar feature of the cultural-political scene since at least the 1930s.... oppositional cultural theory and conservative humanism have repeatedly generated strictly parallel (and, indeed, often indistinguishable) accounts to explain the tastes of other people in such a way as to justify the academic intellectual's revulsion at them (1988:25-26).

As unwitting witnesses, I call upon two prominent critics reacting to the news of *The Lord of the Rings* topping the recent Waterstones survey. Germaine Greer wrote that "it has been my nightmare that Tolkien would turn out to be the most influential writer of the twentieth-century. The bad dream has materialized." And Auberon Waugh described the result as "suspicious", and suggested that Tolkien's fans may have orchestrated a campaign. (To quote Helen Armstrong of the Tolkien Society - membership: approximately 500 - "In our dreams!")⁹ As an apodictically perfect demonstration of "Marxist cultural critics join[ing] Arnoldian humanists in deploring the novel/alien cultural productions of the late twentieth century" (Smith 1988:75), this would take some beating!

Infantile?

The critical rubbishing of Tolkien began with Edmund Wilson's extended sneer (1956:312) about "juvenile trash" in 1956. Younger readers today may need reminding that Wilson was a pathologically ambitious critic who championed modernism in literature (and Stalinism in politics).¹⁰ In his pompous obsession, as a contemporary put it, "with being the Adult in the room" (Parker 1956-57:608) - and maybe, oddly enough, his priapism too - Wilson is a good exemplar of what Ursula Le Guin (1987:125-26) called "a deep puritanical distrust of fantasy" on the part of those who "confuse fantasy, which in the psychological sense is a universal and essential faculty of the human mind, with infantilism and pathological regression."

Le Guin is undoubtedly right about Wilson and others of his ilk, but in a demonstration of the durability and ubiquity of this accusation, Tolkien's "infantilism" (along with "nostalgia", to which we shall return later) was recently revived by Michael Moorcock (1987). Perhaps, therefore, it is no coincidence that Moorcock has now mostly abandoned his science fiction/fantasy - part of whose real appeal was precisely their rather adolescent charm (my, what a long sword you have!) - to write supposedly Adult novels. In any case, many science fiction writers are indeed committed modernists; and not a few are poorly placed to finger infantilism - witness in both respects, for example, the toys-for-boys technological fetishism of J.G. Ballard.

As Tolkien (1988:43) noted, the connection between children and fairy-stories is an accident of history, not something essential; "If a fairy-story as a kind is worth reading at all it is worthy to be written for and read by adults." But being Grown-Up is a recurring theme in modernism, with its teleological fantasy of collectively progressing towards the truth, and its mythoclasm as a necessary destructiveness in order to get there. *The Lord of the Rings* and its readers are thus doubly stigmatized, both individually/psychologically and collectively/socially. Tolkien's enormous popularity then requires such risible explanations as Robert Giddings's (1981) "PR men", at whose behest the reading public apparently took him up solely because it was told to do so.

It is true, however, that modernist hostility to Tolkien need not be of the left. *Private Eye* sneered that Tolkien appeals only to those "with the mental age of a child - computer programmers, hippies and most Americans" (see Craig 1992). And despite his trumpeted sensitivity to elite literary contempt for the reading public, the populist Oxford professor John Carey (1977) repeated the charge of childishness, and attacked Tolkien for his lack of interest in "the writers who were moulding English literature in his own day - Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence" - as if English literature, to quote Brian Rosebury (1992:133), were "a single substance, appropriated for a definite period, like the only blob of Plasticene in the classroom, by an exclusive group (however gifted)..."

Useful to Get That Learned

Catherine Stimpson raised several frequent objections in 1969; they are worth noting symptomatically as having successfully set the tone for much subsequent Tolkien criticism. "An incorrigible nationalist," she wrote of Tolkien, his epic "celebrates the English bourgeois pastoral idyll. Its characters, tranquil and well fed, live best in placid, philistine, provincial rural cosiness." Second, his characters are one-dimensional, dividing neatly into "good & evil, nice & nasty". (She was preceded in this criticism, repeatedly, by Edwin Muir, in 1954-55.) Third, Tolkien's language reveals "class snobbery". Finally, Stimpson writes, "Behind the moral structure is a regressive emotional pattern. For Tolkien is irritatingly, blandly, traditionally masculine....He makes his women characters, no matter what their rank, the most hackneyed of stereotypes. They are either beautiful and distant, simply distant, or simply simple" (1969:8, 13).¹¹

Taking these points in order, one could reply to the first that the hobbits (excepting Bilbo and Frodo, and perhaps Sam; well, and Merry and Pippin) would indeed have preferred to live quiet rural lives - if they could have. Unfortunately for them, and her point, there is much more to Middle-earth than the Shire. By the same token, any degree of English nationalism that the hobbits represent is highly qualified. Tolkien himself pointed out that "hobbits are not a Utopian vision, or recommended as an ideal in their own or any age. They, as all peoples and their situations, are an historical accident - as the Elves point out to Frodo - and an impermanent one in the long view" (1981:197). It is also possible, as Jonathan Bate (1991) suggests, to draw a distinction between love of the land and love of the fatherland; and in *The Lord of the Rings*, the lovingly detailed specificities of its natural world - which include but far outrun those of the Shire - far exceed the latter. But I shall return to these questions below.

As for one-dimensional, good/bad characters, Stimpson has either ignored or missed the inner struggles, with widely varying results, of Frodo, Gollum, Boromir, and Denethor. As Le Guin again has noted, several major characters have a 'shadow', and in Frodo's case, there are arguably two: Sam, and Gollum - who is himself doubled as Gollum/Stinker and Smeagol/Slinker, as Sam calls them. And each race - with the exception of orcs, and even they violently differed with each other - is a collection of good, bad and indifferent individuals. Le Guin (1979:57-8) asks, "When you look at it that way, can you call it a simple story? I suppose so. *Oedipus Rex* is a fairly simple story, too. But it is not simplistic."¹²

Regarding class snobbery: in *The Hobbit*, perhaps; the book's other virtues (such as its quality as a story), and its having been written more than half a century ago, will hardly put off zealous contemporary detectors of orcism and trollism. But with *The Lord of the Rings*, this charge does not stand up. There is certainly class awareness; but orc speech is not all the same: there are at least three kinds, and none are necessarily "working-class" (see Rosebury

1992:75-6), while the idioms of the various hobbits only correspond to their social classes in the same way as do those of contemporary humans. Furthermore, the accent and idiom of Sam (arguably the real hero of the book) and most other hobbits is that of a rural peasantry; while those of virtually all of Tolkien's major villains - Smaug, Saruman, the Lord of the Nazgul (and presumably Sauron too) - are unmistakably posh. There is also the blindingly obvious fact of *The Lord of the Rings* as a tale of "the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the great" (Tolkien 1991:I, 354). Like many of Stimpson's accusations, however, that of pandering to social hierarchy has proved durable.¹³ But as will become increasingly apparent, card-carrying modernists find it almost impossible actually to bring themselves actually to *read* Tolkien.

Sexist?

Then there is the question of Tolkien's, or rather, Middle-earth's, masculinity. How irritating it is will vary wildly with individual readers (including women); but in this case it is tempting to reply, guilty as charged. As evidence to the contrary, there are the characters of Galadriel and Eowyn, without whom *The Lord of the Rings* would be seriously impoverished, and who are more complex and conflicted than Stimpson allows. Galadriel in particular is a powerful and wise woman who dominates her somewhat obtuse spouse, and refuses the Ring out of strength rather than fear or weakness (see van Ewijck 1995). Still, Tolkien's paternalism is unmistakable, and *The Lord of the Rings* is indeed a male-centred text. (Incidentally, he described the family arrangements of hobbits as "'patrilinear' rather than patriarchal....master and mistress had equal status, if different functions" [1981:293-94].)

Yet Tolkien has arguably committed no crime worse than being a man of his time and place, or failing to transcend it in the way J.S. Mill, say, did his in relation to feminist issues. And it is too easy to ask a work to be something it isn't, or its author to do something he or she didn't set out to do. Indeed, maybe we should be grateful that Tolkien didn't attempt a more feminine Middle-earth. Without prejudice to those male writers who have succeeded in placing believable female characters at the centre of their work, the results can be ghastly.¹⁴ Imagine what Tolkien might have wrought!

Perhaps we should also be glad that academic and literary feminists have largely ignored Tolkien (presumably as beyond the pale), and thus spared him the fate of, say, Willa Cather. Cather's plain lack of interest in sex and gender, and the focus in her fiction on quite other matters, has not prevented the kind of gross reductionism whereby "No tree can grow, no river flow in Cather's landscapes without its being a penis or a menstrual period" (Acacella 1995:70). I say "largely" because one essay has already shown what would be the result: Tolkien and Lewis (both devoted husbands) driven by repressed homosexuality, swords all phalli, Shelob a metaphor for female genitalia and Tolkien's fear of female sexuality, and even the phial of Galadriel - one of his book's several heroines - somehow, a super-phallus (Partridge 1983).

Notwithstanding such silliness, however, I think the male centredness of Tolkien's work should be acknowledged as a real limitation. But it is undeniable that countless women have enjoyed and even loved *The Lord of the Rings*. It would be the height of arrogance to accuse them all of gender-false-consciousness. I think the reason is simply that no sane and intelligent reader allows any single issue, including gender, to completely dominate all other considerations; so intelligent/non-dogmatic women, including feminists, are getting the other things from Tolkien that are so richly present, and some of which, such as reverence for nature, arguably relate to ecofeminism. I would also point out that to insist on such a

dominance presumes to dictate what women's consciousness (and, by implication, men's) can and cannot experience and participate in; in its implicit "realism", it is thus also a particularly inappropriate demand in relation to *fantasy* literature, of all things.¹⁵

Incidentally, a related charge is the lack of sex - or rather, since there is a good deal of progenerativity, a lack of explicit or erotic sex. (Norman Talbot once remarked, with some justice, that the most erotic character in *The Lord of the Rings* is Shelob.) In a curious and historically very recent inversion of puritanism, this absence seems to present some readers with real difficulties. Thus, Kenneth MacLeish (1983:27) says that its absence is a serious problem for those who claim a higher status for *The Lord of the Rings* than that of a simple tale." In addition to making unnecessary concessions to the fetish of a Canon, this is surely ridiculous: is *Moby Dick* therefore a simple tale, or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*?

Racist?

Another unpleasant accusation sometimes made, related perhaps to that of class snobbery, is racism. It is true that Tolkien's (1991:II, 14, 357) evil creatures are frequently "swart, slant-eyed", and tend to come from the south ("the cruel Haradrim") and east ("the wild Easterlings") - both threatening directions in what Schepps (1975:44-5) called Tolkien's "moral cartography". It is also true that black - as in Breath, Riders, Hand, Years, Land, Speech - is often a terrible colour, especially when contrasted with Gandalf the White, the White Rider, and so on. But the primary association of black here is with night and darkness, not race. And there are counter-examples: Saruman's sign is a white hand; Aragorn's standard is mostly black; the Black Riders were not actually black, except their outer robes; and the Black Stone of Erech is connected with Isildur (see Rosebury 1992:79). Rather strikingly, it also seems to have escaped the attention of Tolkien's critics on this point that as far as one can tell, hobbits were not white-skinned but brown (Tolkien 1991:III, 229).

Overall, it is true, Tolkien is drawing on centuries of such moral valuation, not unrelated to historical experience attached to his chosen setting - enemies, in N.W. Europe, have overwhelmingly come from the East - in order to convey something immediately recognisable in the context of his story. As Kathleen Herbert (1993:271) noticed, orcs sound very like the first horrified reports in Europe of the invading Huns of the 4th and 5th centuries: "broad-shouldered, bow-legged, devilishly effective fighters, moving fast, talking a language that sounds like no human speech (probably Turkic) and practising ghastly tortures with great relish."

Perhaps the worst you could say is that Tolkien makes no attempt to forestall the possibility of a racist interpretation. (I say "possibility" because it is ridiculous to assume that readers automatically transfer their feelings about orcs to all the swart or slant-eyed people they encounter in the street.) But as Brian Attebery (1992:33) points out, "this ethical division is rendered increasingly invalid as the story progresses, as evil emerges among the kingly Gondorians, the blond Riders of Rohan, the seemingly incorruptible wizards, and even the thoroughly English hobbit-folk of the Shire." Furthermore, as the anthropologist Virginia Luling (1995:56) has noted, the appearance of racism is deceptive, "not only because Tolkien in his non-fictional writing several times repudiated racist ideas, but because...in his sub-creation the whole intellectual underpinning of racism is absent."¹⁶

"If you want to write a tale of this sort," Tolkien once wrote, "you must consult your roots, and a man of the North-West of the Old World will set his heart and the action of his tale in an imaginary world of that air, and that situation: with the Shoreless Sea of his innumerable ancestors to the West, and the endless lands (out of which enemies mostly

come) to the East" (1981:212). Thus, as Clyde Kilby (1977:51-2) recounts, when Tolkien was asked what lay east and south of Middle-earth, he replied: "'Rhûn is the Elvish word for East. Asia, China, Japan, and all the things which people in the West regard as far away. And south of Harad is Africa, the hot countries.' Then Mr. Resnick asked, 'That makes Middle-earth Europe, doesn't it?' To which Tolkien replied, 'Yes, of course - Northwestern Europe...where my imagination comes from.'" (In which case, as Tolkien also indicated, Mordor "'would be roughly in the Balkans.'") He reacted sharply to reading a description of Middle-earth as "Nordic", however: "Not Nordic, please! A word I personally dislike; it is associated, though of French origin, with racist theories....Auden has asserted that for me 'the North is a sacred direction'. That is not true. The North-West of Europe, where I (and most of my ancestors) have lived, has my affection, as a man's home should. I love its atmosphere, and know more of its histories and languages than I do of other parts; but it is not 'sacred', nor does it exhaust my affections" (Tolkien 1981:375-76).

