Images of Evil in Tolkien's World

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In the essay , *On Fairy-Stories*[1] and possibly elsewhere, Tolkien expressed reservations about the capacity of drama, as against narrative, for dealing with material of "fairy-tale," or fantasy nature. The impression of Tolkien's distaste for drama, or scepticism regarding its possibilities, has perhaps been fostered by his occasional barbs at Shakespeare's expense; it has also, more importantly, obscured the extent to which, *The Lord of the Rings* over and above Tolkien's other works, represents an art form whose nature is essentially dramatic. The oft-repeated complaint of the "literary establishment", that Tolkien's fiction is rooted in a simplistically conceived conflict of good and evil, arises because fiction is approached solely in terms of the novel, where such a clarity of moral vision tends to eliminate subtleties of observation and character development. There is no such problem attaching to drama, whether spoken, sung, or danced; characterisation can develop of its own volition within a clearly defined moral dividing line, which will resolve itself in a dénouement that satisfies an audience's expectations.

It is generally accepted that The Lord of the Rings is not "novelistic", in any real sense, but even though Tolkien himself said it, calling it, "a heroic romance, a much earlier form of literature", evades the issue. His reservations about drama really boil down to understandable intolerance of the technical limitations of stage representation in relation to "fantasy", or, "sub-created", material. Stage techniques, in and since Tolkien's lifetime have become vastly more sophisticated, but in any event "drama", in the sense that it is exemplified in, The Lord of the Rings, is independent of stage representation, other than, "the invisible stage," that is the mind of the individual reader. In this guise not only is it infinitely flexible; it can also present the clash of "good", and "evil", powers in many and diverse forms, all contributing to the make-up of a coherent structure. Relatively little seems to have been written about the various levels of presentation of these forces in Tolkien's world. In trying to look at the varied "images" of evil that it contains, I may perhaps accidentally clarify one or two aspects of, "righteousness", as well. If it would be a considerably harder task to approach the subject via "images of good", or of righteousness, this is perhaps due to one's feeling that the Gollums, Sarumans, or Denethors are more vivid and memorable, as characters, on the whole, than the Aragorns, Theodens, or Eomers. The devil, as the saying goes, has all the best tunes.

"Nothing is evil in the beginning", says Gandalf, (perhaps Ungoliant comes as near to it as one can imagine, but the lady's origins are shrouded in mystery). In terms of the stories themselves, however, certain beings, notably Sauron, are evil, *ab initio*, that is, when we first meet them, or hear about them, they have no redeeming qualities whatever. There is a basic, underlying distinction to be made between Tolkien's view of such beings, such as trolls, wargs, or the Balrog in Moria, and the way he presents them, and his entirely distinct presentation of the "human", characters in the story. The term "human", of course covers Elves, Dwarves and Hobbits as well as Men, all representing aspects of humanity. So, in their way, do orcs, but their ambiguous status is a real difficulty, to which I will come[2]. The "human", characters all relate, in their various ways, to the notion of power and its operation in the world. Power expresses itself outwardly in the desire to dominate; in its less harmful aspect, in the certainty, or imagined certainty, of knowing better than everyone else, and being able to order other people about. In its true unadulterated form, as Orwell puts it in *1984*, it expresses itself as power pure and simple, in making others suffer. Sauron, and Orwell's "Big Brother", need no ideological rationale for their activities, but they stand on the shoulders of those who have, or who have convinced themselves that they have. As will appear, all the characters on the "wrong", side of the moral fence, even the oppressed such as Wormtongue, relate to the idea of power, however variously they may conceive it..

The Hobbit, just as much as *The Lord of the Rings*, has been seen as embodying polarised concepts of good and evil, and, in consequence, potentially harmful to the minds of growing youth. This may have arisen largely as a result of the authorial interventions on Tolkien's part, whereby Bilbo's actions and thoughts are explained to the reader; later on Tolkien came to think of these as misconceived. From this point of view, "The Hobbit", indeed, might be said to partake of the character of a novel, unlike its successor, where the course of character development, especially Frodo's, has to be inferred by the reader from the totality of speech and actions, "on the stage". This might help, incidentally, in understanding the seemingly strange views expressed by some people, that *The Hobbit* is Tolkien's real masterpiece and that its successor is flawed and somewhat of an aberration compared with it. In relation to the later work, however the concepts of "good", and "evil" look as not fully developed, and even somewhat blurred.

The first, "image of evil", we encounter is that of the trolls. Somewhat disconcertingly, as far as the adult reader is concerned, they are presented as though they are figures of fun, comic burglars with a Cockney twang; one almost expects

1. *Tree and Leaf* George Allen and Unwin (paperback edition pp11-70) originally in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*. (Oxford University Press 1947).

2. I am not concerned here with theological, or quasi-theological arguments about whether orcs do or do not have "souls", but just with the success, or non-success, of their presentation and characterisation as players on the stage of Tolkien's imagination and ours.

