

Reasons for *not* liking Tolkien

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In many ways this is a good time to be a Tolkien fan. Sheer weight of numbers has at last begun to legitimise us. For decades, the literati confidently announced that the *Lord of the Rings* phenomenon was a craze, an accidental by-product of flower power; that the book would eventually pass into 'merciful oblivion' (Philip Toynbee), or at least become an historical footnote, 'an intricate Period Piece' (Harold Bloom). Well, it hasn't happened yet. One readers' poll after another, culminating in BBC TV's *The Big Read* in 2003, voted *The Lord of the Rings* Britain's favourite book; the publishers followed market signals, if not their personal inclinations, and brought out editions that looked like serious literature, not embarrassing fantasy. And into the midst of all this came the film, and its tie-ins and spin-offs, so that the quiet, respectable core of Tolkien enthusiasts was suddenly swollen by a great flood of showbizzy, cool types who follow whatever's big at the moment. Headly stuff.

But the fact that there are a lot of us doesn't mean we've won the argument yet. The Tolkien-haters are still out there, massing their forces, and they're angry. They are angry that we seem to think that our numbers mean we've proved the right of *The Lord of the Rings* to be taken seriously; to them, it's an 'occult system', a dangerous drug masquerading as a book. While the movie machine and the legions of fans smugly congratulate one another, the critics can represent themselves as the beleaguered voice of reason, seizing the moral as well as the intellectual high ground.

They seem to be deeply worried by the number of people who like Tolkien. Susan Jeffreys of the *Sunday Times* memorably rendered a colleague's verbal response to the news that *The Lord of the Rings* had won the Channel 4/Waterstone's readers' poll: 'Oh hell! Has it? Oh my God. Dear oh dear. Dear oh dear oh dear' (quoted in Andrew O'Hehir, 'The Book of the Century', *salon.com*, 4 June 2001). Tolkien's popularity has been greeted as if it were the ultimate proof of the degeneracy of our civilisation. And yet critics like these are not usually given to spluttering that 'the country's going to the dogs'. They don't worry too much about the effect of rap lyrics or child pornography. They know that the relationship between culture and behaviour is a slippery one; they can take such things in their stride. So why are they uniquely bothered by Tolkien? They themselves find it hard to explain. The *London Review of Books* found a valuable property in Jenny Turner, a former fan who was prepared to recant. In a piece entitled 'Reasons for Liking Tolkien' (15 November 2001), she stated with perfect truth: 'The quite funny one-liners abound, but it's much harder to find someone writing sensibly at length about what exactly is wrong with Tolkien's novel'. Unfortunately she then laid into it with all the detachment of a reformed alcoholic denouncing the Demon Drink, and left us little the wiser. I shall address her arguments in some detail, as they constitute one of the most thorough attempts so far to update Tolkien-bashing to the twenty-first century. But we

cannot understand Tolkien-haters properly unless we go beyond their arguments to the things they do not say.

Tolkien-haters are much more inclined to mock than they are to ask themselves why. A good litmus test is Tolkien's prose style. If you read a sentence that begins 'Thus came Aragorn son of Arathorn, Elessar, Isildur's heir, out of the paths of the Dead, borne upon a wind from the Sea ...' and your automatic reaction is an embarrassed snigger, does that make you a fearless detector of humbug? Or are you merely being risk-averse, disconcerted by any language not strictly contemporary, and falsely modest about claiming grand words to suit grand feelings?

The style points the way to the real problem with *The Lord of the Rings*, which is also its greatest strength: the fact that, in spite of its twentieth-century concerns and its medieval background, in sensibility it is a (capital-R) Romantic work. The main achievement of Romantic music and literature, as of *The Lord of the Rings*, is to embody that elusive quality, the Sublime: what C.S. Lewis called Joy or Sweet Desire, the longing for a half-glimpsed source of beauty beyond reach, a longing which is itself a keener pleasure than the fulfilment of any other desire. Archaism and formal dignity go hand in hand with this quality. Wordsworth's 'trailing clouds of glory', Tennyson's 'horns of Elfland faintly blowing', Housman's 'blue remembered hills', are the company in which Tolkien's work belongs. 'Soggy, yearny nostalgia', 'a confection of pink sugar', 'the long toothache of the soul' - these are the phrases in which Jenny Turner seeks to dismiss his Romanticism, apparently so embarrassed by it that she won't even name it or admit that it has a pedigree.