It is also noticeable that the races in Middle-earth are most striking in their variety and autonomy. Without suggesting that a clear-cut choice exists, but rather as an example of the complexity and ambiguity of his literary myth, is this an instance of ethnocentrism, or multiculturalism? Or even - given that most of the races are closely tied to a particular geography and ecology, and manage to live there without exploiting it to the point of destruction - bioregionalism? Again, one of the subplots of *The Lord of the Rings* concerns an enduring friendship between members of races traditionally estranged (Gimli and Legolas); and the most important wedding in the book, between Aragorn and Arwen, is an interracial marriage. As usual, the picture is a great deal more complex than the critics (although not necessarily the public) seem to see.

The Marxist

A major stream of adverse Tolkien criticism can be traced back to Raymond Williams, who, in *The Country and the City* (1985), noted the "extraordinary development of country-based fantasy, from Barrie and Kenneth Grahame through J.C. Powys and T.H. White and now to Tolkien.... It is then not only that the real land and its people were falsified; a traditional and surviving rural England was scribbled over and almost hidden from sight by what is really a suburban and half-educated scrawl" (1985:258).

Williams has been a massively influential critic.¹⁷ One could produce many other commentators he has influenced: John Lucas (1990:118), for example: "This is the ultimate, deeply conservative, ambition of pastoral. It falsifies the actual relations of non-city communities just as much and for the same reason that it falsifies city communities." And almost interchangeably, John's Barrell and Bull (1974:5, 8) "The Pastoral allows for a direct opposition to social change, a reactionary clinging to a static present, and an often desperate belief in future improvement." And it "fades away with "the possibility of social mobility and of economic progress". (How dated this now sounds, as we face increasingly insurmountable problems as a direct result of "economic progress"!)

Let us try to put "cultural materialism" to work in relation to Tolkien. According to Williams (1985:36-7, 247), "In Britain, identifiably, there is a precarious but persistent rural-intellectual radicalism: genuinely and actively hostile to industrialism and capitalism; opposed to commercialism and the exploitation of the environment; attached to country ways and feelings, the literature and the lore." This sounds generous, until you get to the punch-line: "in every kind of radicalism the moment comes when any critique must choose its bearings, between past and future..." Furthermore, "We must begin differently: not in the

idealisations of one order or another, but in the history to which they are only partial and misleading responses." By the same token, in our current crises myth and revolution must be seen as "alternative", not complementary responses. In other words, we must have "real history" oriented to a revolutionary future, not "myth" dreaming of the past.

But this set of shibboleths (itself profoundly mythical in character) entails a false set of choices - the mythical "vs." the actual, the ideal "vs." the real – that are as politically damaging as they are philosophically naive. It conflates materialism with matter and idealism with ideas, thus missing the crucial and highly "material" effects of the latter. It is essentialist in holding the political character of traditions and positions to be inherent and fixed. And it ignores the massive lesson that the Left, within Williams's lifetime, should have learned from Mrs Thatcher if not Gramsci: that people do not live by factual and historical bread alone, but also by ideas, values and visions of alternatives.¹⁸ In other words, we are looking at something that includes but goes well beyond Williams's moral "self-righteousness", "a basically utilitarian attitude to art", "the claggy dreariness of his writing", and "a terrible puritanism at the heart of the criticism written by those who still follow Williams".¹⁹ These problems are *structural*.²⁰

Nostalgic?

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Williams's treatment of pastoralism terminates in mere abuse of Tolkien's work as, absurdly, "half-educated" and "suburban". (Tolkien [1981:65] actually complained to his son in 1943 that "the bigger things get the smaller and duller or flatter the globe gets. It is getting to be all one blasted little provincial suburb.")

Nor has Williams noticed that the hobbits' pastoralism is dominated and subverted by other themes. As Gildor said to Frodo, "it is not your own Shire...Other dwelt here before hobbits were; and others will dwell here when hobbits are no more. The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out." And as Merry too admitted, "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 some 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" (Tolkien 1991:I, 120; III, 174). *The Lord of the Rings* could thus properly be seen as an extended argument that pastoralism as such is *not* enough - doomed, even: "The Shire is not a haven, and the burden of the tale is that there are no havens in a world where evil is a reality. If you think you live in one, you are probably naive like the early Frodo, and certainly vulnerable" (Grant 1981:99).

Perhaps the political problem is the richness and centrality of the natural world in Middle-earth (and not just pastoral nature). But if so, it only serves to confirm that the Left, *qua* Williams & co., remains stuck in a modernist, economic and incipiently Stalinist problematic. Had it accepted William Morris's generous offer to meet halfway, in E.P. Thompson's terms, this tragedy need never have happened. But the more recent examples too, of its best representatives, continue to be ignored: Thompson himself, for example - Morris's biographer, a passionate critic of economic and class reductionism, defender of Blake's counter-hegemonic cultural *mythos*, and not so coincidentally, perhaps, a passionate gardener.²¹ And again, Orwell (another gardener), in "Some Thoughts on the Common Toad" (1946):

Is it wicked to take a pleasure in spring?...is it politically reprehensible, while we are all groaning, or at any rate ought to be groaning, under the shackles of the capitalist system, to point out that life is frequently more worth living because of a blackbird's

song, a yellow elm tree in October, or some other natural phenomenon which does not cost money and does not have what the editors of left-wing newspapers call a class angle? [Ehrenfeld 1993:25]

Orwell and Thompson - along with Dennis Potter - are also distinctive in being at once on the Left and willing to recognize the power and validity of patriotism (as distinct from nationalism), including a specifically English kind. Unfortunately, most of the Left remains terrified of this whole area, thus continuing to cede it to potential political manipulation by the Right of the kind which Mrs Thatcher and Reagan initiated.²² But for our purposes here, while rejecting the knee-jerk modernist hostility to this work, note the implied intimacy of nature, "nostalgia" and place. Together with myth, these are indeed crucially related - something that Tolkien recognized, and *The Lord of the Rings* embodies.

Even in the realm of power (narrowly construed) and its effects, cultural materialism falls down. Fraser Harrison goes straight to the heart of the matter: "While it is easy to scoff at the whimsicality and commercialism of rural nostalgia, it is also vital to acknowledge that this reaching-out to the countryside is an expression, however distorted, of a healthy desire to find some sense of meaning and relief in a world that seems increasingly bent on mindless annihilation." Accordingly, says Harrison in a wonderful phrase, "it becomes meaningful to talk of 'radical nostalgia'." Echoing Williams, he agrees that "nostalgia recognizes no duty to history"; he asks us to recognize, however, that

there is another dimension to nostalgia and that it should not be dismissed as simply a self-indulgent, escapist and pernicious failing. Whereas its account of history is patently untrue, and more ideological than it would pretend, it does none the less express a truth of its own, which reflects an authentic and deeply felt emotion...Our addiction to it is surely a symptom of our failure to make a satisfactory mode of life in the present, but perhaps it can also be seen as evidence of our desire to repair and revitalise our broken relations. The pastoral fantasy nostalgia invented is after all an image of a world in which men and women feel at home with themselves, with each other and with nature, a world in which harmony reigns. It is an ideal... [1984:170-71]²³

Now Tolkien gives us to understand, as strongly as possible while still writing a story and not a tract, that nostalgia pure-and-simple will not suffice. In Middle-earth, it is the Elves whose nostalgia is the strongest - both in the sense of yearning for the past and attempting to maintain that past now, in places like Lothlorien and Rivendell. But the Elves, despite their valiant resistance, plainly offer no real solution to the central problem of the Ring. Yet it is also true that his work is suffused with the "pastoral fantasy" of a better world, equally memory and longing, to which Harrison refers. And such ideals have real power in the world.

The "Problem" of Evil

Tolkien has often been savaged on this question. Thus, Robert Giddings (1983:12-13):

The evil in the world as portrayed by Tolkien has nothing whatever to do with social or economic causes. It is evil, pure and simple. Consequently there is no need for change of socio-economic conditions, the environmental conditions of life, relations between different classes, etc., etc. - all these things which make up the very fabric of a society, any society, are perceived by Tolkien as totally beyond any need or possibility of change.²⁴

Giddings exaggerates inexcusably - *The Lord of the Rings* is full of "social, economic and environmental" changes which are not exactly randomly related to the War of the Ring, and the crucial effects of which are recognised by all its participants.

In a related point, I'm really not sure what Nick Otty (1983) means (although it's clearly not meant kindly) when he writes that in *The Lord of the Rings* "There are no concrete or operational assertions which make it clear why we should eschew evil." Is it any less clear why in Middle-earth Mordor should be eschewed than, say, fascism now? Or is he so disabled by a perceived absence of "concrete or operational" instructions and labels that without them he is ready to snuggle up to the first Nazgûl, or contemporary equivalent, that he meets?

However, Giddings is not altogether wrong about Tolkien's position. His characters spend a great deal of their lives, and sometimes lose their lives, combatting evil as it exists in their world. They are therefore active, not quietist, and to that extent not "escapist". Nevertheless, as Gandalf repeatedly stresses, that is *all* one can do: "it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule" (Tolkien 1991:III, 185). There is no permanent solution. Ultimately, Tolkien is of the same opinion as Primo Levi (1987:188): evil "spreads like a contagion. It is foolish to think that human justice can eradicate it. It is an inexhaustible fount of evil..." Or, only slightly less darkly, William Empson (1979:4-5): "it is only in degree that any improvement of society could prevent wastage of human powers; the waste even in a fortunate life, the isolation even in a life rich in intimacy, cannot but be felt deeply, and is the crucial feeling of tragedy." Le Guin (1979:100), not for the first time, puts her finger on it: "Those who fault Tolkien on the Problem of Evil are usually those who have an answer to the Problem of Evil - which he did not."

Of course, this issue is itself not the sort of question that comes with an answer in the back of the book, against which yours is "right" or "wrong". While any response to evil is inevitably problematic and incomplete, however, Tolkien's is at least as complex and tenable as that of his more meliorist opponents. And within that problematic, his characters are as activist as anyone could ask, moved by the same kind of ideals that I have just suggested have real power in the primary world. Once again, this is something Tolkien's readers have noticed where his critics have been blind.

Quietist?

To pick a local and contemporary example, there are (mainly) young people trying, as I write, to defend the remaining countryside outside Newbury, Berkshire, against yet another destructive, expensive and futile bypass. Their principal means of resistance is to put themselves, with extraordinary determination and valour as well as good humour, up trees and literally in the way of an army of security guards, bailiffs, contractors and police, not to mention bulldozers and chainsaws. And among them, I found one person out of dozens who hadn't just read *The Lord of the Rings* but knew it, so to speak, inside out. (Indeed, among its leaders, if that is the word I want, is one Balin.) It is no coincidence, then, that an early supporter of one such proposed bypass, running through Dartmoor, called his opponents "Middle-earth hobbits" (Veldman 1994:110). Nor, for that matter that the fashionable and supposedly avant-garde writer J.G. Ballard dismisses road protesters as a "a group of weirdos

that are anti-car".²⁵ Once again, we must ask, who are really the fantasists, the indulgers in nostalgia, the reactionaries here: Tolkien and his readers, or his modernist critics?

This is not the only example. Once I started looking, having seen through the lie that Tolkien's books are a bucolic retreat from "reality" that induce an apolitical passivity and/or right-wing quietism, others quickly appeared. Like Meredith Veldman, I too found profound common ground between the work of the left-wing historian and peace activist E.P. Thompson and that of Tolkien. What Veldman calls "the romantic protest movement" unites the CND/END campaign of resistance to nuclear weapons, the ecology movement beginning in the 1970s, and what Veldman calls "Middle-earth as moral protest". Thus, the countercultural success of this otherwise unlikely figure among 60s radicals and dissidents was no anomaly; far from it. In 1972, David Taggart sailed into the French nuclear testing area - an action which led directly to the founding of Greenpeace. His journal records that "I had been reading *The Lord of the Rings*. I could not avoid thinking of parallels between our own little fellowship and the long journey of the hobbits into the volcano-haunted land of Mordor..." (Veldman 1994:108). Nor had it escaped Taggart's notice, or Tolkien's other readers unblinded by modernist promises, that Mordor's landscape is one of industrial desolation, polluted beyond renewal; and that such desecration is inseparable from its autocratic, unaccountable and unrestrained exercise of political power.