3. Might they, perhaps, owe their origin to an unconscious recollection; a short story by P.G. Wodehouse, "The Ordeal of Osbert Mulliner"? In this story a nervous young man comes home in the evening to find his dining-room taken over by a pair of comic burglars; as he watches from behind a curtain they quarrel, and beat each other to a pulp.

them to carry a large sack marked SWAG.[3] All the same Tolkien thought of them as fundamentally evil beings, as a passage in the letters makes clear.[4] They are, in their way, collectors and hoarders of treasure, and this is to become a recurring motive throughout the book, and a two-edged one; treasure is the purpose and object of the quest, but will also turn out to be, morally, a snare for all who acquire or desire it. In *The Lord of the Rings*, it is implied that trolls are, possibly, distorted counterparts of Ents, the the same way that orcs may be distorted counterparts of Elves. But Tolkien does not introduce any as characters; they only appear in Moria, and at the battle at the Morannon as "walk-ons." They have no speech, and this is true, mostly, of all the "static" non-human images of evil in the later work.

The goblins, whom we next meet, have their songs, and the Great Goblin, and his immediate entourage, have speech. They are defined as being fundamentally wicked, but, as with the trolls, it is a little difficult to take them seriously; I for one find the Great Goblin, "O truly tremendous one", faintly ridiculous. The goblin songs have a grimly humorous quality about them, but that very quality seems to exclude the idea of treating the role of goblins as symbolic of absolute evil. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the split between the symbolism, of fundamental evil, and their functions, as characters with roles to play, becomes more significant. There is less difficulty about accepting their allies, the Wargs, as "images of evil", as they are not characterized, and have no speech. The evil nature of goblins and wargs becomes more clearly defined in their absence, when we hear about Beorn's nocturnal activities, and towards the end of the book, when the whole tone of the narrative has altered, and become more serious and wide-ranging, the goblins at the Battle of Five Armies are genuine orcs, and have no speaking (or singing) parts.

The spiders of Mirkwood, of course do, unlike their senior colleague, Shelob. Ungoliant of course, speaks, but she is mythological in a true sense, and the older mythology places us in quite a different perspective as far as speech and characterisation are concerned - I will take this point up near the end. The Mirkwood crew of course are a genuine threat, and important in the story in that Bilbo faces them and deals with them, as he didn't manage to do with the trolls. But they still don't come across as needing to be taken too seriously; they would be much more frightening if they *didn't* speak. Bilbo himself doesn't take them too seriously, as his "Attercop" song confirms.

Finally, we reach Smaug, the principal villain of the piece. By definition he is fundamentally wicked, the books ultimate "image of evil". He of course, has plenty of speech, and a fund of what he recommends as "advice for your good." The trouble with Smaug is that you can't help rather liking the old (expletive deleted); his sardonic humour is so effective that you almost begin to see things from his point of view (one effect of conversation with dragons, of course). He reminds me of a description I once read of a certain personality in the world of the arts, now long dead, as, "an arch sh..., but charming company at dinner."

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Whereas no one could conceive of Glaurung as charming company anywhere. Glaurung of course is rooted in the earlier mythology, but one cannot imagine that there could ever have been a suitable place for the appearance of a dragon in *The Lord of the Rings*, mute or however characterised in speech.

The "human element", if one can call it that, in *The Hobbit* is concerned with those personages who are not, by nature, fundamentally wicked, but who succumb to temptation, or stand, as all men do from time to time, in danger of doing so, (and as Bilbo stands himself when confronted with the dwarves' treasure). On a small scale there is the Master of Laketown, who succumbs to "the dragon-sickness", steals treasure intended for the relief of the inhabitants, and dies alone in the wilderness; he is of course seen as duplicitous and untrustworthy from the moment he appears, and perhaps can be thought of as a Saruman or a Wormtongue in embryo. Thorin, whose susceptibility to the lure of treasure is symbolised by his pursuit of the Arkenstone (a small-scale reflection of Fëanor's enslavement by the Silmarils), is just as much a central character, a pivot on which the book's plot and argument turn, as is Bilbo himself. He is morally, "blinded", by this weakness, rooted as it is in dwarvish nature, (Smaug's hints are uncomfortably near the mark), and, having tried to retain the entire treasure in defiance of the just claims of the Men of Laketown, is, "dumb with amazement", when the Arkenstone is revealed to him. Yet in the end he shakes himself free of, "the dragon-sickness," redeems himself by his courage in battle, and dies nobly, declaring at the last that fellowship and good cheer are worth more than "hoarded gold", pronouncing, in effect, the book's motto-theme. A fallible mortal, prone like everyone to fall into temptation; the parallel with Boromir's fall and subsequent heroic end in *The Lord of the Rings*, is clear enough. The other dwarves are likewise seen as exemplars of, "the common man,"[5] (to borrow Len Sanford's - and Aaron Copland's - title); witness their behaviour when they leave Bilbo to face the descent into the Mountain on his own. Dwarves are, "ordinary blokes", like most of us, is the implication; decent enough people as long as you don't expect too much of them.

