The Lord of the Rings and the 'Re-enchantment of the World'

Patrick Curry

(April 2019)

A few years ago, I was invited to address the question, 'Is *The Lord of the Rings* a great book?' at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. And rather than answer it directly, I insisted that what was important was to keep a space open for the question, as a perfectly legitimate one to ask. That's quite clever, I thought to myself. And I'm in Oxford; what could go wrong? Well, too clever by half, as we say here. Nobody in the audience was satisfied, no matter which answer they preferred. So today I'm just going to come out and say it: *yes*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a great book.

It certainly fulfils David Foster Wallace's criterion: 'In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness'.[1] More specifically, in this context, it is a great book because it can be powerfully enchanting. So let me tell you why, and what that might mean for us now, in terms of re-enchantment. That idea is one suggested by a famous speech, almost a prophecy, delivered just over a century ago by Max Weber: 'The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world"'.[2]

Before turning to Tolkien, though, I want to give you a basic sense of enchantment in the first place, for you to keep somewhere in mind as we proceed.[3] Fundamentally, it means the experience of wonder. It varies in intensity from charm, through delight, to joy; and the last – deep enchantment – can be life-changing. Its contrary, which partly defines it and vice-versa, is will: as in, the will-to-power, power-knowledge, and agenda.

Enchantment is always relational. It happens as an encounter with an enchanting other, across a gap of difference which it instantly bridges. This other can be literally anything or anyone – it certainly doesn't have to be a human being – but whoever the other turns out to be, whether another human, a different animal, a place, a work of art, an idea – they become, in effect, a person, with a subjectivity and agency of their own. As you can imagine, this experience is extremely challenging to some powerful traditional (religious) and modern (secular) orthodoxies, so it often doesn't get talked about much in public.

By the same token, Weber defined it as 'concrete magic', meaning that it is always both material, even carnal, and spiritual, mysterious. It is *both*, which again makes it problematic to the two dominant metaphysical camps of our time: scientific materialists, on the one hand, and Romantic supernaturalists, on the other. Much as they detest each other, they tacitly agree that you can carve up the world that way and reduce one truth to the other. Enchantment resists that whole process, and when it cannot, it dies.

What else? Since enchantment is a function (a ghastly term but I can't think of a better right now) of relationship, and since relationship is not under the complete control of either party (or else it isn't one), enchantment too is essentially wild. It can be invited but not ordered, controlled or managed; and when it happens, it does so as a gift.

Finally, enchantment, like love, is only forever while it lasts. Time radically slows when it happens, but not completely, and eventually the slowly swirling eddy in the pool rejoins the swiftly-flowing stream of time and is swept away. For that reason, enchantment often has an

---

[1] David Foster Wallace, in the *New York Times* (20.8.06).

[2] H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (London: Routledge, 1991). (Weber was quoting Schiller, but he subtly changed the words and thus meaning.)

[3] See my *Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2019).

undertow of melancholy. It's always passing, and the fact that it always might return isn't always much consolation.

What follows, then, is my account of a book enchanting readers (including me). But its real interest lies in questions like: why does it? What are its readers hungry for? How does the book return them to the world, and is it exactly the same world afterwards?

I first read *The Lord of the Rings* more than fifty years ago, when I was sixteen. It was like falling in love. But not like falling into a dream; more like waking up. Or to change metaphors again, I devoured the story, famished for something in it that I had never found anywhere else. For a long while, I was living more in Middle-earth, and it meant more to me, than where I merely happened to be located, in upstate New York.

It's an open question, I think, whether or not it is still possible to read Tolkien quite as I did. Certainly it is difficult now to imagine the excitement of discovering this book for oneself, in the company of a few contemporaries. Readers of Tolkien then felt a secret affinity: the lucky few, living among the unknowing many.

Of course, one's critical faculties are underdeveloped at that age, but Tolkien's epic has sustained me through countless re-readings since then, and each time I emerge not only renewed but having learned something, whether from a bit I'd never really noticed before or from a new reflection provoked by what I thought I knew well. *The Lord of the Rings* now shares shelf-space with, say, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (another quest narrative, by the way) and Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* (another war epic), but on equal terms.