There seems no reason to shrink from adding that in addition to my having delighted in Tolkien in 1967, the late E.P. Thompson is one of my intellectual and moral exemplars, and I was an active Greenpeace supporter from the mid-1980s; and I still see no contradiction in this combination. But there is no autobiographical element to my final and most recent example. Here is Maria Komenkovich (1992:36, 38) on Tolkien in the former USSR, where *The Lord of the Rings* circulated in *samizdat* form: "Western readers must understand that for us Tolkien was never any kind of 'escape'. When hobbits laughed at the absurd 'distribution', we didn't laugh at all, because the same thing caused millions of deaths among the peasants in the USSR in the 1920s. When Aragorn held up the elf-stone at the parting with the hobbits, we felt desperate because we did not have any hope of winning our battle at home..."

Thus the Siege of the White House in Moscow found itself intertwined with the Battle of the Green Fields in the Shire:

Western friends of Russia know what happened in Moscow on 19-22 of August 1991, but I doubt that they were informed that many people remembered Tolkien when they made barricades from trolley-buses (just like hobbits from country wains!). It is important to remember that the first [complete] translation officially published went on sale only a few days before. Moscow members of the Tolkien Society spent all those fearful thunderstorm and rainy nights near the White House holding a defence. The war-machines got as crazy as Oliphants and stamped down three young archers. And Gandalf stood before the King of Angmar saying: 'You shall not pass'...

Tolkien never meant to describe any real events either in the past or the future. But he certainly added something to earthy events. It just cannot be helped.²⁶ Maybe our political problem is not too much fantasy, but *not enough of the right kind*.

Fascist?

Raymond Williams (1985:35-36) says that nostalgic "celebrations of a feudal or aristocratic order" embody values that "spring to the defence of certain kinds of order, certain social hierarchies and moral stabilities, which have a feudal ring but a more relevant and more

dangerous contemporary application....in the defence of traditional property settlements, or in the offensive against democracy in the name of blood and soil."

In the light of the unpleasant implications in the last passage, perhaps this is the place to consider the politics (in the narrow sense) of both Tolkien and Middle-earth. Tolkien noted in 1943 that "My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs) - or to 'unconstitutional' Monarchy. I would arrest anyone who uses the word State (in any sense other than the inanimate realm of England and its inhabitants, a thing that has neither power, rights nor mind)..." Actually, arguably anticipating the eco-sabotage of Earth First!, his approval stretched to the war-time "dynamiting [of] factories and power-stations; I hope that, encouraged now as 'patriotism', may remain a habit! But it won't do any good if it is not universal" (1981:63).

Some years later, Tolkien wrote:

I am not a 'socialist' in any sense - being averse to 'planning' (as must be plain) most of all because the 'planners', when they acquire power, become so bad - but I would not say that we had to suffer the malice of Sharkey and his Ruffians here. Though the spirit of 'Isengard', if not of Mordor, is of course always cropping up. The present design of destroying Oxford in order to accommodate motor-cars is a case. But our chief adversary is a member of a 'Tory' Government. [1981:235]

He was referring to a narrowly-defeated proposal in 1956 to put a so-called relief road through Christ Church meadow - something with a typically contemporary ring.

So Tolkien himself can be classed as an anarchist (or libertarian) and/or a conservative - not at all in the contemporary sense of the last, which has been almost entirely arrogated by neo-liberalism, but in the sense of striving to conserve what is worth saving. Neither category can easily be assimilated to either Left or Right, which is itself usually sufficient cause to be dismissed by those who like to have these things cut-and-dried. In a consistently pre-modern way, Tolkien was neither liberal nor socialist, nor even necessarily democrat; but neither is there even a whiff of "blood and soil" fascism.²⁷ In this, he contrasts strongly with modernists such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis and arguably Philip Larkin²⁸: writers to whom Tolkien is sometimes unfavourably compared. But his absence from these ranks is no surprise; he was trying to do something completely different. Consider too that besides imperialistic nationalism, of which Tolkien was very suspicious, something common to all strands of fascism (but especially Nazism) is the worship of technological modernism, which he positively hated.²⁹

That antipathy is obvious throughout his works, down to the background detail of, say, the fall of Numenor (Tolkien's Atlantis) through hubris, which consisted of both domestic political autocracy and intolerance of dissent and a foreign policy based on technological and military supremacy. Actually, German Nazism was a particular tragedy for Tolkien. In 1941, he wrote to his son Michael that "I have in this War a burning private grudge" against Hitler, for "ruining, perverting, misapplying and making for ever accursed, that noble Northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light" (1981:55).

It is also noteworthy that when the German publishers of *The Hobbit* wrote to Tolkien in 1938 asking if he was of "arisch" (aryan) origins, and could prove it, he refused to do so, indignantly remarking that "if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people". He consequently advised Allen & Unwin to "let a German translation go hang"

(1981:37). It may be, as Tom Paulin has suggested (instancing T.S. Eliot), that anti-Semitism is historically integral to the formation of Englishness; but not in Tolkien's case.

It is true that Tolkien had been shocked by the violent anti-clericalism of the republicans in the Spanish civil war, and for that reason favoured the nationalists; the link here with his Catholicism is direct.³⁰ But however reactionary and repressive Franco's regime (which I do not dispute), there is no justification for conflating his reactionary conservatism with fascism; and Spain was noticeable in the Second World War, despite intense pressure from Hitler, by its neutrality.

Nor is Middle-earth fascist, let alone Nazi. The Shire, for example, functions by a sort of municipal (not representative) democracy, which Tolkien himself described as "half republic half aristocracy" (1981:241). The former half has, typically, been ignored by Tolkien's critics in their eagerness to assail the latter; but even here, their case is weak. Of the three positions of authority in the Shire, two are hereditary and one elected; but their powers (and duties) are minimal. True, by the end of *The Lord of the Rings* there is again a King; but he merely grants to the Shire (and other areas) the kind of effective independence they already had. And his accession was only with the approval of the people of his City (Tolkien 1991:III, 296-97). In other words, it is a case of local self-government (or subsidiarity) - most decisions are taken at the lowest possible level, closest to those who are most affected by them.³¹

This is the nature of the Shire as a yeoman-republic, including real connections to the tradition of civic republicanism, with its emphasis on a self-governing citizenry and its fear of corruption by clique and commerce. As Donald Davie (1973:93-4) noticed, the implication of *The Lord of the Rings* points firmly "towards the conviction that authority in public matters...can be and ought to be resisted and refused by anyone who wants to live humanely." This tradition has pre-modern roots, in Aristotle, Cicero and Machiavelli, but its contemporary relevance is none the less for that; and in no respect more importantly than to remind us that modern parliamentary liberalism has no franchise on democracy and community, or on solutions to our problems.³²

Other societies in Middle-earth function differently still, although mostly under the aegis of non-autocratic royalty. Each is distinct, even among humans: Gondorians, the Riddermark and the Bree-folk are not interchangeable. Tolkien would have agreed with that humane and sceptical humanist - in an earlier and more honourable sense than the cult of "reason", technology and Progress that it has now become - Hubert Butler (1986:95): "It is as neighbours, full of ineradicable prejudices, that we must love each other, and not as fortuitously 'separated brethren'." And indeed, *The Lord of the Rings* does hold out hope that very different kinds of traditions and communities can respect one another's differences and live at peace, without being subsumed into a vacuous Benneton-style multiculturalism dominated by American-led market forces: what Tom Shippey (1996) has aptly called "burbocentrism".

But none of these societies resemble Mordor: an utterly authoritarian state, with a slave-based economy centred on intensive industrialism and industrialised agriculture - "great slave-worked fields away south", while "in the northward regions were the mines and forges" (Tolkien:III, 240) - all of which is directed towards the goal of global military domination. It is worth noting, too, given the cults of Hitler, Stalin and Mao (all leaders of supposedly secular states) that Mordor is also an "evil theocracy (for Sauron is also the god of his slaves)..." (Tolkien 1981:154) Once again, Tolkien has dared to offend modernist/humanist orthodoxy - or should I say, fantasy? - and name the truth.

To conflate Sauron with the pre-industrial kingships of Gondor or Rohan would thus be absurd. As Madawc Williams (1995:17) points out, "if one king feels morally bound to respect your existing rights while the other is planning either to enslave you or feed you to his Orcs, you'd have little trouble knowing which side you ought to be on!" Furthermore, what is "The Scouring of the Shire", politically speaking, but an account of local resistance to fascist thuggery and modernization?³³

That leaves the "approval of traditional property settlements". Well, I doubt if Tolkien's approval could have been taken for granted; it would probably have depended a great deal on what was proposed for the land in question. And as Jonathan Bate (1991:46) points out, redistributing ownership is not going to be much use if the land in question is poisoned beyond use.

As I mentioned earlier, Bate (1991:11) makes another important point too: a distinction between love of the land and love of the fatherland. The former, which is clear both in Tolkien's personal life and his books, involves a fierce attachment to highly specific and local places and things. As such, it offers little foothold to the inflated emotional abstractions that are so essential to nationalistic fascism. This is vividly illustrated in Sam's saving realization, when tempted by the Ring of Power, that "The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command" (Tolkien III:210-11).

The Cultural Student

Williams was the chief founding father in this country (along with Hoggart) of what is now called cultural studies. One of its luminaries, and Williams's biographer in a work he himself describes as an act of homage, is Fred Inglis (1995, and see 1994). He wrote essays on Tolkien in 1981 and 1983. I will try to be brief, because I already addressed some of their content, but also because his work here plumbs such a nadir of mendacity.³⁴

Inglis (1981:192, 197) writes that Tolkien's prose "is moving, there is no doubt, but it moves a reader away from and never towards real life." "Real life" is a purely rhetorical gesture here, of course, signifying "what us left-Leavisite Grown-Ups have, in our wisdom, decided is real". But there is worse to come, for "Tolkien's 'schmaltz-Götterdämmerung'" is such that "for once it makes sense to use that much-abused adjective, and call Tolkien a Fascist." Williams, of course, implied the same; as have others: Jonathan Miller, for example, in a characteristically glib equation of Tolkien and Wagner.³⁵ Now, I have already shown the utter flimsiness of such a charge. In addition, there is simply no Wagnerian "Götterdämmerung" in *The Lord of the Rings*; "Victory neither restores an earthly Paradise nor ushers in New Jerusalem" (Muirhead 1986:20). In addition, Tolkien strongly disliked Wagner, all the more so for drawing directly on some of the same mythological material that the latter only knew second-hand, and to such very different ends (see Shippey 1992:296). (Interestingly, Ragnarok was a relatively late aspect of Germano-Scandinavian mythology that never caught on in the pagan Anglo-Saxon England that so influenced Tolkien. Even then, it was, apparently, unEnglish in its melodrama [Branston 1957:155].)

Inglis makes a number of other bizarre assertions to back up his specious claim: "Like all popular cultures, Middle-earth's utopia is pre-historic and classless"; his prose "abjures any corporeal solidity", being "bodiless", "colourless", and "unreally picturesque"; and "none of his characters reflect on their actions for a moment". Overall, "the whole book is suffused with an intense spirituality which...transposes what is physical into the soaring splendours of musical experience which, having no referent, cannot *signify* but only move" (1983:33, 35-7).

I say "bizarre" because (1) again, there is no such utopia, at least in the sense Inglis means, and what is there is saturated with historicity; (2) it is precisely the corporeal reality of Middle-earth that impresses the overwhelming majority of readers; and (3) there is hardly a major character in the book who doesn't, at some point, reflect on his or her actions. (Inglis's utilitarian contempt for music speaks for itself.)

He comments that "Such a feeling does not transcend culture, it is created by culture" (1983:33). Here we at least touch usefully on a fundamental flaw in cultural studies, which is to conclude that because something is learned, cultural, contingent or constructed it isn't real or true. Of course, by simply reversing the conservative valuation of instinctive, natural, necessary and revealed, the same impoverished oppositions are preserved intact, and any critical advance on them disabled. As Antony Easthope (1991:45) puts it, the "literature-as-construction analysis relies on an erroneous either/or: either literary value is a textual essence independent of the reader; or there is no literary value at all." Above all, to quote Derrida (1988:136), "All that ["quite simply everything"] is political, but it is not only political." Quite so. Tolkien's work cannot "transcend culture" in the way Inglis absurdly implies, because no discourse can. On the other hand, although "created by culture" it addresses a great deal more than that: nature, ethics, myth...