If the truly evil beings in *The Hobbit* are not thought out in depth, the power of evil, represented by the treasure and its effect on all who come into contact with it, is real enough. The moral complexity of the tale is neatly enshrined in the paradox which the Quest represents - the dwarves seek for the restoration of their birthright in the treasure, and yet the very thing sought endangers the moral fabric of the world. It represents power of a sort, but power still limited in its scope. Even Smaug is not a universal or worldwide threat - he has no designs on the rest of Middle-earth (or seems to have none), and is only roused to activity when his own particular territory, or what he regards aas such, is invaded. He's a lazy (expletive deleted), actually - a vice that perhaps - another paradox - represents his one saving grace?

The emergence of the concept of "the One Ring to rule them all," in the midst of the early and developing drafts for, "the new" *Hobbit*, "led inevitably to the vast expansion of the scope of the original tale. The notion of power expressed as simple possessiveness, the insistence on control of particular objects or

4. JRR Tolkien *Letters* no 153 p. 191.
5. L. Sanford *Fanfore for the Common Man* in *Mallorn* no 36 (The Tolkien Society 1998)

assets, or of a particular site or piece of territory, is gradually replaced by the notion of power unlimited and world-wide, power enjoyed for its own sake. The earlier concept of power does, however, survive for much of *The Lord of the Rings*, especially in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The transition is seen in essence in the life-history of Gollum.

The reader may indeed have been wondering why Gollum has not put in an appearance before now. To begin with, we are faced with the first Gollum, the Gollum of *The Hobbit*, as it was originally written and published, and in this form he hardly seems to qualify as "an image of evil" at all. Like the familiar later one he is outwardly repulsive, a miserable creature, "lonely, sneaky and nasty" , catching as food fish, goblin and anything else on which he can lay his hands; the limitations of the available menu perhaps afford him a sort of excuse. He has had a predecessor of a kind, in a poem of Tolkien's, *Glip*, dating from his time in Leeds; a strange slimy creature who lives beneath the floor of a cave and has pale luminous eyes. His distinctiveness seems to lie in his oddity, rather than in criminality; in this first version he is prepared to hand over the ring following his loss of the riddle game, and he avoids cheating by showing Bilbo the way out of the goblin tunnels when he finds that the ring has been lost. The ring itself of course has no special significance at this stage other than its power to confer invisibility. It may be that Tolkien had not yet made up his mind about Gollum: "I don't know where he came from, or who or what he was," he says. Rather strangely, this remark survives in the revision, although by then he surely *did* know; does this perhaps represent a *lacuna* on his part?

The Ring's later enslavement of Gollum expresses itself outwardly in his attachment to his "precious", the lure of treasure, the insistence on possession of it, and the obsession with regaining if when it has been lost. During the course of *The Lord of the Rings,* however, the motive by stages is subtly transformed; it develops into lust for power and pursuit of it for its own sake. In his debased way, Gollum comes to display it as much as do other, outwardly greater personalities affected, and descends the same moral downward path as they do. He can therefore, serve as a bridge to lead us into the fully developed world of, *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, he is not wholly evil *ab initio*, and possibly not at any time afterwards. Nevertheless his predisposition to evil is very strong; as soon as he is introduced, in Gandalf's narrative, "flashback", he commits fratricide. Is this the immediate effect on him of sight of the Ring? Or is it, rather, Tolkien's way of embodying in the story the concept of original sin? The reference to Cain and Abel, or any other mythological slaying of brother by brother is quite unconscious, no doubt, but seems plain enough. I am inclined to think, myself, that the crime is explicable in the traditional way, rather than in terms of the Ring's immediate effectiveness, as Gollum's subsequent moral

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deterioration, though real enough, is a very long-drawn-out affair. His conscience has not been silenced; according to Gandalf, the murder of Deagol haunted him, and he made up a defence to quieten the stirrings. His early use of the Ring, which gives him, "power according to his stature," may perhaps, before he is turned out of the grand-maternal hole, be thought of as mischievous in a nasty way, but not truly evil. Until he loses it to Bilbo, he appears to use it only to prey on the orcs and other wildlife underneath the Misty Mountains. As Gandalf says, a little bit of him succeeds in resisting the Ring's complete dominance; "as a hobbit might." He and morally his state seem to follow the earlier pattern of simple possessiveness; the urge to retain his treasure and subsequently to regain it at whatever cost.

All the same there are periodic indications, from his own words, that the lust to possess is gradually turning into something more sinister; power itself is beckoning him on. The process can be illustrated quite clearly:-

"The roots of those mountains must be roots indeed; there must be great secrets buried there which ave not been discovered since the beginning".[7] Why should Gollum want to discover such secrets, if not to make use of them in some way or other? It is difficult to believe that his interest in, "roots and beginnings", already aroused, was simply academic and directed towards scholarly investigation and research.