For those who have been living on a different literary planet, Tolkien's tale centres on hobbits, a literally little people of his own invention, with hairy feet and simple tastes, supplemented by humans and several other species – Elves, Dwarves, Orcs and Wizards, not to mention sapient trees – each with their own culture, language and home-place. There are also some memorable characters: not least Gollum, a study in addiction who is surely Tolkien's contribution to any enduring twentieth-century literary cast. The story is set in Middle-earth, a world both like and unlike our own, featuring an extraordinary array of forests, mountains and rivers, each with their own personalities.

The narrative follows a quest not to find but to get rid of something: a toxic Ring of Power. It finally succeeds, albeit at a grievous cost. Along the way, stirring set-piece battles alternate with sojourns in vividly distinct places of peace or power, thus creating a rolling narrative rhythm (which was completely lost in Peter Jackson's films, by the way).

Let me give you an instance of each kind. Here is the hobbit Merry, on his way to the Battle of the Pelennor Fields:

> 'He sat for a moment half dreaming, listening to the noise of water, the whisper of dark trees, the crack of stone, and the vast waiting silence that brooded behind all sound. He loved mountains, or he had loved the thought of them marching on the edges of stories brought from faraway, but now he was borne down by the insupportable weight of Middle-earth. He longed to shut out the immensity in a quiet room by a fire.'

And in that battle, just when the Lord of the Nazgûl about to enter the shattered gate of the City, his victory all but complete:

> 'in that very moment, away behind in some courtyard of the City, a cock crowed. Shrill and clear he crowed, recking nothing of wizardry or war, welcoming only the morning that in the sky far above the shadows of death was coming with the dawn. And as if in answer there came from far away another note. Horns, horns, horns. Great horns of the North wildly blowing. Rohan had come at last.'

(I cannot even transcribe that without a catch in the throat.)

But the story of the book itself is almost equally strange. Despite its contents' sheer unlikeliness – no lawyers, detectives, lone serial killers, anguished middle-class metropolitans, or even sex, plus it runs to more than a thousand pages – *The Lord of the Rings* has a good claim to be the best-selling work of fiction ever. The most probable estimate of sales figures since its publication in 1955-56, in English alone, is at least 200 million copies, perhaps more, and they show no sign of declining. The implication is clear: however odd its contents are, in mainstream terms, Tolkien is feeding some considerable hunger (not just mine) which is nonetheless largely unacknowledged by cultural leaders.

In polls of readers, from the Waterstone/ Channel 4 and Folio Society polls in 1996, through an Amazon poll the following year, to the BBC's 'Big Read' poll of 750,000 readers in 2003, *The Lord of the Rings* has consistently placed first. More recently, the exhibition of Tolkien's art at the Bodleian Library in Oxford broke all their attendance records, as did the same exhibition in New York and Paris. Then there were the movies, all hugely popular whatever their merits or lack thereof.

This overwhelming popular success has been accompanied by almost comical critical dismay. Tolkien has had some able defenders, notably W.H. Auden and Ursula Le Guin, but the dominant tone was set by Edmund Wilson, who implausibly attacked its 'poverty of invention', and Philip Toynbee, who, with spectacular imprescience, declared in 1961 that the books 'have passed into a merciful oblivion'. It continued at the hands of various modernist, Marxist and feminist critics through to the reaction to those polls, whose outcomes were described as 'a nightmare' by Germaine Greer and 'horrifying' by the *Times Literary Supplement*. In the *London Review of Books*, Jenny Turner described Tolkien's work as 'an infantile comfort that is also a black pit'. (One suspects this says more about her than her subject.)[4] Even today, Philip Pullman continues the reflex modernist attack on Tolkien with equal fatuity.