True, there was a good historical reason for the reaction against Romanticism that occurred in the twentieth century. The Romantic poets thought it right and proper to go out and discover the Sublime in a patch of daffodils; but as the century progressed, literary critics came to feel that it was dangerous to think you could buy it so cheaply. 'Sublime' feelings were too easily diverted into dubious causes like political nationalism; and the scale of the sufferings of two world wars made the whole Romantic project seem at best intolerably self-indulgent. You could earn your experience of sublimity, ran the argument, only if you could face the death camps with your spirit intact; and, if this was impossible, the Sublime itself would have to go. At the most, it might be seen in glimpses from the top of an Everest of horror and suffering.

Unfortunately, this tough approach to literature demanded a level of moral courage and intellectual honesty that few could sustain. It did not translate well into popular culture, and, indeed, greatly deepened the divide between 'high' and 'popular'. In the hedonistic era of post-war prosperity, 'nothing matters unless you can confront your darkest depths' tended to become 'nothing matters, period'. 'Confronting your darkest depths' translated into the nihilistic gross-outs of the horror movie and the 'satanic' rock act - a pornography of

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despair, lent a spurious aura of honesty and significance by the preoccupations of the elite - while the more up-beat manifestations of popular culture remained sugary and fake, and the Sublime was nowhere.

But the nightmare ends and life goes on. In gentler times, Romanticism creeps back, and people crave the Sublime, earned or unearned. The 'locking on of the hungry imagination' that Turner describes in response to Tolkien is both natural and inevitable, although the best part of a century of denigration has made it seem embarrassing. Many right-minded people resist it for the best of reasons. For them, the cure has not yet been long enough. They tend to detect a whiff of falsity and sentimentality about most Romantic literature and music. They sense danger in Tolkien's 'racism', and rightly fear the memory of the historical slide from Romanticism to nature-worship, hero-worship, social Darwinism and fascism; they worry that if one strand of this nexus is picked up, the whole tangle will come with it. But need it be so? At this vantage-point in time we can try to separate the good from the bad. Just as it has become possible for scientists to investigate the genetic component in human nature without turning back into eugenicists seeking to eliminate the 'unfit', so in the arts it may be possible to revive Romanticism without plunging on into fascism.

I respect those whose historical scruples say otherwise. They are austere people, like the medieval penitents who used to shed constant tears for the sin of the world; they value truth above all and would rather have no pleasure than one that might be unearned. There is no point in trying to argue them out of it, though one may privately think that they can't be having much fun. But one finds that this sort of Tolkien-disliker keeps quiet about it, only murmuring 'I could never quite get on with *The Lord of the Rings*', reluctant to hurt anyone's feelings. The loud Tolkien-haters have additional objections, which it is tricky to get to the bottom of. A recurring assumption in their arguments is that dislike of Tolkien is so obvious an attitude as not to need explaining, whereas to like Tolkien is so pathological as to need near-medical scrutiny. This is clearly evasive; and the situation isn't helped by the number of Tolkien-defenders who undermine themselves by seeming to accept their attackers' premises. Let us do a bit of the attackers' homework for them and probe the matter further.