"Gollum had good friends now, good friends and very strong."[8] He had had, actually, some very painful experiences, at the hands of these "good friends", but the spectacle of real power in operation clearly fascinated him. (While hiding, together with Frodo and Samwise, near the Black Gate; Smeagol in dialogue with the "other", Gollum.)

"Then we shall be master, gollum! Make the nasty suspicious hobbit, make him crawl, yes, gollum!"[9]

(And again)

"Perhaps we grows very strong, stronger than Wraiths? Lord Smeagol? Gollum the Great? Eat fish every day.... etc, etc"[†]

(And finally)

"We'll save the Precious, as we promised. Oh yes. And when we've got it safe, she'll know it. Oh yes, then we'll pay her back, my precious. Then we'll pay everyone back!"[‡].

Of course it is impossible to conceive of Gollum actually making good boasting such as this. He had visited Shelob in her lair and bowed before her, but had vowed to himself that one day he would turn the tables. You might perhaps view this as one of Tolkien's unconscious symmetries; if you can imagine the scene for a moment, does it not suggest a ghastly parody of Bilbo's interview with Smaug; instead of the dwarves treasure, the "filth unnameable piled up within."? The actual sequence of Gollum's moral deterioration to which the above-quoted passages bear witness is so sensitively balanced that the B.B.C. radio serial, in the process (unavoidable as it was) of cutting the whole episode of the hobbits' journey from the Cross-roads to Cirith Ungol, managed to eliminate the motivation

6. H. Carpenter *Tolkien. A Biography*. George Allen & Unwin.
7. Tolkien: "The Followship of the Ring" (2nd ed. hardback 1966 p63
8. *Ibid.* p 66.
9. J.R.R. Tolkien "The Two Towers". (2nd edition hard back 1966) p 140
† *Ibid.* p 141
‡ *Ibid.* p 333

at this point - Gollum's plan to double-cross Shelob as well as the hobbits. The whole of Gollum's part, a dramatic part as much or more than any other one in the tale, needs to be considered both as a whole and in its details; in the latter, both separately and in sequence, the subtleties if motivation become plain.

Another notable feature of the characterisation is the way Gollum appears, not quite explicitly, but nearly so, as a kind of reversed mirror-image of Frodo himself. Frodo retains his "innocence," his symbolic attribute, only to lose it at the very end of the Journey. He displays the same resistance, "as a hobbit might," to the evil and the temptation inherent in the Ring, as Gollum has done in the past, and ironically might have done again and continued to do. The "mirror-image," is evocatively suggested by Frodo's disquieting visions of Bilbo (at Rivendell) and Samwise (in Cirith Ungol) as distorted images of himself, and reappears at the climax when the contrasted outcomes, of good turning to evil, in Frodo's laying claim to the Ring, and evil bringing forth good, in Gollum's final acts, balance each other.

Now that we are well and truly launched into the midst of *The Lord of the Rings*, we can first of all fairly briefly consider the title-role.[10] Sauron is, for the purposes of the story, wholly evil, *ab initio*, and indeed was so in *The Silmarillion*. He represents and personifies power in its most extreme form; the drive to world domination as an end in itself. But although he has, or can be said to have, the title role, he is not a *dramatis persona*. He never appears other than as a disembodied cloud following the collapse of Barad-dûr, and he has no direct speech, only a few reported words, *oratio obliqua*, in Pippin's palantir episode. The comparision with Milton's Satan, made by Edwin Muir in his original review of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, ("he has no room for a Satan both evil and tragic") thus misses the point entirely; the parallel (as previously remarked) is with Orwell's Big Brother. He exercises power via his servants and agents, and only makes his intentions and decrees known by means of the palantiri (Orthanc and probably also Minas Tirith), or finally, by the "Mouth of Sauron". As the name indicates, the latter is a mouthpiece only, and has submerged what individuality he had totally in his master's; a wholly fallen being, but not a "character", in the normal sense of the word.

The Black Riders, later the Nazgûl, like their master, are evil beings from the word go for the purposes of the story; they were corrupted and enslaved long before it began. They were once Mortal Men, proud and great; Tolkien as everywhere links the lust for absolute power, represented by the Nine Rings they have received at Sauron's hand, with the first and primal sin of pride, stemming from Melkor, the great original, "Evil One." Like the Mouth of Sauron, they are not, "characters," in the usual sense; they have no recognisable personalities and virtually no speech. The words of the Rider who encounters Farmer Maggot are reported speech, not direct; otherwise we have only their few words called out to Frodo in the face of his defiance of them at the Ford of Bruinen. Personally, I rather wish Tolkien had left those out; there is always a tendency for spoken words to lend a semblance of humanity to the speaker. On the other hand the absence of speech often increases the sense of terror inspired by the evil beings in the story, by adding the dimension of the unknown. I find Frodo's comment, while the hobbits are still in the Shire "There were words in that cry, though I could not catch them," most alarming; and likewise Butterbur's comment on the questioning of Harry at the West-gate, "he was white and shaking when they left him." The only other portions of speech allotted to a Nazgûl are those spoken to Gondalf and subsequently to Eowyn at Minas Tirith and at the battle of the Pelennor; these perhaps do little to characterise the Black Captain, and pertain rather to his role as commanding general of the besieging force, than to him as Nazgûl-lord.