But Inglis's chief strategy is carefully to condemn and disown a series of critical tactics before proceeding himself to turn them on Tolkien. Thus, he mocks the "old, round way of dealing with bestsellers", which viewed their readers as seeking refuge "in a fantasy world (swear word) whose emotional gratifications (ditto) compensated for (school-teacher's report judgement) the emptiness of everyday life (guerilla slogan)." Yet only a few pages later, we find a cringingly florid caricature of a "typical" Tolkien reader - a former head of art in a market-town grammar-school, sitting in a new, pine-panelled unit in a converted farm building, reading Tolkien to his two young sons - doing exactly that (1983:25, 27, 31-2).³⁶

Inglis continues (1983:28) that "To write of Tolkien's version of this tradition is not in the least to say that...[in] a now familiar but entirely empty putting-down, it is nostalgic... *But*" - nonetheless - Tolkien's nostalgia "implies not only some distortion of vision but also a privileging of the past over the present such that the present can *only* be lived in terms of its failure to measure up to the past..." And his final disingenuous gesture is to retract his claim that Tolkien is a fascist, before asserting that his work is: "instead of Nuremberg, Frodo's farewell" - equally a travesty of the text and the history that as Clay Ramsay remarked, "Inglis uses on Tolkien apparently to situate him, but really to engulf him."³⁷

The Psychoanalyst

It is almost a relief to turn to another of Tolkien's sternest critics, Rosemary Jackson, a literary critic with strong commitments to both Marxism and psychoanalysis. She believes that Middle-earth is somehow "outside the human...free from the demands of historical time, or of mortality" - which is presumably why "fairy tales discourage in the importance or effectiveness of action", and why those of Tolkien (together with C.S. Lewis and a host of other offenders) function "as conservative vehicles for social and instinctual repression... supporting a ruling ideology" and serving only to "reinforce a blind faith in 'eternal' moral values, really those of an outworn liberal humanism." In addition to the by-now-familiar charge of "nostalgic", she attacks "the chauvinistic, totalitarian effects of [Tolkien's] vision..." and sympathizes with those victims of repression, the orcs, of whose hairiness (as a sign of desire) she makes much (1988:154-56).

Since Jackson too is fond of what she calls "reality", let us run a textual reality-check on her own claims. Tolkien's work is saturated with historicity - a claim which I submit to the judgement of any informed reader; "Death and the desire for deathlessness" was perhaps his most fundamental theme (see Tolkien 1981:262, 18); *The Lord of the Rings* is nothing if not packed with action, upon the outcomes of which everything subsequent hangs; and whatever the values inherent in his work - and liberal humanism is an odd description of them: Tolkien as E.M. Forster? - "outworn" would seem rather presumptuous in the light of their popular reception. As for the hairiness of Jackson's orcs, what of hobbits' famously hairy feet? Or is that bourgeois hair?

Already by 1953, Kenneth Burke (1957:119) could justifiably complain that "people have gone on too long with the glib psychanalytic assumption that an art of 'escape' promotes acquiescence. It may, as easily, assist a reader to clarify his dislike of an environment in which he is placed." Three-and-a-half decades later, Jackson and most of Tolkien's other leading critics are still making the same glib assumption. And driving her Freudian anathema we find the same atavistic Enlightenment essentialism, with its faith in the power of Reason to liberate us from "repressive energies" and attain utopia: "De-mystifying the process of reading fantasies will, hopefully, point to the possibility of *undoing* many texts which work, unconsciously, upon us." Why? Because "In the *end* this may lead to *real* social transformation" (1988:10, my emphases). Let us pause here, note the modernist profession of faith in demystification, and ask: what is this state of freedom, equally *hors le texte* and the bonds of *savoir/pouvoir*, into which such "undoing" (magically uninfluenced by any new reading) releases us? Exactly what and when is this distinctly eschatological "end"? And what is this equally absolutist "real" transformation, as opposed to the kind we know from mere history and quotidian experience? In short, who is really the utopian fantasist here: Tolkien, or Jackson?

What *shouldn't* be utopian is to find not a nonpolitical criticism, certainly, but in Joan Acocella's words (1995:71) "a sophisticated criticism - one that, while indebted to a certain politics, can balance that concern with a sustained attention to what the artist is saying." But by now it should come as no surprise to find (as Attebery [1993:23] has pointed out) that Jackson also cites an essay by the politically acceptable W.H. Auden as the source of some of Tolkien's ideas in his "On Fairy Tales", when the former appeared twenty-one years after the latter. (Valentine Cunningham [1989:232] recently performed a similar trick when using Auden's satire on "ruralizing simple-lifers" to sneer at Tolkien's "mythic and escapist fairyland". He conveniently fails to mention Auden's fulsome praise for *The Lord of the Rings*.)

Escapist?

This was a charge which recurs throughout the attacks of Tolkien's critics, and he was familiar with it early in his career. His "Essay on Fairy-Stories" provides his own best defence. As an instance, Tolkien mentions the recent technological innovation (in his time) of mass-produced electric street-lamps. Any writer who ignores such developments, or prefers to discuss, say, lightning, is liable to be labelled escapist: "out comes the big stick: 'Electric lamps have come to stay,' they say..." Or: "'The march of Science, its tempo quickened by the needs of war, goes inexorably on...making some things obsolete, and foreshadowing new developments in the utilization of electricity': an advertisement. This says the same thing only more menacingly" (1988:56-7).

The prison, to encapsulate my theme, is enforced modernity, whose human casualties alone now number in many millions, while for animals and the natural world the holocaust is still continuing. And its intellectual and cultural warders are the "realists" and "rationalists" whom Tolkien has in mind when he says, for example, that "The notion that motor-cars are more 'alive' than, say, centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more 'real' than horses is pathetically absurd" (1988:57). In the years before Nazism, Stalinism and Maoism provided such grim confirmation, and before global consumer capitalism took over the job, Tolkien already saw this clearly. Yet his only honour among the elites is still to be accounted escapist, juvenile and irrational. This, with Tolkien, I utterly deny: "it is after all possible for a rational man, after reflection (quite unconnected with fairy-stories or romance), to arrive at the condemnation, implicit at least in the mere silence of 'escapist' literature, of progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say 'inexorable', products" (1988:58).

The Lord of the Rings is hardly escapist within its own context, either, centred as it is around a war, struggle, hardship and suffering. And at the end of his tale, occasional hints about other worlds notwithstanding, Tolkien returns us firmly to *this* one: at the Grey Havens, after the departure of Frodo and Gandalf, Sam "stood far into the night, hearing only the sigh and murmur of the waves on the shores of Middle-earth, and the sound of them sank deep into his heart" (1991:III, 378). We stand with him. At best, Tolkien's "evangelium" permits only a "fleeting glimpse of Joy" in this world, not permanent transportation to the next (1988:62). The nostalgia he engenders, therefore, is finally redirected back into our own lives here. In Geoffrey Grigson's still more compact words:

"be comforted.

Content I did not say."

The Structuralist

Christine Brooke-Rose is an eminent structuralist, professor of literature in Paris, and author of experimental modernist novels.³⁸ Here again, we find the heavy guns of Theory employed not to comprehend Tolkien but to get rid of him. Gimli and Legolas serve "no functional role...[and are] wholly gratuitous". Any maps and appendices are mere "semiological compensation". And *The Lord of the Rings's* histories and genealogies are "not in the least necessary to the narrative, but they have given much infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies..." (1981:237-38, 247)

The modernist dread of being thought infantile shared by Wilson and Brooke-Rose seems to be related to a widespread contempt for Tolkien's "fans" (almost always "fans", perhaps to invoke an implicit association with something like football). The editor of one book of scholarly (but mostly dull) essays on Tolkien (Isaacs and Zimbaro 1981:2) poisonously dismisses as "fanfluff" publications by Tolkien societies that contain very little worse and not a little that is better.³⁹ Even Tolkien's biographer (Carpenter 1992:231) complains sniffily about his "deplorable cultus". Yet the objects of this fastidiousness are readers for whom Tolkien's work is large and alive, and who are therefore better-placed to understand it than his narrowly scholarly dissectors. It is the latter who deserve pity and scorn.

Like Jackson, Brooke-Rose puts *The Lord of the Rings* through the structuralist text-grinder in order (she supposes) to attain freedom through disenchantment. Another practitioner, Nick Otty (1983:155), similarly recommends "deconstructing" *The Lord of the Rings* "so that we may see the text as a construct produced in a certain context", and are

therefore "no longer 'in thrall' to it" - an ambition whose risibility I have already discussed.⁴⁰ All that distinguishes Brooke-Rose's (1980) version is its detailed and dismal emphasis on "the machinery of realism", "mechanisms inherent to the marvellous", and so on. I am forcibly reminded of Treebeard's description of Saruman: "He has a mind of metal and wheels, and he does not care for growing things..." (Tolkien: 1991:II, 90) This is no mere conceit: structuralism, like Marxism and psychoanalysis, bears a heavy freight of what Howard Felperin (1985:57) called "a lingering nineteenth-century faith or superstition - that the study of literary texts can be, should be, or, in the case of their own work, is scientific."⁴¹

No wonder, then, that Brooke-Rose (1981:237-38, 244-45, 247) cannot seem to comprehend Tolkien, or indeed, even *read* him: "orks" - "the Gollum" - "Tolkien's trilogy" - "Sam Gamjee" - "Elf-people" - "Belin" (for Balin) - "Edora" - "Minas Mogul" - "Moria Mountain". (Edmund Wilson had already saved her some time with "Gandalph" and "dwarfs", and Stimpson with "Sarumen".) She gives the wizards their own language, states that Gandalf, "although a wizard, can only perform minor magic" (!), and has Arwen's father Elrond as her brother.⁴² The sloppiness of such an astounding catalogue of errors, and the arrogance it implies, would hardly be tolerated in other areas of scholarly inquiry, and it speaks volumes about Brooke-Rose's (and her publisher's) attitude to her subject.

A Literary-Industrial Establishment

Brooke-Rose's attitude is also part of a larger critical problem in relation to the whole genre that Tolkien's success unintentionally created. Consider, for example, how mainstream literati lapped up the magic and spirituality of South and Central American and African "magic realism" because it seemed exotic, while condemning to the "fantasy" ghetto any local and native expressions of the same. Alternatively an author identified as a mainstream novelist is frequently praised for imaginative daring when he or she incorporates fantasy into a novel, but authors who have been pigeon-holed as fantasy-writers can do the same thing (only better) in vain.⁴³ And any fantasy-writer with a local product that threatens to succeed more widely is firmly slapped down with the usual modernist clichés: "childish", "phantastic", and partaking of an "underlying irrationality" which is "okay" in poetry and children's writing, but not "in a grown-up novel for grown-ups" (Turner 1996). This is not reviewing, it is policing.

Such an attitude was early and aptly analyzed by Walter Benjamin, in a wonderful essay entitled "The Storyteller", whose every resonance applies to Tolkien. He noted (1969:83, 87, 101, 102) that

the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with an ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed....The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out.... A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen....The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story.⁴⁴

Benjamin described the novel as a huge step away from storytelling, with its roots in the oral tradition; the modern obsession with information is yet another huge removal. And the novels are bad enough: permitted only "that necessary degree of irony which is the sole form of 'honesty' modern prose styles or conventions readily allow....Unhappy with myth, wary of emotion, harried by empty political terminologies, scornful of 'character', eager, it seems, to refine, redefine and narrow down the material until the works in question are about themselves, nothing else but themselves. Affirmation, no. Consolation, certainly not"

(Potter:12-13, 31).⁴⁵ No wonder that, as Tolkien (1981:209) believed, "the 'fairy-story' is really an adult genre, and one for which a starving audience exists."

This *trahison* of readers by the clerks is one in which critics collaborate with writers and publishers. If, as Brian Attebery (1992:17) suggests, "the task of literary theory is to provide a framework capable of accounting for the story's success in its own terms, rather than denying that its aims are achievable or worth the attempt", then literary theory has dismally failed with Tolkien, and fantasy literature in general. Indeed, as Bill Buford (1996:11-12) recently pointed out, in the 1,383 pages of the authoritative *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, there is no entry for "story"! In the book pages of the quality press, the situation is no better. Those calling the shots include people like Martin Amis, self-consciously clever modernist *par excellence*, for *The Sunday Times*; and Robert McCrum, for *The Observer*, who seems to view Marx and America with equal reverence (and no sense of contradiction).⁴⁶

Now that Seamus Heaney has won the Nobel prize for Literature, will it begin to dawn that as he remarked, "the movement is always from delight to wisdom and not vice versa"? I doubt it. As much as ever it remains the case, to quote Nuala O'Faolain (1992), that "The language of highbrow criticism can only cope with a certain kind of fiction. It has no vocabulary with which to discuss a world where neither the individual nor the society is self-conscious, and the author pretends not to be either....The ordinary reader is far ahead of the critics in ease with such a world." This in turn relates to the *déformation professionel* of modern criticism, journalism and publishing as a whole - aggressively secular, cynical, snobbish and incestuous - which is beyond my scope here.⁴⁷ But I will give Karel Capek (1995) the last word on the subject:

look how often the cultural world pronounces a sentence of annihilating rejection. How old-fashioned ideas, other people's views, or those of the habitués of a different literary café, are arrogantly dismissed out of hand....This is variously called literary criticism, ideological struggle, a matter of principle, or the generation gap. In truth it is merely prickly intellectual exclusiveness running around looking for something to turn its nose up at. If your nose is in the air, though, you cannot see properly...

Nor can you read very well.

Why?

The question remains: how could so many otherwise intelligent critics be so slapdash, unfair and just plain wrong? First, let's notice that they are so in significantly similar ways. The specific charges against Tolkien and the values in whose name they are made make up a strong family resemblance, and I have suggested we call it modernism. Indeed, Williams's Marx, Jackson's Freud, Brooke-Roses's Saussure - these are among the very avatars of modernism, whose the "grand narratives" of modernity - secularised versions of divine revelation - were supposed to supply essentially complete accounts of our progress towards the realisation of the truth. But there have been too many broken promises by now, and too many terrible "successes". The human being has become a stranger not only to the cosmos and the Earth but to each other, and him- and herself. By now, "man himself has become, after God and nature, an anthropomorphism" (Schnadelbach 1992:314).