Many critics find a pretext for disliking Tolkien in mistaken assumptions about the genre and aims of his work. One finds critics of *The Lord of the Rings* (and all too often its defenders) persistently referring to it as a 'novel', expecting its characters, its politics, its battle scenes even, to conform to the conventions of realistic fiction, and writing it down as a failure because they do not (or claiming fatuously that they do). This was understandable when the book was first published, when fantasy as a genre was barely recognised, but seems disingenuous now, when most critics admire at least some works of modern fantasy and no longer urge that the creation of an imaginary world is in itself an invalid or 'escapist' project. Their assumptions, by now inconsistently held, can be traced to Freud. It was Freud who dealt the first body-blow to the Romantic view of the artist as a gifted individual who could point his audience towards the Sublime. To him, any notion of the Sublime was (in the specialised medical spelling of his translators), mere 'phantasy'. In 1917, famously, he wrote:

'[The artist] desires to win honour, power, wealth, fame, and the love of women; but he lacks the means for

achieving these satisfactions. Consequently, like any other unsatisfied man, he turns away from reality and transfers all his interest, and his libido too, to the wishful constructions of his life of phantasy, whence the path might lead to neurosis.' (Standard Edition of the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & transl. James Strachey [24 vols., London, 1953-64], vol. 16, p. 376.)

That's us told: art is nothing more than wishful thinking. One can hardly bear to contemplate the boredom of a society in which everyone was psychologically 'healthy' in Freud's terms. Although his ideas on art in their extreme form have come to seem absurd, he had a strong influence on the critics who largely shaped twentieth-century ideas of 'good' and 'bad' literature. They reconciled their jobs as best they could with Freudian doctrine by arguing that a work of literature was better the more it engaged with the outer world, the more it resembled an action in human affairs - or, one might say, the more there was in it of work and the less of play. A novelist must struggle with the 'real', set his mind to work on his external experience of character and society, transforming it into art for the edification of others. It is in this artistic task that Tolkien fails, according to Jenny Turner. To her, his writing seems an evasion of the external troubles which dogged his life - his deracinated, orphaned childhood, his terrible experience of trench warfare, his arid marriage. Here is her peroration:

'Imagine him there, like Basil Fawlty, not thinking about the war, or about his mother, or about the miserable childhood that seems so present, but always beyond his grasp. Imagine him, looking out of the window at one of his beloved trees. He stares at the tree, and in a fleeting glimpse of Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief bursts out. He sits on, at his desk in his little study, puffing on his pipe. All around him, great dark pits open, with elves and orcs and hobbits emerging, ready to fight the great fight' (p.31).

You notice from Turner's choice of words how nearly she has slipped back into being impressed by Tolkien's art after all; her whole piece alternates in the same way between strained sneering and sneaking affection. But, overtly at least, she is denying that the claims of the inner life can be at least as important and legitimate as those of the outer. With Freud, she deplores 'the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality' (p.10), but who's to say how much respective accentuation the two deserve? What if Tolkien didn't actually suffer all that much? What if the joyful challenge of getting on with his inner 'game' was the most important thing for him - and if, in the process, he was able to address his external troubles fruitfully in the language of symbolism?

Ursula Le Guin, herself a hugely creative writer of fantasy, has written the best vindication of Tolkien that I know. 'Fantasists are childish, childlike. They play games. They dance on the burning-ground. ... Even when they are making entire universes, they are only playing' ('Do-it-yourself Cosmology', in *The Language of the Night*, The Women's Press 1989, p. 106).

Musicians practise for hours each day, dancers devote their whole lives to that one perfect leap and turn, no matter what wars and disasters may be going on outside; Tolkien's game was to put the magic back into language. (Obsessive? Lucky man, rather, to find his life's work at such an early stage and

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to be able to carry it through.) Turner derides Tolkien for his belief in the possible 'reality' of elves. She seems to forget that the intellectual life of his time was dominated by reductive materialism to the extent that it was difficult to find any intellectually credible words in which to affirm what the 'elves' represented for him: the sense of transcendence as a fact in human biology, as much as aggression or sexual appetite. 'Elves' and 'Faerie' were his metaphors for the special power of the 'peripheral vision' of language - new words, half-understood words, the gaps in the mesh of words: the power that these have to de-familiarise things, to refresh and renew them, and to hint at a sublime, because half-seen, meaning beyond. Tolkien might have probed all this in academic or scientific language, without writing an enormous fantasy. But who then would have experienced it? Even if the 'effect' is 'only' an accidental by-product of language, rather than expressing any mystical reality about the world, Tolkien was right to concentrate on the experience: its intensity must make it an important part of being human.

This aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* is pure play, but there was work to be done as well: to understand the nature of it one has to turn to Jung, rather than to Freud. It is obvious that Tolkien's War of the Ring is not an accurate reflection of political conflict in the 'real' world, but it is compelling as an account of internal conflict. As Jung realised, the Quest narrative in myth and fantasy represents an inner journey towards adulthood, and the characters in such a narrative stand for different aspects of one personality working out its destiny. Even the Dark Lord is not necessarily a personification of objective evil, but of the things that the self must struggle against in its progress towards wholeness: for instance, unquestioningly accepted parental authority. The 'inner story' of *The Lord of the Rings* might be sketched as follows. The Child (Frodo) must cast down the oppressive inner Parent (the Ring, the Dark Lord) with the indispensable help of the Shadow (Gollum), before his Adult self (Aragorn) can come into his inheritance and claim his bride. But when he has done so, childlike wonder and positive parental protection (the Elves, Gandalf), in fact the Child himself, must pass away - a dreadful, but inevitable cost. Tolkien himself would have resisted this interpretation; if one is oneself involved in the struggle it is only by seeing it as absolute that one can muster the energy to wage it. Symbols, also, are always richer and more suggestive than one simple interpretation can convey. But a good artist's work explains more, and explains itself more, than the artist consciously intends. Even if Tolkien couldn't resolve his problems in life (and how many of us can?), he knew in the language of symbols what they were. He realised, for instance, the real effect of his lifelong inability to defy his dead, sainted, un-confrontable mother and her Catholicism - one begins to see what the monstrous spider Shelob is all about. And he knew that his need to see himself as a 'good' person stood in his way - otherwise why should the 'good' Frodo ultimately fail in his quest, and the 'evil' Gollum succeed?

To see the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* as aspects of the psyche makes sense of some features of the book that

worry neo-Freudian critics. For instance the 'painlessness', the lack of physical contact in the battle scenes, made much of by Turner. Perhaps Tolkien realised that intra-psycho conflict, although very demanding of energy, is low on blood and guts; he must have read the fourth-century Christian allegorical poem *Psychomachia* (as all medievalists seem to have to) and noticed the odd effect of, say, Chastity spattering Lust's face with warm brains. The question of Tolkien and sex deserves more extended attention. Nothing attracts more contempt from neo-Freudians than the absence of sex from Middle-Earth - when it is well known that sex, like exercise and a high-fibre diet, is essential to your health. Turner approvingly quotes Edwin Muir writing in the *Observer* in 1955: 'All the characters are boys masquerading as adult heroes. The hobbits, or halflings, are ordinary boys; the fully human heroes have reached the fifth form; but hardly one of them knows anything about women, except by hearsay ...'

Erm, excuse me, Edwin, some of your readers *are* women, and find the prospect of being 'known about', in that sense, resistible. Why do we suddenly get the feeling we're in a locker-room, overhearing two schoolboys? 'That little prune Tolkien, he doesn't even know what a ... (snort, snigger) is'. It is understandable that, writing when he did, Muir should have failed to realise that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a novel, and that its characters are not 'characters' in the realistic sense. I suppose it is even understandable that at the intoxicating dawn of the sexual revolution it was tempting to laugh at the buttoned-up older generation for avoiding the subject, and to assume that if anyone chose to write about a non-sexual or pre-sexual phase of life the only reason could be that they were repressed or pusillanimous. But by now one expects attitudes to have moved on. Turner shows that she at least understands the role, or non-role, of sex in fantasy better than Muir did, when she compares the work of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis with Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials*:

'When, as in Pullman, sex is permitted, it is impossible to feel that soggy, yearny nostalgia you feel at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, with Frodo and pals passing through the curtain of rain, or at the end of Lewis's *The Last Battle*, with poor old Narnia dark and broken and Susan, with her disgusting lipstick and her nylons, shut out. Sex happens because it has to happen: there wouldn't be much of a human race without it. And the existence of sex acts like a sentry - like Milton's cherubim at the gates of Eden - preventing you from indulging that favourite fantasy that maybe what has been done can be undone' (p.21).