The shift in Gollum's personality by stages from simple over-possessiveness to something like power mania corresponds to a decisive change in the tone and atmosphere between T*he Fellowship of the Ring* and its two successors. Tolkien indeed remarked on the change himself. That in "The Fellowship" we still stay to some extent within the world of *The Hobbit* is among other things indicated by the recurring "images of evil" encountered in its course, which continue to display the "static" nature of those in the earlier book; concerned with the defence or preservation of individual portions of territory, but not with the extension of the limits of such or of their influence beyond them; again they are mostly not individualised by speech. Old Man Willow, who to some extent seems able to commmunicate thought, appears as the centre of an evil, or at least hostile, aura radiating out through the Old Forest. The same aura of hostility seems to pervade Fangorn, or at least parts of it, and is reflected in Treebeard's comment about Saruman, "his heart is as rotten as a black Huorn's". Tolkien seems to be hinting, or rather more than hinting, that even his beloved trees are capable of giving way to corruption; that nature is at once benevolent and potentially hostile and dangerous is the outcome of Melkor's original assault on and perversion of the natural world. But Old Man Willow is tameable, and tamed by Tom Bombadil as Orpheus tamed the wild beasts, and the image is one that belongs to the world of *The Hobbit* rather than to the world of *The Lord of the Rings*.

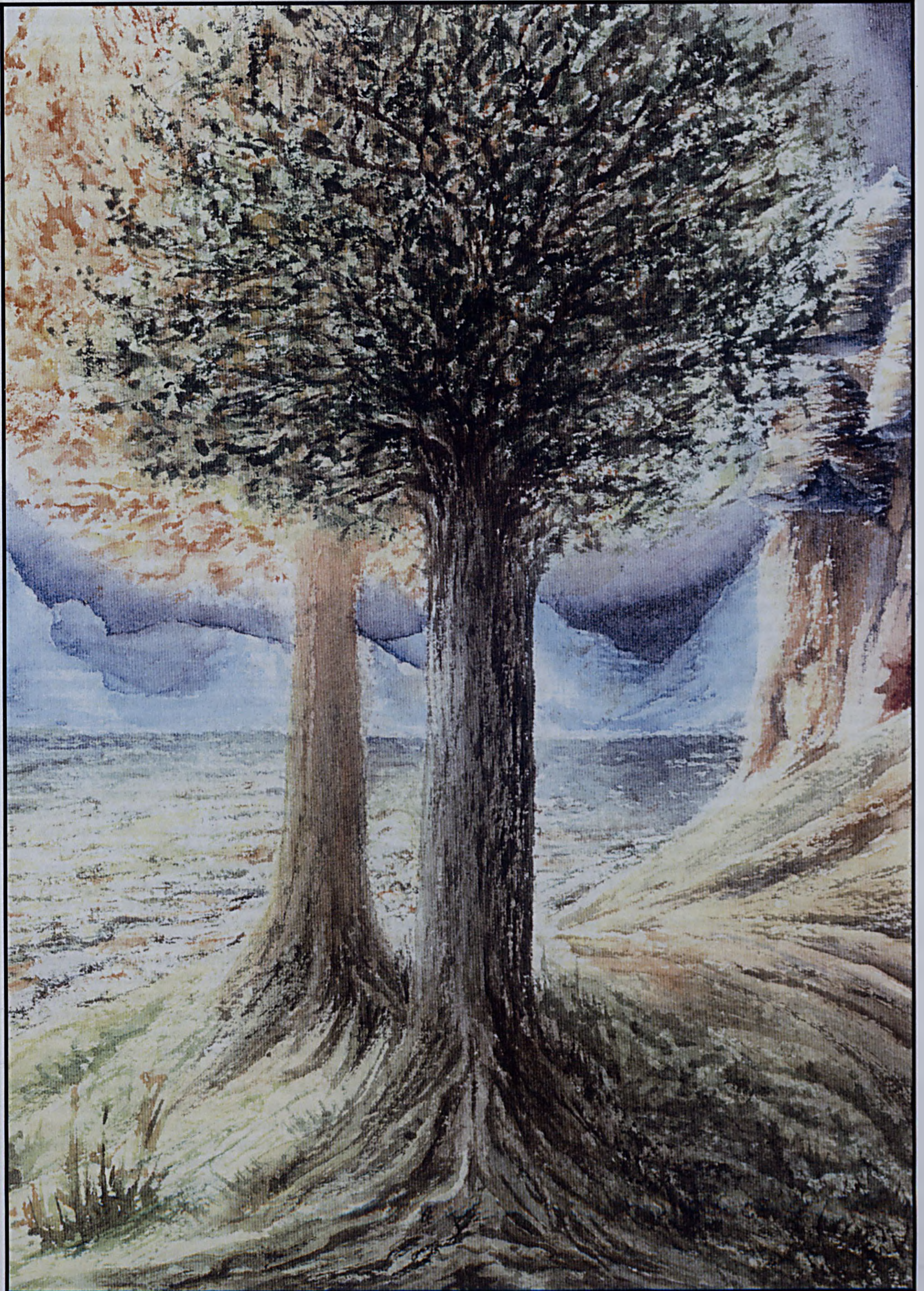
The Barrow Wight is an "image of evil" on quite a different level, but again appears purely as a local phenomenon, and, likewise at Bombadil's command, vanishes into the darkness "until the world is mended". Presumably it is to be identified as one of the evil spirits that came out of Angmar and Rhudaur at the time of the Plague. It does have speech after a fashion, but its utterance is incantatory, not conversational. The context links the Barrow Wight with Sauron ("until the dark lord lifts his hand") and the threat of Middle-earth ruined and devastated ("over dead sea and withered land"). The "guardian of treasure" motif makes itself evident in the description of the various *objets d'art* discovered in the barrow.