Modernism is not the only description possible; another strong candidate I have already mentioned is humanism, as analyzed in David Ehrenfeld's (1978) - a book which, not coincidentally, cites or quotes Tolkien approvingly several times. On balance, however, I think the former term has the edge. But in either case, Tolkien's apostasy (or perhaps more

properly, since he never subscribed to it in the first place, heresy) often seems so strongly felt by true believers as actively to interfere with being able actually to read him. As J.P. Stern once remarked, "Contempt is a poor guide." The modernist missionaries arrive in Middle-earth dressed in a hard-shell suit of Theory, protected from contamination by what they have already decided is its infantilism, escapism and reactionary politics. This is hardly good critical practice; can you imagine any of them admitting with William Empson (1988) that "A literary critic must be prepared to say, 'This is good, though I don't know why; not yet anyhow'..."? Or finding it in their hearts to say a good word - on any grounds whatever - about Wodehouse, Kipling or Yeats? Yet Orwell somehow managed it, without losing his socialist soul.⁴⁸

But the modernists are right, in their own twisted way. *The Lord of the Rings* really is a text whose predominant available meanings powerfully contradict their own values;⁴⁹ and whose popular success, as a sign of widely shared doubts if not repudiation, makes it, from their point of view, all the worse. In the intention of its author an *anti-modernist* text, attacking industrialism, secularism, and the myth of Progress, *The Lord of the Rings* falls into the traditions of what Jonathan Bate (1991) calls "romantic ecology", Don Elgin (1985) "the ecological perspective of comedy" and Meredith Veldman (1994) "Romantic Protest". And like the works of other such authors - William Wordsworth, John Ruskin, William Morris - it has acquired powerful new meanings in a *post-modern* context.⁵⁰ When this dimension overlaps with Tolkien's enduring popularity in the same way as that of Dickens, Kipling and Hardy, you get some idea of the potential power of his books - and of the critics' irresponsibility in so cavalierly dismissing them.

Of course, as both Shippey and Rosebury have pointed out, there are important modern elements in Tolkien's work: its stress on the anti-heroic and unmilitary hobbits and their reluctant participation (and that of others, such as Faramir and indeed Aragorn; the martial Boromir comes to a bad end) in the War of the Ring; war itself as at best a necessary evil; its Actonian view of power (in the Ring) as unavoidably corrupting; and even its absence of explicit religion.⁵¹ But Tolkien's very syncretism offends modernist purism.

Ironically, therefore, it is his critics who belong to the past, and Tolkien the future. It is they are nostalgic for the past, including their role as legislators (in Zygmunt Bauman's terms) rather than the interpreters they have become. Behind their instinctive antagonism lies an uncomfortable sense that here is a coherent fictional critique and alternative, in every major respect, to the exhausted myth of modernity which has so far underwritten their own professional status; and worse still, it is a popular one. Not for the first time, those who claim to speak for universal truth and reason are lagging behind "the people" whom they often claim to represent, and whose interests to know better than the people themselves.⁵²

Now, it is perfectly possible to imagine Tolkien's books "being" truly reactionary: racist, nationalist, etc. - that is, having those kinds of effects. In fact, there is one historical instance of just that, when his writings were briefly adopted by some violent right-wingers in Italy who held a "Camp Hobbit" outside Rome in June 1978.⁵³ What I am arguing, however, is that (1) neither in his intention nor (especially) essentially or inherently is Tolkien's work pathologically reactionary; and that (2) *as it happens* - as things have actually turned out - his implicit diagnosis of modernity was prescient; and his vision of an alternative, progressive. (Of course, it also follows that his critics, despite their loud claims to being both, were neither.)

Thus, in the context of global modernisation and the resistance to it, his stories have become an animating and inspiring new myth. It is one that suggests that just as there was life

before modernity, so there can be after it. They are deeply nostalgic, certainly; but it is an emotionally empowering nostalgia, not a crippling one. And it joins up with a growing contemporary sense, represented in postmodernism, of history's sheer contingency - the liberating perception that it-might-have-been-different, and therefore *could* be different now.⁵⁴

Post/Modernity and Re-Enchantment

By modernism I mean not so much a particular literary or artistic or architectural movement as the self-conscious articulation and celebration of the chief values and goals of modernity. And by modernity I mean the co-dependent power of corporate and finance capital, the modern political state and modern science that is probably best summed up in Lewis Mumford's term, "the megamachine". These have generated, and are served by, the ideologies of economism, statism and scientism. The last, particularly relevant to us here, is the belief that only science, being dis- or un-enchanted, has access to the truth; it is therefore the only legitimate kind of knowledge, to the exclusion (and if possible elimination) of all others, eg. traditional and local forms (see Ekins 1992). A primary commitment is thus to deny and/or disguise the fact that science, as an epistemological practice, is no less a contingent and fallible human construct than any other kind; in other words, that even science is not "scientific" in the way they mean it.⁵⁵

Modernity began to grow in the late-seventeenth-century, received clear and programmatic articulation in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, developed powerful new political and economic forms in the nineteenth, and attained truly global dimensions of natural and social engineering in the twentieth (see Toulmin 1990). Its chief characteristics - historically formed, but nonetheless essential for that - can be defined as *monism* and *universalism*: truth, initially divine and apprehended through revelation, but then (without significant modification of its *modus operandi*) secular and apprehended through reason, that is single and universal. And this truth must be certain; hence the modernist obsession with *theoria*, or science, going back to Descartes, Galileo, Bacon and Hobbes. (Toulmin identifies these men as instituting a "counter-enlightenment" to the earlier pre-modern humane scepticism of Montaigne and Erasmus.)

As Kolakowski (1990:7) points out, the origins of this modernity can be dated back as far as the eleventh century; but "the question so many of us have been trying to cope with is not so much when modernity started, but what is the core - whether or not explicitly expressed - of our contemporary widespread *Unbehagen in der Kultur*?...And the first answer that naturally comes to mind is summed up, of course, in the Weberian *Entzauberung* - disenchantment - or in any similar word roughly covering the same phenomenon."

The characteristic rhetorical gesture of modernism - its sacrament, one might say - is indeed unmasking, demystifying, debunking, and indeed destroying false gods, false truths, false consciousness. The trouble is, this process recognizes no limits; hence the power granted to its economic expression, neo-liberal market-forces, to tear up and make over everything - nature, communities, human nature. Without limits, however - which must therefore come from other sources - the terminus of this process is natural impoverishment, social violence and cultural nihilism (see Gray 1995).

Since my focus here is primarily cultural, let me illustrate the last by quoting art critic Sarah Kent, a big fan of the feted corpse-artist Damien Hirst. Extolling an exhibition of life-size castrated and mutilated dummies, she wrote: "They satisfy your [sic] blood-lust, they seduce, and they make you sick. Brilliant."⁵⁶ This sort of thing is sometimes backed-up with

aesthetic theory, eg. Bernstein (1996:16): "Art cannot avoid the progressive disenchantment of the world that has occurred outside art; if it sought to obtain authenticity and authority for itself by summoning dead gods and dead meanings into its precincts, it would rightly be accused of naivete or anachronism....Authenticity without cruelty is no longer possible." And indeed, just these accusations are frequently levelled against *The Lord of the Rings* (including an unconscionable lack of cruelty).

But who says the gods and meanings to which it refers are dead, and on what warrant? Whether historically or metaphysically, it takes a peculiarly narrow and teleological modernism to assign them to the grave, only to be perpetually amazed at "the return of the repressed". In Russell Hoban's words, "Why cannot any god die? Because gods do not replace one another....gods are a cumulative projection of everything in us."⁵⁷ And as Tolkien (1988:53) long ago noted,

...the true road of escape from such weariness is not to be found in the wilfully awkward, clumsy, or misshapen, not in making all things dark or unremittingly violent; nor in the mixing of colours on through subtlety to drabness, and the fantastical complication of shapes to the point of silliness and on towards delirium. Before we reach such states we need recovery. We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and red and yellow...

And that is why, rather than a still further disenchantment that ends by eating itself, and utterly capitulating to the logic of capital and the market (art and otherwise), re-enchantment is needed: as Ted Hughes (1992) recently argued, the whole point of art is "to reopen negotiations with the mythic plane". The implication, which I shall not try to follow up here, is that postmodernists' militant secularism (such as that of Richard Rorty) actually disables their own programme.

Nonetheless, the basic critique of modernity (including its articulations in modernism) which has come to be called postmodernism is correct as far as it goes. It has been aptly summed up by Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988:179) as "intellectual/ political totalitarianism (the effort to identify the presumptively universally compelling Truth and Way and to compel it universally)..."⁵⁸ The essence of this programme is not rationality per se, "but a deranged, totalizing rationalism which yields disenchantment", whose products include, as Max Weber foresaw (and some of whom I have already quoted), "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved" (Kontos 1994:235, 233). Modernity therefore need not, indeed cannot be countered with mere irrationality. Culturally speaking, these exemplars of nullity may now simply and without any regrets be abandoned: "The growing sense that we are not bound to *complete* the project of modernity (Habermas' phrase) and still do not necessarily have to lapse into irrationality or into apocalyptic frenzy, the sense that art is not exclusively pursuing some telos of abstraction, non-representation, and sublimity - all of this has opened up a host of possibilities for creative endeavors today" (Huysen 1986:217).

Nor is postmodernity a new era marking the end of modernity or even modernism; but it does articulate a process in which hitherto largely unquestioned modernist truths look increasingly, to increasing numbers of people, like highly questionable assumptions. And people *do* have questions - more people, with more and deeper fears and worries, than perhaps ever before. By now, only a fool (or convert, or employee) would say they are groundless.

By contrast, then, the chief characteristics of postmodernism - as an articulation of postmodernity - are *pluralism*, *localism*, and *perspectivism* (or "relativism").⁵⁹ As against the

quest for certainty, there is room for Keats's negative capability, that is, "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." The postmodern question is not "is it true?" but "is it any use?"; its *modus vivendi*, accordingly, is not theory but the "practical wisdom" of *phronesis*. And its proper cultural project, in response to modernist nihilism (or what Michael Ende (1993) calls "the Nothing") is *re-enchantment*: what Tolkien (1988:18) described as "the primal desire at the heart of Faerie: the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder." But the "realization" here is ambiguous, and properly so; it signifies both the making of the natural world wonderous through the creation of a "Secondary World...artistic in desire and purpose" (1988:50), *and* the realization (through the former) that the Primary or "real" world actually is wonderous.⁶⁰ Ultimately it has to be that way, for to adopt wonder as a way to save the world merely re-admits humanist utilitarianism by the back door.

Such project cannot succeed as an act purely or even primarily of will, because that is precisely the domain not of enchantment but of magic, which (in Tolkien's words) "is not an art but a technique; its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things and wills." Thus "Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic - but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician" (1988:49-50, 15). Tolkien's intuition here is historically borne out by modern science's continuity with, and largely unacknowledged borrowings from, magic.⁶¹ And why it cannot save us now is that together with capital and the state, such science is what has created this crisis.

Aspects of postmodernism that are most relevant here have been voiced by Paul Feyerabend (1987:89) - "we either call gods and quarks equally real, but tied to different sets of circumstances, or we altogether cease talking about the 'reality' of things and use more complex ordering schemes instead" - and Zygmunt Bauman (1992:x-xi):

Above all, postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; as a re-enchantment of the world that modernity had tried hard to disenchant....The war against mystery and magic was for modernity the war of liberation leading to the declaration of reason's independence....world had to be de-spiritualized, de-animated: denied the capacity of subject.....It is against such a disenchanted world that the postmodern re-enchantment is aimed.

But note that we are not comparing a prior or later state of enchantment (what Tolkien identifies as "Faerie") with one of disenchantment; that concedes far too much to the disingenuous mythology of modernism, which pretends it is fundamentally different. Recalling Tolkien's distinction between magic and enchantment permits us to recognize what such scientists are doing, and their representatives defending, for what it is, namely modernist magic: a powerful negative or *counter*-enchantment, much of whose power stems from being a spell that denies that it is one, a secular religion - literally a bad faith, born of Descartes's dream (again, literally) of a perfect and certain knowledge has culminated in the avowal of Edward Teller, "father" of the hydrogen bomb, that "There is no case where ignorance should be preferred to knowledge..." That may well be true for science; it is by no means always true for humanity. With better reason than he knows, Teller's interviewer described him as "our great master of the black art of detachment".⁶²

That is why modernists cannot afford to take myth, folk-tale and fantasy seriously, and find any serious exemplars or discussion thereof offensive and even threatening. As Le Guin (1979:36) notes of fantasy, "It isn't factual, but it's true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy." To admit that

would come perilously close to admitting the possibility that their own "factual" truths partake of a perverted and disguised mythicity.