This is spot-on with regard to the effect of sex in literature, but is unfair to both Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Susan wasn't shut out of Narnia because she started having sex but because, as the nylons and lipstick reveal, she became sophisticated. Real sex is undignified and intimate. Nylons and lipstick stand for a carapace, a mask of sexuality, the point of which is not to gain intimacy but to gain status. In that game you have to play tough all the time, to deny that you were ever a child with the ability to marvel. Some anti-Tolkien-and-Lewis critics seem to use their self-styled sexual maturity as a

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status weapon in very much the same way, which is perhaps why they don't notice how Lewis skewered them. And as for Tolkien, I can't see why Turner should accuse him of having a 'fantasy that maybe what has been done can be undone'. It is precisely Tolkien's point that, at the end of his story, nothing can be the same again.

In Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* books, which Turner admires, the wizard hero is able to enter into a sexual relationship only after he has spent his magical powers. Le Guin's magic, Tolkien's 'elvish craft': both imply a pre-sexual state of the imagination. To omit sex from *The Lord of the Rings* was a solid artistic decision, whether conscious or not. *The Lord of the Rings* is not so much a novel of character as it is an evocation - almost musical, an opera or symphony - of a mood and a time of life. The time of life is early adolescence, and the mood is Sehnsucht, Fernweh, nostalgia, Sweet Desire. The experience of reading the book is the experience of those spring days when one is thirteen or fourteen, when the wind seems to be blowing from somewhere beyond the end of the world, when life seems almost unbearably full of possibilities of romance and adventure, and yet also of a sense of loss: the sense that one's conscious personality is taking shape and acting as a filter to the immediacy of experience - life is actually, and inevitably, growing more ordinary. Yet in this pre-sex stage one's inner world still seems limitless. When one embarks upon one's first real love affair, one is brought up hard against the boundaries of one's own self and the irreducible claims of another's; as Rowan Pelling has put it, 'to be united with someone in this way means, inevitably, fissures in the fabric of a vividly solipsistic internal universe' (*The Independent on Sunday*, 12 May 2002). There is no going back. Accordingly, the magical world of *The Lord of the Rings* is one person's inner world, with no real, clashing, messy relationships between different selves; and, when couples wed at the end of the story, this world ends too: childhood and its magic have to pass into memory.

In their rush to look like mature, healthy Freudians, Tolkien's critics deny the legitimacy of writing about this stage of life. If Tolkien over-emphasised the losses of growing up compared to its gains, they go to the opposite extreme. But shouldn't we, as adults, attempt to keep a channel open to the world of childhood and adolescence, to the beauty and intensity of its experience? To dismiss such attempts as 'soggy, yearny nostalgia' looks suspiciously like a self-flagellating denial of the critic's own past. A snide, dismissive tone constantly creeps in: 'the elegiac, valedictory aspect of the novel perhaps speaks with particular power to the swotty teenager, sorry to be leaving the figments of childhood, but itching to get to a university library.' You see how one can talk down the whole experience of being a teenager - translate some of the sweetest feelings a human being is fortunate enough to have into something embarrassing and ridiculous? Why? It is the Tolkien-haters who need to justify their decision to do this.

Not content with finding Tolkien (and Tolkien-lovers) to be sexually repressed, Jenny Turner attempts to show that they are chronically depressed as well.

'Though ostensibly a book of action, it [*The Lord of the Rings*] is largely concerned with passive states' (p.25) ... 'Frodo's sufferings are wonderfully evocative of the self-pity and self-mythologisation that tend to come with depression ... *The Lord of the Rings* reads like a panoramic portrait of the depressive state. Depressed people

report feelings of powerlessness to be an index of their condition; and just look at how power is distributed on Middle Earth. Aragorn has it, Gandalf has it, Galadriel has it, because of what they are (a king, a wizard, an elf-queen) rather than what they do ... In a politics like this, hobbits are in a subordinate position, always slightly left out ... In the end, hobbits are small and weak and furry-footed, and Tolkien has given tallness and strength and glinting grey eyes far too much weight in his world for this not to count. The politics of *The Lord of the Rings*, in short, comprises a familiar mixture of infatuation with power with [*sic*] an awareness of one's own helplessness beside it. One's best hope, really, is to suck up to the big people, in the hope they will see you all right. It's the perennial fantasy of the powerless. Things would indeed be hopeless were it not for your secret friend the Big Bad Elf-Queen, who will come along when you finally call for her and wreak revenge for you on all the nasty kids at school' (pp. 26-7).