The most interesting feature of the whole episode is the description of the incantatory voice heard by Frodo in the barrow, before actual words become distinguishable. "The night railing against the morning of which it was bereaved - the cold cursing the warmth for which it hungered."[11] There seems to be a kind of implication that the condition of a,

10. This is perhaps rather debatable, in reference to Sauron, who is referred to as "The Lord of the Ring," (singular). But the Ring itself was made "to rule them all," and by implication Sauron is consequently also "The Lord of the Rings" (plural).

11. J.R.R. Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2nd ed 1966 p 152).

12. The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien ed H Carpenter (George Allen & Unwin) 198 no 181 pp 234-5.



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"lost soul,", as the Barrow-wight appears to be, is something to be pitied, not judged. Final judgment rests only with the One, with Iluvatar, "when the world is mended." There is the notable passage in the published letters, in which Tolkien comments that to essay to pass final judgment on Gollum, or to predict his fate in the hereafter, would be to invade, "Goddes privitee."[12] "As for me," says Gandalf, "I pity even his slaves." Somewhat of the same feeling is conveyed by the earlier description of the Rider's distant cry, back in the Shire, as the wail," of an evil and lonely creature." The Riders' state, trapped in a lifeless but still earthly existence, must be one of total misery, and therefore deserving of pity. The motive is to become increasingly important in the later stages of *The Lord of the Rings*; "Yet now I have seen him, I do pity him."

Bill Ferny and the southerners at Bree are the next of the "servants of the Enemy," to be encountered, but they are not characters of any significance; pawns in the power game, if it can be put that way. Other than in the subsequent appearances of the Riders, the next important group of "evil forces" are encountered on the journey as far as Moria, and within Moria itself; their scope once again is local and territorial, not universal and world-wide. It has been plausibly suggested[13] that the hostility of Caradhras, and the appearance of the wolf-pack (evidently spectral) that attacks the Company subsequently, are engendered, not by the long arm of Sauron, as Gandalf suspects, but by the Balrog in Moria, seeking to repel an infringement of its territory. If this is accepted, weight is added to the conclusion that manifestations, or "images", of evil at this stage, are local in nature, not linked to a threatened takeover of world power. Personally, I tend to take the view that the overflight of the *crebain* and the hostility of Caradhras do not have the sinister significance that Gandalf and Aragorn attribute to them. They are, simply, natural phenomena whose effect is to increase, for the Company, the apprehension felt by each one of its members, and for the reader, to heighten the tension that has begun to build up as soon as Rivendell is left behind. Caradhras is just a mountain peak, no more than that; simple common-sense would indicate that if you try to cross a high mountain-pass in mid-winter of course you stand a more than even chance of being snowed in. All of these manifestations, up to and including the passage of Moria - the Watcher in the water perhaps identifiable as the Balrog in an alternative form - are unaccompanied by speech; they are static images with no implication as regards character. The orcs and trolls who make their appearance at the climax of the passage through Moria and at the bridge of Khazad-dûm do not have speaking parts,[14] unlike the orcs who are their successors in, "The Two Towers", and "The Return of the King." It might have been easier for Tolkien, indeed, if he could have kept the orcs without speech throughout, and avoided the difficulties of characterisation that arose, although the further development of the story of course made this impossible. The orcs remain mute all the way through *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in fact; the encounter at Parth Galen taking place, "behind the scenes".