A note of clarification is appropriate, however. My critique of modernism and secularism should not be taken to imply advocacy of a return, somehow, to past religious certainties; and for these cogent reasons: (1) such a thing is impossible; (2) any such attempt is therefore bound to end up in the grossly distorted form of religious fundamentalism; and above all, (3) even if it were possible it would be highly undesirable. The fact is that modernist monism and universalism has its roots firmly in the universalist monotheism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and its logic is essentially the same. The minimal requirements for an enchanted world, in which nature is respected as alive, integral and active, are "mystery and a plurality of spirits"; whereas a single god, as Max Weber realized, establishes a monopoly which implies that everything can be subjected to a single, "rational", and therefore disenchanting ordering (Kontos 1994:226 & *passim*).⁶³ "Returning to God" therefore offers no solutions to the problems of modernity; quite the contrary. The only real advance is to a pluralist, locally-rooted, and "relativist" re-enchantment that is *new*.

Nor do I equate enchantment with all that is good. But I do maintain that in some form or other, it is humanly unavoidable; and that critique which rejects scientific essentialism must address itself not to which discourses are truths and which merely narratives/stories/myths, but to which of the latter are helpful and which are not. I need hardly add, I hope, that if there is no master-template of single, universal and unenchanted Truth, then it follows that you are left with various and plural truths - not, as some would disingenuously have it, nothing but lies.

Richard Kearney is right: "It is our ethical duty to use our powers of *logos* to discriminate between the authentic and inauthentic uses to which *mythos* is put in our culture" (1985:78). But the irony is that you cannot even begin to distinguish pathological myth from healthy and encourage the latter until you have admitted its reality and, when healthy, desirability. Dogmatic secularists and atheists stigmatize all forms alike and attempt to force an impossible (and undesirable) universal disenchantment; thus, failing to understand the legitimacy of the desire for (re-) enchantment as such, and wasting their fire on harmless or healthy kinds, they leave us more exposed than ever to its pathologies. Hence, in part, Tolkien's (1988:45) insistence that "Fantasy is a rational not an irrational activity." But rational, appropriately, in the ancient (and postmodern) sense of *phronesis*, not *theoria*. As Milton Scarborough (1994:110) writes,

The ultimate assessment of myth must be of a kind suited to the nature of myth as giving expression to apprehensions of the life-world and as functioning to provide an orientation for living in that world. Within those strictures myth is neither true nor false *in a theoretical sense* but viable or not viable for the tasks (both theoretical and otherwise) which confront us. This viability is not determined in intellectual terms but in the very process of living, by whether or not one is energized, whether or not problems are being solved, whether or not life is integrated at a variety of levels, whether or not it is endowed with a significance that pulls one toward the future in hope.

Back to Fantasy

All this has very specific and significant implications for fantasy literature in general and Tolkien's books in particular, which speak powerfully to precisely our present conditions. Drawing on the power of ancient Indo-European myth, they invite the reader into a

compelling and remarkably complete pre-modern world, saturated with corresponding earlier values, which therefore feels something like a lost home. They are just the values whose jeopardy we most now feel: relationships of respect with each other, and nature, and (for want of a better word) the spirit, which have not been stripped of personal integrity and responsibility and decanted into a soulless calculus of financial profit-and-loss. Wisdom in Middle-earth is not a matter of economic, scientific or technological expertise, but of practical and ethical maturity. If Middle-earth had a prophet, he was John Ruskin (1862): "THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE." And (1856):

To watch the corn grow, and the blossoms set; to draw hard breath over ploughshare or spade; to read, to think, to love, to hope, to pray,- these are the things that make men happy; they have always had the power of doing these, they never will have the power to do more. The world's prosperity or adversity depends upon our knowing and teaching these few things: but upon iron, or glass, or electricity, or steam, in no wise.

But this same world, as we begin *The Lord of the Rings*, is under severe threat from those who worship pure power, and are therefore its slaves - the technological and instrumental power embodied in Sauron (after whom the book itself is named, after all), and the epitome of modernism gone mad. Reading this story, one therefore finds oneself reading our own story. That is one reason why so many readers have taken it so to heart. Another is that just as Sauron is vanquished in *The Lord of the Rings* - albeit barely, temporarily, and at great cost - so Tolkien, crucially, offers his readers *hope* that what is precious and threatened in our world might survive too.

Only those who cling to the modernist myth of a singular universal truth - as opposed to myth and story and indeed interpretation as such, which is somehow directly accessible to those with the "correct" understanding - only these will look at Tolkien's glorious tree and see (to use an apt image of William Blake's) only "a green thing standing in the way." To the modernist, the choice is between Truth and myth (or falsehood). Whereas the postmodernist, giving up the pretense of a direct line to the Truth, sees the choice as between truths; or to put it another way, between myths (or stories) that are creative and liberating, and those that are destructive and debilitating.

So, for example, what really matters about the image of pre-Conquest England 'as a free and equal rural community' benefitting from 'a primitive freedom' and 'the perpetual impulse and teaching of "Nature"' (in Williams's [1985:79] excellent description) is not the extent to which things were 'actually' otherwise - though that too, itself an interpretation rather than a 'fact', may become mobilised as a resource in one political direction or another - but the use of such an image in the present. In his own way, Tolkien (1981:47) himself saw this clearly: "When we have done all that research...can do...there remains still a point too often forgotten: that is the effect produced *now* by these old things in the stories as they are." Indeed, Tolkien's anti-positivism is bizarrely in tune with some of the best and most refreshing aspects of postmodern philosophy:

You call a tree a tree...and you think nothing more of the word. But it was not a "tree" until someone gave it that name. You call a star a star, and say it is just a ball of matter moving on a mathematical course. But that is merely how *you* see it. By so naming things and describing them you are only inventing your own terms about them. And just as speech is invention about objects and ideas, so myth is invention about truth.

Furthermore, "The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval", and "History often resembles 'Myth', because they are both ultimately of the same stuff..."

(1988:24, 31) As for the Derridean endless flux of discourse, fairy-stories "have a greater sense and grasp of the endlessness of the World of Story than most modern 'realistic' stories, already hemmed within the narrow confines of their own small time" (1988:72).⁶⁴

This resonance is less surprising if one recalls that Tolkien was strongly influenced by Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction. A Study in Meaning* (1928).⁶⁵ In a more recent adumbration, Barfield (1977:41) concluded that "Literalness is a quality which some words have achieved in the course of their history; it is not a quality with which the first words were born....[The word 'literal'] means something which is the end-product of a long historical process." Furthermore, "Abandoning the specter of born literalness, we shall also abandon the whole dream of fixed entities with which literal meanings must somehow correspond."

Compare this with Laclau and Mouffe (1985:111): "Literality is, in actual fact, the first of metaphors." Or Paul Veyne (1988:38): "the flowering of myth and all manner of foolish tales ceases to mystify us by its gratuitousness and uselessness if we see that history itself is ceaseless invention and does not lead the reasonable life of a petty economizer." And it would be possible to quote any number of other authors to the same effect, questioning the naive reality of "the real" and demonstrating the inescapability of metaphoric interpretation. Furthermore, this is the point at which myth, as one particularly powerful kind thereof, starts to become an enormous and fascinating subject which should at this point be addressed; but cannot be, here. For now, let us just note with Tolkien (1988:51) that

Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason....On the contrary. The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make. If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy would languish....and become Morbid Delusion. For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it.

He rightly adds that "If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-tales about frog-kings would not have arisen." It is thus the vulgar "scientific" and "materialist" literalists who have an interest in destroying metaphor and the creativity - in science no less than art and play - upon which, as Tolkien correctly notes, it depends.⁶⁶

For closely related reasons, postmodernism has also restored the crucial importance of narrative, the way by which we produce and find meaning.⁶⁷ Thus, Brian Attebery (1992:46) has suggested that "Postmodernism is a return to storytelling in the belief that we can be sure of nothing but story." He shrewdly adds not only that postmodernist criteria are much better suited to explaining Tolkien's success than are realist or modernist criteria, but that fantasy "makes its metafictional statements most effectively when it seems most ingenuous, as in Tolkien's perfectly sincere, perfectly impossible narrative." By contrast, the tedious authorial reminders of textual artificiality that are often identified with postmodernism are actually a ritualistic and compromisingly modernist attempt at demystification.⁶⁸

At the very heart of their effect now, both of fantasy in general and Tolkien in particular, is that of wonder. It has been given profound new life by the postmodern cultural project of re-enchantment. Along with Brian Attebery, C.N. Manlove (1983) - otherwise no fan of Tolkien - sees this clearly: "there is a very definite and constant character to fantasy, and in nothing is it perhaps so markedly constant as its devotion to wonder at created things, and its profound sense that that wonder is above almost everything else a spiritual good not to be lost."⁶⁹

But critics like Jack Zipes and Marina Warner - despite their pre-eminence on the subject of fantasy, fairy tales and myth - sadly do not. The reason is plain: their subject-matter is less significant than their commitments to cultural materialism and political feminism respectively - projects that take place within the modernist problematic, where that of mythopoeic enchantment (including near-relations like creative "DIY" politics, eco-feminism and neo-paganism) subverts it.

Three Critics

Let me briefly flesh out this indictment. In Zipes's *Breaking the Spell* (1979:18), real and exciting insights successfully struggled free of Marxist dogma and turgid academic jargon. Drawing on Marcuse and Bloch, Zipes argued convincingly that "To the extent that the folk and fairy tales of old as well as the new ones form alternative configurations in a critical and imaginative reflection of the dominant social norms and ideas, they contain an emancipatory *potential* which can never be completely controlled or depleted unless human subjectivity itself is fully computerized and rendered impotent."⁷⁰ And he convincingly applied this aperçu to Tolkien.

Sadly, his more recent (1994:6, 15) marks a retreat to dogma. He approvingly quotes Barthes on myth as really "*nothing but* a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences". His own definition of myth is any discourse with "a structure, image, metaphor, plot, and value [fixed] as sacrosanct".⁷⁰ This is one way (political and epistemological) of looking at it, to be sure; but by itself, it is too facile, abstract and (above all) amenable to a modernist appropriation whereby myth in its original meaning becomes cognate with falsehood, delusion and infantilism.⁷¹

His definition is therefore seriously inadequate (especially for a book nominally half-devoted to the subject). This could be done in a number of ways; in order of generality, for example, Milton Scarborough (1994) suggests convincingly that myth is an orientation for existence which is not only comprehensive of the life-world but a special *a priori* condition of all theoretical thinking.⁷² Less ambitiously, there is myth as culturally collective narratives which help people answer ethical/existential questions, and whose truths therefore surpass properly factual or "scientific" justification. Or there is Roberto Calasso's suggestion, which has the virtues of historical and cultural specificity, and simplicity: "Stories of the gods and heroes as defined by the ancients."⁷³ Finally, isn't there a thread running through each of these views?

In any case, we can place no confidence in Zipes as a guide here - not even where the last suggested definition, surely closest in spirit to the other half of his subject-matter, fairy-tales, is concerned. For example, his free-association about Robert Bly's title *Iron John* results in twenty-four names and concepts (1994:96). Yet extraordinarily, Mars (or Ares) never occurs to him, although through its "rulership" of iron, it is precisely the ancient mythical key - from its Mesopotamian roots and Greek and Roman versions, through its Hermetic codification and Renaissance neo-Platonic restatement, to its ubiquitous appearance in modern astrological discourse - to "Iron John" in all his aspects and symbolic associations (masculinity, hardness, war and so on). As Paracelsus wrote, "He who knows what iron is, knows the attributes of Mars. He who knows Mars, knows the qualities of iron." And he who doesn't, he might have added, knows neither.⁷⁴

Zipes also possesses the usual modernist faith in the power of demystification. (Not that there is anything wrong with faith as such; but with this particular one, yes.) Thus, he seems to think that the chief problem with Disney is that "The pictures conceal the controls

and the machinery. They deprive the audience of viewing the production and manipulation, and in the end, audiences can no longer envision a fairy tale for themselves as they can when they read it" (1994:84). The last point is right, but not for the reason he gives. Viewing Disney's production and manipulation involved in making Disney films would interest, let alone "free", very few people; indeed, it wouldn't work, so to speak, unless it was itself the (successful) result of such a process. Conversely, the pathology of Disney films lies not in production/ manipulation - which, as such, is unavoidable - but in the particular kind they involve: the true and deliberate infantilizing of imagery, the relentless exploitation of both the medium and the stories for colonizing the imagination, and all driven by the logic of a global pop monoculture, a culture of capital itself, with all its unmatched ability "to degrade, vulgarise, constrict, or, as the argot has it, 'tabloidise'".⁷⁵

As Tolkien (1988:50) said, the creative desire for enchantment "is only cheated by counterfeits, whether the innocent but clumsy devices of the human dramatist, or the malevolent frauds of the magicians" - and with computerized film, these two are as one. But revealing their means of production and manipulation will have negligible effect; if you want to undermine Disney, you must give people (or if you are parents, find) *something better*: in other words, not a disenchantment but an alternative enchantment.⁷⁶

Turning to Marina Warner, one is struck by certain paradoxes. One is that such a prolific author, and one claiming such a wide remit, could omit so much; her recent *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), despite the comprehensive sub-title, does not actually concern fairy tales at all, but "traditional nursery classics". Even then, there is no discussion of any such classics featuring boys (Puss in Boots, Tom Thumb, Jack and the Beanstalk, *etc.*), nor the stories of such authors as George MacDonald, Hans Christian Anderson, or Tolkien.⁷⁷ (And lest I be accused of merely subjective partisanship, let us recall that *The Hobbit* is easily the most popular fairy story of this century.) The doubt unavoidably stirs that these were simply unamenable to what she wanted to conclude.