The other book that tended to come up tops, albeit second, was Orwell's *1984*. This actually makes sense. Although one book is by a socialist and the other a conservative (small 'c'), the authors of both were equally worried about where modernity is headed. And that, I think, is one reason for Tolkien's success. The world he presents consists of three nested spheres which are perhaps our richest sources of enchantment: community (the Shire, home of the hobbits), enclosed within nature (the natural world of Middle-earth), itself contained by ineffable spiritual realities (the encircling Sea). And as the story opens, all three are under severe threat from the Lord of the Rings himself: Sauron, the most powerful magician and technologist in Middle-earth. (As Tolkien well knew, 'magic' and 'machine' come from the same Indo-European root, **magh*, meaning 'to have power'.) Mordor is the only modern state in Middle-earth, albeit pathologically so, with an advanced industrial economy, mass surveillance and bureaucracy, a huge military force, and an aggressively imperialist foreign policy. (How familiar that all sounds!)

In all three respects, then – communities, the natural world, and spiritual values which cannot be counted in cash – readers find their fears addressed and taken seriously. And they take heart from the fact that in the end, those values survive, although not without grievous losses. The threat is lifted, if only just and thanks, in the end, to an unforeseeable act of grace centred on the unlikely character of Gollum.

Tom Shippey has shrewdly observed that Tolkien's concerns about power are distinctively modern, putting him in the company of Orwell, William Golding and Kurt

---

[4] See my essay 'The Critical Response to Tolkien's Fiction', pp. 369-388 in Stuart D. Lee (ed.), *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014; second edition forthcoming in 2021.

Vonnegut.[5] But Tolkien himself was deeply anti-modern, along the lines of John Ruskin and G.K. Chesterton, and his book is deliberately non-modern. It makes no concessions to either of the two modern gods with whom theism has had to share metaphysical rulership since the seventeenth century: psychology and physics (more recently, neurophysiology). Tolkien was learned beyond the dreams of most ‘fantasy’ writers, yet he chose to turn his back on the self-conscious, preferably ironic, modernist literary novel and write as if it had never happened. For the literati, the fact that the reading public loved the result made it all the more unforgiveable.

Except for Mordor, Middle-earth too is non-modern: a Europe that was never Europeanised, so to speak.[6] Self-organised communities are the dominant political form, nature is not a set of ‘resources’ but alive and even sentient in all its parts, and spiritual values, looking over the Sea to the West, home of the gods and ultimately the Elves, are respected and honoured among all free peoples. (Unsurprisingly, given that Tolkien was a staunch Catholic, *The Lord of the Rings* gives pride of place to the virtues of pity and mercy. But these exist alongside the equally prominent pagan virtue of courage, which Tolkien took from his deep study of *Beowulf* and the pre-Christian cultures of North-West Europe.)

Another important thing to understand about Tolkien and his work, however, is that he was, above all, an artist. He did what storytellers do: take what they need, combine it with something else that fits, and come up with something new – even if its roots are ancient. Thus in post-Roman Europe, the Holy Roman Empire and Byzantium remained forever sundered, but the kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor, after many centuries, are re-united; the Riders of Rohan are a mixture of Goths and Anglo-Saxons, but Tolkien put them on horseback; the Jewish diaspora was given to the Dwarves; his two Elvish languages were inspired by Finnish and Welsh; and so on.

Not surprisingly, then, Tolkien decries allegory, whereby one thing (the Ring, say) is really and only another (nuclear power, say). But he defends applicability, which is describes as ‘the freedom of the reader’ to find stories relevant to their own ‘thought and experience’, and come up with new meanings. And there are plenty of opportunities, for readers so inclined.

For example, Tolkien draws a sharp distinction between magic, as the exercise of power, or what we might call the will-to-power, and enchantment, the experience of disinterested and non-possessive wonder, which he calls *Faërie*. Tolkien had abiding concern with wonder, both in life and art, and its absence, along with any equivalent of the Elves, marks another important difference between his work and most other contemporary fantasy: ‘Game of Thrones’, say.