There only remain two, or perhaps three, of the impersonal "static", "images of evil," to be encountered, but one of them is the most repulsive, and most formidable, of them all; as Smaug does in *The Hobbit*, Shelob occupies a climatic place in the story. A further image, that of the Silent Watchers, is somewhat of a puzzle in its way, because their real nature is hardly explained. The triple-headed statues, like the fortress of Cirith Ungol itself, must be Gondorian work in origin, and their description as triple seated figures with heads rather suggests that Tolkien may have had some ancient, perhaps Near Eastern prototype in mind. We have to presume that evil spirits entered into them when Saauron re-entered Mordor, and that these rather than the stone figures themselves, are responsible for the horror which their appearance inspires. Their function is limited to their task as gate wardens. The dreadful aspect of the fortress of Minas Morgul, with "the black windows looking in on nothingness" no less an "image of evil", in its own way , comes under the same heading; the structure itself originated as Minas Ithil, the counterpart of Minas Anor, only subsequently falling under occupation by the Ringwraiths, whose "nothingness", the physical appearance of Minas Morgul, as beheld by Frodo and Samwise, seems to symbolise.

Shelob, the most powerful image of the class so far considered, represents Nature in its most hostile and horrific aspect; she is independent of Sauron's control, though a useful presence and asset from his point of view. Without speech, she still appears capable of communicating her desires and intentions in some way; Gollum has, "bowed before her and worshipped her", offering the hobbits as an obscene kind of sacrifice. But, strangely perhaps, Tolkien also lays stress on the absolute misery of her existence; light, the light of the phial of Galadriel, is torment for her, and is Samwise's chief weapon in his encounter with her; she recoils, "blasted with inner lightnings, her mind in agony." The imagery recalls a rare case in literature of characterisation as wholly evil; John Claggart, the villainous master-at-arms in Herman Melville's novella, *Billy Budd*, and Benjamin Britten's opera based on it. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it and suffers." But there words and music enable the reader, and the listener, to look into the mind of the character, whereas here nothing like character or individuality can be discerned. But does Tolkien perhaps intend us to feel that even the most manifestly evil and repellent of these static "presences" is somehow pitiable?

The results of "evil will," expressing itself in the form of increasing hunger for power, have already been observed in the gradual reduction of Gollum to his final state. The other major characters in the story who "fall into evil" , are likewise affected progressively, though the descent takes several different forms. At their head stands Saruman, the leading case of moral decline and collapse in, *The Lord of the Rings*; having once been "of a noble kind we would not have dared to raise our hand against," in his pride he falls farther than anyone else. It is worth noting, by the way, that he is a fairly late entrant in the developing complex of drafts that eventually became, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, as we know it; Tolkien did not start to conceive him until 1940, by which time the basic

13. A Lewis. "Thoughts on the worth of a Warg" *Amon Hen* (The Tolkien Society) no 147 Sept 1997 pp 11-15. See also correspondence in this connection. H. Armstrong & P. Hobday Amon Hen nos 148-50 Nov 1997, January & March 1998)

14. Gandalf reports them as speaking among themselves, only the word *ghâsh* (fire) being distinguishable.

narrative as far as Moria and the Chamber of Mazarbul was starting to take shape.

The crucial passage is Gandalf's confrontation with Saruman in Orthanc, reported by him to the Council of Elrond - as it begins the extent of the latter's real moral collapse is still not fully evident; he is boastful enough to start with, but his opening gambit, "we must have power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see."[15], suggests that his power mania has developed out of a genuine concern for "good government in Middle-earth," which has become entangled with a typical , "the man in Whitehall knows best", kind of bossiness; it might be Sir Arnold or Sir Humphrey talking. But almost at once he moves way beyond this, and speaks of a Power arising which, "we may join." "We may come to direct its courses," he says, "to control it, we can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose, Knowledge, Rule, Order, all the things we have so far striven in vain to accomplish ..... hindered rather than helped by our weak and idle friends. There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means".[15] Self-deceit could hardly make itself plainer; the confusion of means with ends, the classic apologia of the fascist dictator down the ages. Tolkien's enquiry into the nature of evil here reaches its decisive stage.

At the same time one can observe that "the good", or at least good intentions, have contributed to thsi outcome. Gandalf himself has, to some extent, been at fault. Saruman's treachery has taken him by surprise; but perhaps it ought not to have done. He has also in a sense deceived himself, into inactivity. On his own showing he was culpably late in taking steps to identify the One Ring, despite his suspicions, and similarly he was remiss in his failure to realise that Saruman was deteriorating into a security threat. He suspected what might be amiss "but something always seemed to hold me back".

In the second confrontation between the pair, their relative positions are reversed - this displays another of Tolkien's characteristic, probably unconscious. symmetries. The most notable feature of this one is the effort Gandalf makes to save Saruman from himself, up to the point at which the latter's staff breaks, "perhaps you have things to unsay" "to turn to new things, perhaps, ... will you not come down?" For a brief moment it seems that he might turn one way or the other, "the anguish of a mind in doubt, loathing to stay, yet dreading to leave its refuge." He seems to shrink visibly after his staff is broken, and, "crawls away", from the encounter (like Wormtongue later on). When the prospect of redemption - or rehabilitation is again held out to him, by Frodo at Bag End, he has gone beyond being able to entertain or grasp the idea, and can only shrink back into himself; Frodo's pity hurts him more than anything else could, "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven". The mist that rises above his body after his death is a clear recollection of the cloud that rises above Barad-dûr at the passing of Sauron.