Another curious thing, if more ineffable, is the distinct odour of sanctity that clings to this avowedly secular and analytical writer's work - one that noticeably exceeds any attached to that of Tolkien, an unshakable Catholic. The reason, it seems to me, is Warner's devout adherence to the pieties of literary feminism and modernism, acclaimed and protected by the same congregation that has already canonised Angela Carter. Once again, disenchantment and demystification, through revealing the origins of fairy-tales in specific "social and material conditions", is again the secular sacrament.

Another such tenet is the cosy meliorist creed - one of Tolkien's targets in his essay on Beowulf - that there is no real, intractable and ultimately irrefragable evil, because (in Warner's words) "monsters are made, not given. And if monsters are made, they can be unmade, too".⁷⁸ Thus, interviewed about the recent slaughter of Scottish school-children, she delicately eschews "evil" for "vice"; even when confronted with the example of Nazism, she will not look it in the eye, preferring instead that "I don't think there was enough resistance there. People were duped or taken in and the vitiation spread..."⁷⁹

Vitiation! This is a serious failure of the moral imagination - as if, to quote Le Guin (1979:58-9), "evil were a problem, something that can be solved, that has an answer, like a problem in fifth grade arithmetic....*That* is escapism, that posing evil as a 'problem', instead of what it is: all the pain and suffering and waste and loss and injustice we will meet all our lives long, and must face and cope with over and over, and admit, and live with, in order to live human lives at all." That, as we have seen, was Tolkien's opinion too.

Finally, a genteel but relentless concern with the single dimension of gender excludes everything that is not grist to its mill; thus, any hint of the power of myth, folk- and fairy-tales to induce wonder *as such* - the very heart, in a postmodern context, of Tolkien's (1988:32) "point too often forgotten: that is the effect produced *now* by these old things in the stories as they are" - is utterly absent. She thus misses an invaluable opportunity to counter the stranglehold of a sclerotic modernism on literature and criticism, one of the chief remedies for which is precisely, in Ihab Hassan (1992:204) words, "to remythify the imagination, at least locally, and bring back the reign of wonder into our lives."

Once again, unsung readers probably have the edge on literary professionals. The great Indologist Heinrich Zimmer (1948:1-3) pointed to the heart of the matter:

The dilettante - Italian *dilettante* (present participle of the verb *dilettare*, "to take delight in") - is one who takes delight in something....The moment we abandon this dilettante attitude toward the images of folklore and myth and begin to feel certain about their proper interpretation (as professional comprehenders, handling the tool of an infallible method), we deprive ourselves of the quickening contact, the demonic and inspiring assault that is the effect of their intrinsic virtue. We forfeit our proper humility and open-mindedness before the unknown, and refuse to be instructed....What they demand of us is not the monologue of the coroner's report, but the dialogue of a living conversation.

Jameson's "Magical Narratives"

There is no better example of the coroner's report than my third choice of critic Frederic Jameson's "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre", so I am going to give it a little extra attention. It was published in 1975, and many of its premisses (notably the Marxist metaphysics) have suffered since then. But many of Jameson's generation who shared his convictions are now ensconced in positions of institutional power. And as his subsequent work shows, the fundamentals of those convictions have changed little; his subsequent "post-modernism" is really simply neo-Marxism, in which the command "Always historicize" applies to everything except itself and its own particular assumptions.

Discussing Vladimir Propp's structuralist analysis of folktales as "a process of abstraction, whereby *surface* events or elements are assimilated to emptier and ever more general categories", Jameson criticizes it as insufficiently coronistic - or in his words, "still too meaningful". He wants "a type of analysis which aims at seeing the entire narrative in terms of a single...*mechanism*" (1975:146-48; my emphases). What better statement of the modernist dream, with its chilling monist and imperialist ambitions, could be imagined?

Along the way, so-called "surface events" are not the only victims. So too is "the belief in good and evil" - apparently *any* kind of such belief. This fundamental human experience is dismissed as "a magical thought mode, that is, one which springs from a precapitalist, essentially agricultural way of life." And since the mode of production is all-powerful, the reader "now finds himself obliged to justify the henceforth scandalous and archaic activity of fantasy, so that what we have called the replacements for the older magical function also serve as so many rational ways of explaining it away - in Stendhal by way of psychology, and in Eichendorff by the demonstration that it was not really there at all in the first place" (1975:141, 145). We must ask: really? Are there any of these modernist "replacements" in *The Lord of the Rings*? And do any of its millions of readers miss them?

Perhaps that is why Jameson (1975:161) specifies the work of Tolkien and Lewis as "archaic nostalgia" (which, for modernists, is about the worst thing you can say). But his own

theory cannot explain either their continued existence or popularity except as pure mass infantilism, which really ought (or should it be, who ought?) to be eliminated. The higher knowledge/cause that justifies this lofty purism is our old friend Marx and Engel's "base": that muscular starting point of "real men" and "real existence" which consigns to the dustbin of epiphenomena "what men say, imagine, conceive...men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived....Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness". Magically enough, the "base" determines all this "superstructure" without being affected in return. And Marxists like Jameson *know* this because their creed is not "simply one more critical language or method among others"; uniquely, its critical operation "requires us to correlate literary phenonema, not with...conceptual abstractions, but rather with the realities to which those abstractions correspond" (1975:157, 159). That is, Marxist concepts alone, being somehow not conceptual, escape abstraction. Such an assertion has all the intellectual authority of "what I tell you three times is true".⁸⁰

For many readers, this will be old ground, hardly worth retracing. But I disagree; we need reminding of the arrogant fatuity that has become a mentality, an entrenched habit of thought amounting to a *déformation professionnelle*, among many influential literary professionals. This is what anyone who wants to see understanding (as well as explanation) and value (as well as interpretation) restored to the heart of the critical enterprise is up against. Such a reader might well take heart from the rich perceptiveness - the wisdom, to give it its proper name - of Walter Benjamin, who lamented the dying out of "the epic side of truth, wisdom", and with it, the art of storytelling:

no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it....There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis....

Benjamin concludes, in words that apply directly to Tolkien and celebrate the survival of what Jameson regards as an atavistic aberration, that "The first true storyteller is, *and will continue to be*, the teller of fairy tales" (1969:89, 91, 102).

Three Writers

The approach I have urged has interesting implications for various writers, too - especially those who apparently share the category of "fantasy", and draw on the same stock of myth, folk- and fairy-tales. Here, very briefly, are three examples. The stories of Terry Pratchett, the hugely successful English comic fantasy writer, are stuffed with trolls, dwarves, witches and wizards and magic generally. Yet these are devices he uses to produce quintessentially humanist tales. But not of the scientific and universalist modernist kind - Pratchett's idiom is unmistakably local, *i.e.* English (not "British"), and his humanism is in the best pre-modern Montaignian tradition of humane, tolerant, sceptical humanism. In Elgin's terms, Pratchett is a comic and ecological writer: accepting of nature, the body, and human limits.⁸¹ As such, his stories partake of postmodern localism and pluralism; and they refresh, not dessicate, the contemporary soul.

My second example is the vivid contrast between Tolkien's work and that of the late Angela Carter. This goes deeper than the latter's earthy feminism, and the generation gap between her 1960s anti-authoritarianism and Tolkien's residually Edwardian love of a quiet, green world. Consider the fact that Carter's best fiction centres on the circus and the theatre,

both arenas whose magic, while potent, falls well within the humanist and secular ambit of drama. This is an art-form which, if Tolkien was right, is necessarily anthropocentric, unlike literature, which can (if rarely now does) escape into the non-human world, or nature - and thus nature, in turn, into art. And literature which harkens back to ancient myth would have a special impetus, and ability, to let the voices of non-human nature speak.

True, the two authors drew upon many of the same European and English folk- and fairy-tales; and Alison Lurie (1996) thinks Carter shares a Northern air with Karen Blixen that I had already decided linked the latter with Tolkien. But I would contend that their projects were exactly opposite; Carter was primarily interested in *disenchanting* her readers - freeing them from a false glamour cast by a sexist and racist capitalism - whereas he, despite sharing to a surprising extent the same concerns, was trying to work an alternative *re-enchantment*.

These represent very different strategies. Neither is necessarily more effective than the other; Carter's sophisticated and anti-mythic subversion of enchantment limits her audience in one way, just as Tolkien's contrary approach does his in another. In terms of appeal discernible through sheer numbers of readers, of course, Tolkien obviously has the edge. But I would also reject the suggestion that Carter's left-of-centre affiliations notwithstanding, her work is inherently more "radical". Indeed, if I am right about the destructiveness of unchecked modernity, then Tolkien's is the more needed; and, ironically, the less naive. (The same could be said of Fay Weldon's fiction, for example, and Warner's criticism; but definitely not of the work of Ursula Le Guin - surely no less a feminist than they, so that cannot be the fundamental consideration.)

Nor, in my terms, is Salman Rushdie, my third example, a consistently or successfully postmodern writer. For all its irony, pastiche and hybridity, *The Satanic Verses* was correctly recognized by its Asian Islamic readers (for all their near-illiteracy) as a serious secularist attack on their religion: a classic case of modernist debunking, in fact.⁸² And it is significant that both Carter and Rushdie - the former rightly praised by the latter as "a thumber of noses, a defiler of sacred cows" - have declared their devotion to "The Wizard of Oz".⁸³ For the fundamental point about the Wizard of Oz - Oz the Great and Terrible - is this: he was a cheat and a fraud, and as such, a comforting anti-fairy-tale for secular and modernist Grown-Ups: just "a little, old man, with a bald head and a wrinkled face". "Hush, my dear...don't speak so loud, or you will be overheard - and I should be ruined. I'm supposed to be a Great Wizard.' 'And aren't you?'...'Not a bit of it, my dear; I'm just a common man'" (Baum 1993:122-23).

Now if I were (*horribile dictu*) Fred Inglis, I would now play my trump card, and point out that while it would be disgraceful to use the fact against him, it should nonetheless be noted that L. Frank Baum was a violent racist who publicly advocated genocide against the (remaining) American Indians.⁸⁴ I will content myself, however, with noting that Baum doesn't exactly leave Tolkien gasping at the back of the radical sweepstakes; and since reactionary modernists abound (Wyndham Lewis, T.S. Eliot, and many Weimar intellectuals),⁸⁵ so political backwardness, too, cannot really be the problem.

The real problem Tolkien poses for modernists is that his work has committed the crime - like a felled tree he once mourned - of being "large and alive." Its success calls time on them, and underscores their own dead hand. And not before time. For wonder alone cannot save us, or a world worth living in; but without it, the outlook is very dark indeed.⁸⁶

 REFERENCES

¹ My recent book, Curry (1997), concentrates more on the positive content of Tolkien's work as construed by readers; this paper takes the *via negativa* of tackling his critics directly. The latter is also written in a somewhat more academic vein. There is, however, some unavoidable overlap.

² Relatively conservative estimates, based on figures supplied to me by HarperCollins and by Houghton Mifflin (courtesy Richard McAadoo), and on those in Ezard (1991). *Gone With the Wind* has sold about 27 million copies, and according to the *Guinness Book of Records* of 1991, the single modern novel with the highest global sales is Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1966) - 28,712,000, as of March 1987. (Of course, this may have been subsequently superseded.) Translations: based on information kindly supplied by HarperCollins in 1982. Fashionability: Park (1991). In a recent survey of readers' "favourite novel" by the *Sunday Times* (24.9.95), with almost 1100 respondents, *The Lord of the Rings* came second (behind *Pride and Prejudice*). A survey of teenagers' reading habits showed *The Lord of the Rings* still high among 15-16 year-olds (*Guardian*, 16.12.95). Still sells: in England, my assertion can be confirmed by talking to the relevant buyer for any largish bookstore. Libraries: Public Lending Right figures; see also *Times Literary Supplement* (14.1.94), and *Guardian* (7.1.93). Value: M. Hime, writing in *Firsts* 5:10 (Oct. 1995) 41.

³ These results were carried and discussed by every major British national broadsheet on 20 January 1997. *The Daily Telegraph* apparently repeated the poll, and obtained exactly the same first three places. See also my article in the *New Statesman* of 31 January 1997. Folio Society result: *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 April 1997; Bookworm: *The Guardian*, 1 September 1997.

⁴ There is at least a reasonable entry in Stringer (1996).

⁵ I have never figured out whether Schepps is being ironic or not; he seems to be saying that the values in Tolkien's work are fine as long as one doesn't try to "apply" them to the so-called real world - a tortuous and unsatisfying conclusion, to say the least. See also West (1970); Johnson (1986); and Hammond (1995). Good critics: eg., Lurie (1990). Humphrey Carpenter made the last-quoted extraordinary remark on BBC "Bookshelf", 22.11.1991. See also Raffel (1968), who concludes patronizingly that it is "magnificent but...not literature" (246).