I have quoted at some length from this section because at first I could hardly believe what I was reading; after reading it six times I convinced myself that she really was saying that, and could even just about understand how she could see it that way, but it wasn't an easy position to keep up. It's an uphill struggle to see 'infatuation with power' in a book in which power and control are treated as evils to be rejected at all costs. The way power is distributed in Middle Earth is that the Dark Lord has most of it. Far from being in a subordinate position and slightly left out, the little hobbit is right in the centre of the struggle. The big guys, Gandalf, Aragorn, Galadriel, need him more than he needs them. Gandalf may be a wizard, but he can give orders to no one. Aragorn is a king without a kingdom, who will never get his kingdom without Frodo's help. Galadriel is queen of a passive, fading realm. Only the hobbit can do what is necessary. Our psychic helpers, the Wise Old Man, the Hero and the Muse, naturally appear strong and beautiful when they are working for us, but they can take us only so far. Our small, vulnerable, inadequate self must take the vital step alone, with only the ruthless instinctual Shadow to help. This seems to me a thoroughly constructive message for a depressive reader. Maybe I'm like Frodo, Tolkien is saying, fifty years old and still an adolescent; maybe that terrifying Parent is still there, unfought; but I won't admit defeat yet: I may still find the right combination of courage and good luck and give up what has to be given up in order to make myself whole.

Turner sees the mythology of *The Lord of the Rings* as a product of the grandiosity that is the reverse side of depression: the self-dramatisation that comforts the depressed person without actually doing anything to help him throw off his condition. I, on the contrary, see this kind of myth-making as an essential tool in the integration of the self. It is not grandiose, it is grand: it has to be. Soul-building is a grand enterprise.

The Lord of the Rings can easily be defended against the charge of being (in Freudian terms) 'unhealthy'. That being so, why do Tolkien-haters persist in labelling his writing, as Jenny Turner inelegantly puts it, 'tit' (p.4) - not just basic flagrant tit-for-losers like Mills and Boon or James Bond, but tit-for-losers that pretends to be something more? It seems to me that this whole bundle of accusations comes under the heading of pretexts for disliking Tolkien; it does not reach the heart of the matter. It doesn't account for the fear. And this is where



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Lorenzo Daniele

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we came in. Why does Jenny Turner find Tolkien's appeal to her 'scary' and 'alarming'? Why does the 'infantile comfort' it offers seem to be something as extreme as a 'black pit' (p.4), when all we're talking about here is a naive, well-intentioned story about some furry little people and a magic ring?

One thing that Turner finds sinister about *The Lord of the Rings* is that 'it is a work written to keep the modern world at bay that the modern world adores'. Yes: unlike 'novels', it doesn't just add its little pinch of wisdom to the world we live in, it does a huge amount of compensating for things the modern world can't give us. The 'Tolkien Nearly Ate My Brain' school of thought seems to find this threatening - as though Tolkienites, if they got into Parliament, would construct a real-life Shire where cars would be forbidden and forelock-tugging compulsory. Oh come on. It's not going to happen, because at heart, in their saner moments, not even the most rabid Tolkienites want it to. They know that evil didn't come into the world with the internal combustion engine; that, if there was a real Shire, it would have dog-hanging and ergotism as well as beer and embroidered waistcoats; they know, if nothing else, that in a non-technological world they could never read the book, let alone see the movie, not least because in a non-technological world a Romantic awareness of nature is impossible. This does not make their love of the book hypocritical, any more than it is hypocritical in an agnostic to feel awed when he walks into Chartres Cathedral. It is no longer good for people to live in the bosom of Nature or within mythical systems, or even to pretend to. But it is good for them to remember how it may have felt, and that is one service that Tolkien provides. It is a psychological necessity to pay some sort of due to the things one has done away with, to assimilate what one has killed, to recall what has been lost. But for some modernists, it seems, the fact that we all inevitably progress from medieval to modern to post-modern, from birth through maturity to death, is not enough - we must look neither backwards, downwards nor sideways as we go. Perhaps if one had staked one's all on modernity, one would feel like that.