As it happens, the Elves affected me particularly strongly. Beginning with the first one we encounter, Gildor, but then full-blown with the appearance of Glorfindel, I felt as if I was encountering a dear but long-lost friend whom I had never expected to meet again – indeed, had almost forgotten. Tolkien’s Elves are deliberate exemplars of enchantment, but I didn’t need to know that to feel it. (They are a world away from Shakespearean or Victorian whimsy.) But I think most readers would agree that the chapter on Lothlórien, the heart of enchantment in Middle-earth, is one of the book’s most powerful. At Frodo’s first encounter,

> [I]t seemed to him that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more.... Frodo stood still, hearing

---

[5] Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).

[6] Virginia Luling, "An Anthropologist in Middle-earth", in Patricia Reynolds and Glen H. GoodKnight (Eds.), *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference* (Milton Keynes: The Tolkien Society, and Altadena: The Mythopoeic Press, 1995), 53-57.

> far off great seas upon beaches that had long ago been washed away, and sea-birds crying whose race had perished from the earth....

And he sees Galadriel, Lothlórien's embodiment, as 'present and yet remote, a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of Time.'

Ultimately, though, it seems that Faërie is at the mercy of power. The One Ring and its 'Single vision', to borrow from William Blake, trumps the Three Rings of enchantment. Not only that, when the former is destroyed, the power of the latter also begins to fade. But there is another issue still deeper than power: in Tolkien's words, 'Death and the desire for deathlessness'. That desire leads to mistaking 'limitless serial longevity' for immortality, which lies, if anywhere, on the other side of death. The Ring thus confers the power to go on apparently living forever, until life becomes an endless weariness and torment, and those in its power – pre-eminently, the Ringwraiths – crave death as much as they fear it, but it cannot give true immortality. And all we humans have, to set against that 'hideous peril', is what Tolkien called 'Hope without guarantees'. In that respect, among others, he is more of a realist and less of a fantasist than many modernists, and all transhumanists.[7]

These themes and concerns are woven into the fabric of Tolkien's tale, and there are others. I haven't even mentioned his passionate love of trees and prescient fears for the destruction of wild nature by industrial society. (His work has inspired generations of ecological activists.) These concerns are directly reflected in his fictional forests: each one unique, not one merely a generic stage-set for the main human interest. By the same token, his Ents are decidedly not human beings in tree-form but trees who happen to be fully sentient. Middle-earth itself is not a setting but a character in its own right.

Rayner Unwin, who first published *The Lord of the Rings*, summed it up with inimitable pith as 'a very great book in its own curious way'. This does not mean it is perfect, of course, whatever that might mean. Tolkien's style usually rises to the occasion but is not always adequate to his epic's range. Sometimes it lapses into sentimentality or woodenness, and its occasional archaism, even when appropriate, will never be to everyone's taste. In addition, Tolkien was no misogynist and his tale doesn't lack strong female characters – Galadriel, Éowyn, Arwen and, for that matter, Lobelia Sackville-Baggins and Shelob – but Middle-earth is dominated by men, even when an independent woman such as Éowyn chafes against it. On the other hand, the charge that sex is missing is true, but to call that disabling is absurd. *Moby-Dick*, or James Joyce's short stories, or P.G. Wodehouse?

Something which virtually all his readers recognise is the book's deeply melancholic undertow. By the end it is clear that even though the Ring has been destroyed, Elrond's initial conjecture was correct: 'many fair things will fade and be forgotten'. Indeed, it appears that for Tolkien, the best that is on offer in this world is 'a sadness…without bitterness.' Yet I have noticed that many of his readers emerge from the book feeling renewed, as I do. That is probably why re-reading *The Lord of the Rings*, no matter how familiar with it one may be, is so frequent. It's a case of what Fraser Harrison calls 'radical nostalgia': not a fuzzy disabling indulgence, but an empowering reminder of what we love – community, nature, spirit – which encourages us to value and protect them. After all, Tolkien's story doesn't end over the Sea, but here. The last words of the book are Sam's: 'Well, I'm back.'

In this sense, my early response was true: *The Lord of the Rings* doesn't cast a dream-like spell on us. Rather, it awakens us from the deathly spell of modernist disenchantment and lassitude, latterly electronic.