⁶ Initially, W.H. Auden and C.S. Lewis; more recently, Shippey (1992); Elgin, (1985); Attebery (1992); Le Guin (1989); Swinfen (1984); Rosebery (1992); Fliger (1983); Filmer (1992). This list is not intended to be exhaustive. For interesting additional comments on Tolkien's rejection by the English literary establishment, see Shippey (1995). (I invite anyone who wants empirical confirmation of my last remark to try to interest a mainstream and/or leading academic publisher in producing a serious book on Tolkien.)

⁷ A remark to the author.

⁸ Nonetheless, obviously, Smith cannot be held to account for my uses of her work.

⁹ From, respectively: *W* [the Waterstone's Magazine] (Winter/Spring 1997), 4; *The Times* (20.1.97); and *The Guardian* (23.1.97).

¹⁰ See Meyers (1995).

¹¹ See Colebatch's critique of Stimpson in his (1990), 61-66.

¹² Cf. Attebery (1992:33) and Rosebury (1992:75-6).

¹³ For a recent repetition, see Kavaney (1992) who also associates Tolkien with "a broadside attack on modernism and even realism" (is nothing sacred?), and anachronistically blames him for current "American commercial fantasy and science fiction".

¹⁴ I am thinking of two otherwise excellent writers, John Fowles and Dennis Potter, in *The Mantis* and *Blackeyes* respectively.

¹⁵ I am indebted to Carolyn Burdett for discussion of this point.

¹⁶ However, as she adds, the Orcs - as distinct from the Haradrim, Variags and Easterlings - "are a separate problem, and one that Tolkien himself never really solved" (p. 56).

¹⁷ See O'Connor (1989) (especially 109-15). Two disclaimers: I note and appreciate Williams's opening-out of critical vistas from the confines of Leavisism. And I do not mean to subsume Marxism in the work of Williams; there are others, especially Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School, who have been deeply sceptical about Enlightenment rationalism.

¹⁸ To be fair, this is something that the best of Williams's former students, such as Stuart Hall, absorbed and have themselves said.

¹⁹ Tom Paulin, writing in *The Independent on Sunday* (16.4.95). A good example is Williams's ex-student Terry Eagleton, who eulogized him as author of "the most profound and original collection of cultural writing in 20th-century Britain" (*New Statesman & Society* (13.10.95). As late as 1994, Eagleton was still touchingly defining culture as "a transitional point between religion and politics" ("Discourse & discos", *TLS*, 15.7.94).

²⁰ See Felperin (1985): "The marxist fideo-materialism, with its fundamentalist ground of History and utopian goal of socialism to support and guide its reading of texts, is rather a dogmatism, another secular theology in which the old transcendental signifieds of God and the Bourgeois Author may have been superceded or sublated by History but certainly not dispensed with" (206-7).

²¹ Thompson (1976) and (1993). For Thompson's impressive catalogue of his garden on his 50th birthday, see the *New Left Review* 102 (Sept/Oct 1993).

²² Hence the furious reaction to historian Samuel (1995), which dares to question this shibboleth; typical was that of the nostalgia- and patriotism-phobic Patrick Wright. As a hopeful sign to the contrary, albeit well outside mainstream political (and musical) discourse, note the success in the UK of critically patriotic "new folk" bands like The Levellers.

²³ Cf. Harrison (1992: 156): "nostalgia keeps open the vision of historical alternatives..."

²⁴ Cf. the similar point made by Jackson (1988:154-5).

²⁵ Quoted by John Ryle, *Guardian* (25.11.96).

²⁶ See also Grushetskiy (1995) and Grigorieva (1995); and "Tolkien fantasies strike Russian Chord", *The Globe and Mail* (28.5.94).

²⁷ For a fuller discussion of Tolkien's opposition to fascism, see Plank (1975) and Yates (1995).

²⁸ See Harrison (1966); on Larkin, see Hitchens (1993) 161-74. W.B. Yeats would appear to be ambiguous here.

²⁹ See Bauman (1989); Payne (1996); Herf (1984).

³⁰ See Tolkien (1981:95-96).

³¹ See Finch (1994:12-13); and Williams (1995:17, 19).

³² See Curry (1995), for an introduction.

³³ See Plank (1975); he also points out that "Tolkien opposes fascism as a conservative rather than as a democrat" (114).

³⁴ Although, to be fair, it is no worse than his editor and some of his fellow contributors to Giddings's (1983) execrable collection, thankfully already discussed by Coelbatch (1990:67-81). See, *eg.*, the slimy sub-cultural materialism of Nigel Walmsley, Nick Otty's confusions about deconstruction and Brenda Partridge's dysfunctional psychoanalysis.

³⁵ This is typical of Miller in its arrogance and ignorance, as so often when he ventures out of his area of actual expertise; but personal psychology apart, it also typifies the consequences of a dogmatic belief in the tenets of scientific secularism, rationalism and modernism.

³⁶ As he himself admits, "Once we have set the irony-stereotypewriter to work, it is easy for any bookish person who lives within the London-Bristol ellipse of thriving capital to go on remorselessly in this vein." (3) So why does he do so, and allow it to stand as substantive and fair comment?

³⁷ Personal communication. (Typically, Inglis's determination to make his point overrides his "grateful" acceptance of Claude Rawson's correction on this point in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 26.6.82 – (1983:41, n. 18).

³⁸ The latter, persistently unpopular, were recently defended by Lorna Sage in the *Times Literary Supplement* (12.8.94), who wrote that Brooke-Rose's "voice has seemed more distant and characterless than in fact it is" - something to treasure alongside Mark Twain's observation, more deliberately ironic, that Wagner's music "is better than it sounds."

³⁹ Such as the (UK) Tolkien Society's *Mallorn* and the (USA) Mythopoeic Society's *Mythlore*, *Arda* (Sweden) and *Lembas* (Netherlands). This is evidently an attitude shared even by Rosebury (1992:129); but not, I'm glad to say, by Shippey or Attebery.

⁴⁰ See my remarks on Jackson, above. (It is equally amusing to find him complaining about Tolkien's "fusion and confusion of levels of reality" and narratives - unlike, say, that of Borges, O'Brien or Calvino?)

⁴¹ Note too the cultural studies mantra of "interrogating" texts, which reveals a common mentality if not indeed origin in the Baconian interrogation of nature, bound and on the rack.

⁴² Some of Brooke-Rose's mistakes are mentioned in Rosebury (1992:154); and see Shippey (1992:282-84).

⁴³ *Eg.* high praise for Mark Helprin's "literary" *Winter's Tale* (1983) but ignoring John Crowley's superior "fantasy" *Little, Big* (1982); for Deepak Chopra's New Age *The Return of Merlin* (1995) but not Robert Holdstock's genuinely chthonic *Mythago Wood* (1982); and so on.

⁴⁴ Benjamin's modernist admirers, at least those who have also engaged in Tolkien criticism, seem to have missed this essay. I am very grateful to Nicola Bown for bringing it to my attention.

⁴⁵ The depressing degeneration of Italo Calvino's fiction is a characteristic case in point.

⁴⁶ Amis's attitude to anything at odds with the modernist credo was perhaps revealed by his "review" for the *London Review of Books* of Robert Bly's *Iron John* - a book which, whatever else one might think of it, at least raised serious and interesting issues. The entire piece consisted of variations on sniggering occasioned by Bly's title denoting a gay man in Amis's boyhood English slang.

152. Asked in a recent interview in the *New Statesman and Society* (3.5.1996), "Which books and authors have had the greatest influence on your political beliefs?" Crum replied "*The Communist Manifesto* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire* by Karl Marx." Yet "Which event during

your lifetime has had the greatest effect on your political beliefs?" "My first visit to America in 1976 showed me how it was possible to live in a genuinely free society."

⁴⁷ On a "snide and aggressive" media, see Gopnik (1994:84-102); also Nicholson-Lord (1995), and Midgeley (1997).

⁴⁸ See, by contrast, Raymond Williams's biographical attack on Orwell - a perfect sample of dogmatic socialist sanctimony.

⁴⁹ As was noticed by Wilson (1974:37): LR "is at once an attack on the modern word and a credo, a manifesto."

⁵⁰ The latter book shows connections between Tolkien's popularity and the CND/END protest movement that far outweigh E.P.Thompson's superficial use of imagery from his books to describe a Cold War mentality - something about which he was corrected (as he later acknowledged) by Jessica Yates; see her (1995).

⁵¹ See Rosebury (1992:148) and Shippey (1992:24).

⁵² Another good example: the attempt by modernists like Waldemar Januszczak and Martin Pawley to trash the doubts, fears and dislike of much modern architecture by Prince Charles in 1989-90. They invoked everything from the size of his ears, and associations with Hitler to economic "realism" and "progress". But the vast outpouring in the media from members of the public in Charles' defence demonstrated that he was, overwhelmingly, speaking for them; and to those feelings, the experts had no convincing reply.

⁵³ See Bjorgo (1995:234), who cites Franco Ferreresi (Ed.), *La Destra Radicale*. I am grateful to Matthew Kalman for this reference.

⁵⁴ For a brilliant essay on Middle-earth as a "Fourth World" Europe, unstained by industrialism and imperialism, see Luling (1995).

⁵⁵ In addition to Paul Feyerabend's books, see recent work in the history and sociology of science - eg. by Stephen Shapin and Simon Schaffer, to mention only two names out of many - as well as the new growth industry of attempting to debunk this work by scientific publicists.

⁵⁶ From *Time Out* (5-12.10.1994).

⁵⁷ He adds, "I'm not trying to reduce this to psychiatry - I mean that we worship the gods projected by the god-force that projects us as well on the screen of its mind."

⁵⁸ Cf. Laclau and Mouffe (1985:191-2): "This point is decisive: there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal, and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to 'the truth', which can only be reached by a limited number of subjects."

⁵⁹ These can be summed up as "anti-essentialism".

⁶⁰ The point about (re-) enchantment not being a matter of will was also asserted to me, in conversation, by Roberto Calasso.

⁶¹ Out of a vast literature, see Webster (1982).

⁶² Hitchens (1994:45).

⁶³ This idea relates fundamentally to the "value pluralism" of Isaiah Berlin, itself deriving from Machiavelli.

⁶⁴ Most recently, in his (1994), Derrida has written of the "infinite promise" of emancipation, which always risks betrayal through a vulgar and literal-minded realization. But isn't this what Tolkien meant by the hope of Escape - from modernity, from poverty and injustice, and from death itself - which runs exactly the same risk: eg., in the last instance, the attempt at "endless serial living"? If so, how delicious an anticipation!

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- ⁶⁵ See the fascinating recent discussion by Hipolito (1993).
- ⁶⁶ On the last point, see Bateson (1972).
- ⁶⁷ Although not an explicitly postmodernist text, see Carr (1986).
- ⁶⁸ Cf. Beatie (1967): "The more real it seems, the more fictional it is." (8) An instance of the last-mentioned tendency is Calvino's interminable *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (in contrast with his own earlier wonderful tales, such as *The Baron in the Trees*.)
- ⁶⁹ Cf. Brian Attebery (1980:3).
- ⁷⁰ (My italics). Zipe's text is also marred by the worst kind of in-house academic jargon, e.g., "the evolution of the fairy tale as a literary genre is marked by a process of dialectical appropriation involving duplication and revision that set the cultural conditions for its mythicization, institutionalization, and expansion as a mass-mediated form..." (10).
- ⁷¹ I am aware, of course, that such a definition has much older roots, notably in that great enemy of myth, Plato.
- ⁷² Cf. Dews (1995), on the unavoidability of metaphysics.
- ⁷³ At a talk at the South Bank, London, on 11 November 1995.
- ⁷⁴ If I was asked who I trust on the subject, I would include: Walter Otto, Heinrich Zimmer, Karl Kerényi, Roberto Calasso, P.L. Travers, Ursula Le Guin and Tolkien. In other words, it is a necessary if insufficient prerequisite at least to respect myth in its own terms.
- ⁷⁵ Cockburn (1995).
- ⁷⁶ Incidentally, the film "Company of Wolves", based on Angela Carter's disenchanted version of Red Riding Hood, provides a perfect example; although its director, Neil Jordan, was at least as responsible as she for the extent to which it bears out Tolkien's pessimism. Films that enchant *are* possible, if rare.
- ⁷⁷ The same was true of another ambitiously-entitled address, "Re-Thinking the Uses of Enchantment", on 21 June 1992, at The Society of Antiquaries of London.
- ⁷⁸ *The Independent* (3.2.94); cf. "Children are our copy, in little..." (*The Independent*, 10.2.94).
- ⁷⁹ Quoted in Porter (1996).
- ⁸⁰ Thompson's wonderful polemic (1978) is still relevant here.
- ⁸¹ In this as well as in narrower literary terms, the comparison with P.G. Wodehouse is not misplaced.
- ⁸² This should not, of course, be taken to imply that I agree in the slightest with the outrageous *fatwa* threatening his life.
- ⁸³ *New York Times Book Review* (8.3.92),
- ⁸⁴ See *Twin Light Trail: American Indian News* 2 (1992) 15.
- ⁸⁵ See Herf (1984), Harrison (1966), Carey (1992).
- ⁸⁶ See the superb analysis by Hepburn (1984), which I have used in my own recent essay, "Magic, Enchantment, Glamour" (forthcoming).