Tolkienophobia involves a fear of going backwards, and perhaps an equal fear of standing still, as is suggested by the Tolkien-haters' constant refrain of 'Child, you'll never amount to anything if you spend all your time daydreaming.' Tolkien-haters tend to be people in whom the Parental persona is over-represented - busy, bossy, responsible, very anxious for everyone to agree with them. It's an odd contradiction, on the face of it, that people who are mostly of a liberal persuasion - anti-authority, knowing and ironic - should be so concerned to be agreed with. But there is a difference in personality type that goes deeper than class or political allegiance, a difference between those who want to shape events and those who simply want to go their own way. The movers and shakers see all these people in anoraks lolling around in Middle-Earth, dreaming - what are they dreaming? That authority, the ability to control people, isn't everything - that to long for 'honour, power, wealth, fame, and the love of women' is really rather sad - that all these things are merely the ash from the volcano?

Perhaps that's what's scary.

Tolkien-lovers, admittedly, tend to be dominated by the Child persona - nice, dutiful, eager to please, excessively ready to see the other chap's point of view. They find Tolkien reassuring because they know that he, like they, had some growing-up to do. Even at their most truculent they defend him the way a child will react if his mother comes along and accuses him of time-wasting. 'I'm not, Mum, honest - I'm working! Look at all these books I've read and these lists I've made! I've really done my addiction-and-depression homework, look, Mum ...'. It's very difficult for the child not to accept the parent's premises - for him to say instead, 'Yes, I am time-wasting - so what? All the best things in the world have been done by people who waste time. And anyway, what business is it of yours? What's your problem?'

We Tolkien-lovers have to work at becoming adult; that might persuade the Parent types to climb down a bit. But that's still not the whole story. Tolkien-haters aren't mainly afraid that reading too much Tolkien will plunge us into a pro-Christian crusade or an illiberal dystopia; they know that fantasy readers are much too inward-looking and equivocal. They aren't afraid that it will rot the minds of the populace, because they believe the minds of the populace are about as rotten as they can get, anyway, and they're quite at home with that. No, it is Tolkien's happiness, not his depressiveness, that really scares them. It's an existential fear: a fear that one will be proved annihilatingly wrong, and made ridiculous; that the values that have shaped one's entire life will be undermined. Their culture has immersed them in the belief that, however well one's outer life may go, in one's inner life one must Face the Worst. The only true virtue is scepticism. One must never let down one's guard; if anything in the world of ideas seems glorious, there must be a catch somewhere. Joy, wonder, reverence, the Sublime - all these words are merely cues for hollow laughter: they can't really mean anything.

But what if there is no catch? What if there's a whole bright, elvish world out there, where pleasure and wonder come with no price attached? And this is the point of *The Lord of the Rings*: an invitation to experience joy, the 'Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief' that Jenny Turner works so hard throughout her article to dismiss. Yes, joy is 'infantile', and, no, you can't feel it and look clever at the same time. Joy is not *The Lord of the Rings* the answer to evil, nor does it make up for suffering - if defenders of Tolkien claim this, they play right into his detractors' hands. But it stands alongside them, undiminished by them, as a fact in this world.

Tolkien-haters refuse joy for fear of being deceived. Their predicament was precisely rendered by that smarter-than-they-think writer C.S. Lewis: they are the Dwarfs who Refused to be Taken In. Sitting in a huddle in their imaginary dark prison while the sun shines and the green grass grows all around.

Now that really is scary.