---

[7] See my 'Fantasy in transhumanism and Tolkien, *The Ecological Citizen* 4:1 (2020) 23-4; accessible at https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/article.php?t=fantasy-transhumanism-tolkien

Let's see where we are. I hope I've made a plausible case for the greatness of *The Lord of the Rings*, in its own strange way. Its popular success cannot be doubted. If we combine those two points – oddness and success– we are left with this question: what is it about this book which so many people want, but which most cultural, literary and academic critics don't get?

I made a start earlier in answering that, pointing to the way readers' fears about the trajectory of modernity, and its triple threat, are addressed within the story. So Tolkien's tale partly works as a deep critique of aspects of the modern world. And within the story that threat is averted, albeit barely, so they are again left with 'Hope without guarantees'. Which, these days, is already something.

What do I mean by modernity? The most important point is encapsulated in the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood's summary of the defining project of modernity. What it seeks above all, she says, is 'The rational mastery of nature' – including human nature.[8] Now rational mastery requires bringing everything under one single and undisputed rule. And what does that remind us of? Something sole, shiny, and round. There cannot be exceptions, or other truths – even other kinds of truth – because that would imperil the possibility of complete mastery; and if it isn't complete, then it has failed.

To put it another way, the programme of modernity entails the disenchantment of the world. Why? Because what the experience of wonder shows us – partly revealing, partly creating – is the *intrinsic* value of the enchanting other, no matter who or what they are. Ultimately, says Tolkien, enchantment is 'a love and respect for all things, 'animate' and 'inanimate', an unpossessive love of them as 'other'… Things seen in its light will be respected, and they will also appear delightful, beautiful, wondrous, even glorious.' And he adds that 'this "Faery" is as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life'.[9]

Disenchantment recognises only instrumental value for realising some other purpose, usually power over others, although often described as 'higher' or 'ultimate'. That is of course how the wizard Saruman tries to justify his treacherous collaboration with Sauron: 'Knowledge, Rule, Order'. Relatedly, modernism prizes exchange value in the market-place, which is conflates with rationality as a whole. In the sharpest possible contrast to unique and incommensurable intrinsic values, 'its ideal is the system from everything and anything follows'.[10] That would mean that everything could be predicted, manipulated, and controlled.

Enchantment thus interferes with the project of modernity, which is why executing that project requires its active extirpation. Thoroughly, systematically disenchanted people, with no ultimate values to protect, will have no way to resist being mastered. None of that messy, awkward, embarrassing nonsense from the little people of 'Hands off! or 'Not for sale!' or 'You don't speak for us!'

No wonder that modernists dislike Tolkien, then, for this project is exactly what *The Lord of the Rings* calls into radical question. It encourages and inspires people to value really being alive – to *feel* alive – and what that entails: vital relationships with all kinds of other beings, human and otherwise, and therefore ethics, because you are responsible for your effects on other subjects. And the precious value of our only home, which gave us birth: the living Earth. And the places where, and moments when, our eyes are opened: in love, in art, in religion, in learning, in nature. And the felt, intuited existence of an intangible dimension of lived life which cannot be calculated or exploited – let's call it the spirit, although what I'm talking about pervades and suffuses our sensuous bodily existence without in the least

---

[8] Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[9] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major*, extended edition, ed. Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins, 2005) 101.

[10] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1994 [1944]) 7.

impugning it. But not all enchantments have to be high Elven ones. Don't despise good food and drink, and convivial company! The hobbits certainly didn't.

In all these respects, then, the world doesn't need *re*-enchanting. 'The world', as Chesterton observes, 'will never starve for want of wonders, but only for want of wonder.'[11] *We* are the ones who need reminding to keep the door open to its wonders, and to honour and protect them. So perhaps enchantment – the possibility of it, at least – does have the last word after all.

Thank you.

[11] G.K. Chesterton, *On Tremendous Trifles* (London: Hesperus Press, 2009) 6.