The magnitude of Saruman's decline and fall is tellingly emphasised by being "run" hand-in-hand with a small-scale model of it - the parallel life-to-death descent of Grima Wormtongue. Although he was not, "great, once, of a noble kind," he was, at one time, a Rider of Rohan, and he "did you service in his fashion." When we first encounter him, he has become, of course, after the fashion of Monty Python's parrot, "an ex-Rider." He is, just as much as his new master Saruman is, an example of power-mania, but he is also, as Gollum is not, intelligent enough to realise that in himself he is simply not qualified to hold or retain anything resembling real power. He can only hope for a share of it indirectly by trying to influence someone stronger than himself. At first this is Théoden, but he soon turns to backing Saruman in secret, seeing the latter as the stronger power who will destroy Rohan. And as with Saruman's case at Orthanc, he is offered the chance to rehabilitate himself; Théoden invites him to ride with the force preparing to set off from Edoras, and to demonstrate his loyalty in battle, continuing to do so even after his exposure by Gandalf; the offer is rejected with as gross an insult as Wormtongue can make. The interesting feature of Wormtongue's subsequent existence is that even after Saruman's fall and exile, he persists in hanging on to his coat-tails, beaten and insulted though he is, and even when urged to leave him; Saruman represents the only source of power of which he can conceive. His penultimate and final acts are murderous (the final one admittedly under extreme provocation[16]); before he is exposed as the murderer of Lotho he hesitates in momentary doubt when offered the choice of remaining behind in the Shire, as his master has momentarily done when offered a corresponding opportunity in Orthanc, and like his master he shrinks physically, emerging "out of one of the huts crawling like a dog." Has he by his final act put himself put himself beyond any capacity for redemption? - at least we can only agree with Saruman for once and conclude that Wormtongue is "not really nice."

'the confusion of means with ends, the classic apologia of the fascist dictator down the ages'

There remain two other exemplars of power and the hunger for it, symbolised and stimulated by the One Ring; father and son, Denethor and Boromir; linked by the Ruling Stewardship of Gondor, the succession to it, and the power and prestige inherent in it and associated with it. As regards Boromir, relatively little need be said here, his personality and career having recently been so thoroughly dissected in the pages of this journal. There are two matters regarding him which need emphasising of which the first is his position in the moral structure of the tale, at the half way house between the heroic, "power-resistant," side of humanity represented by Aragorn, or Faramir, or (till the very end) Frodo; and the opposite tendencies seen in the life-histories of Gollum, Saruman and Wormtongue. In another way the four hobbits are also in this position, but they are protected by their inherent attributes of innocence and unimportance; they alone are independent of the two opposed power-blocs in Middle-earth. Frodo's resistance to the Ring carries him as far as the Cracks of Doom; Samwise when compelled to take temporary possession of it has little difficulty in fighting off temptation; neither of the others display any interest in it at all. This of course does not mean that they are exempt from ordinary human

15. Tolkien "The Fellowship of the Ring" (2nd ed 1966 pp 272-3).
16. The killing of Saruman may perhaps have been triggered, not simply by Saruman's treatment of him, but by a sudden realisation that Saruman had now lost any power to which he, Wormtongue, could attach himself.

feelings; Pippin's immaturity more than once has disastrous, or potentially disastrous, consequences; Merry's foolhardiness at Bree endangers all the others; Sam's fidelity and devotion to Frodo masks a heavy-handedness which cuts off Gollum's repentance before it can express itself and take hold.

The other important matter regarding Boromir, and his fallibility in regard to the Ring, and succumbing to the lure of it is that these are bound up, just as are his "heroic" qualities, with his consciousness of the dignity of his position as heir to the Ruling Stewardship; he sees the whole Middle-earth-wide situation and the objective of the Company's journey in terms of Gondor's pre-eminence, and the power and responsibility he will eventually have as Denethor's successor; in other words he lacks the gift of humility, the contrary of pride. It is because Faramir on the other hand has this quality that he emerges as the stronger character of the two, showing himself able to resist the lure of the Ring, in his encounter with Frodo, when his brother has given way to it. Faramir again, unlike his brother, feels no resentment at the prospect of Aragorn coming to claim the kingship and in the end willingly surrenders the Stewardship, which is at once granted back to him.

Boromir's consciousness of ancestry and sense of his importance as heir to the Stewardshiip is very much an inheritance from his father, who displays it almost to the point of arrogance. Théoden, "a kindly old man," can afford to dispense with the formalities just because he is a king - "very polite," says Merry. Denethor, a man of far greater power and lineage, though not called a king, cannot and will not. Tolkien, in a highly interesting passage in the published letters, refers to Denethor as "tainted with mere politics," whose prime motive was to preserve Gondor against an opposing potentate because the latter was stronger, rather than because he was ruthless and wicked. "He had become a political leader: sc. Gondor against the rest."[17] Denethor, indeed, resembles many a politician in today's world; he is in love with the externals and trappings of power as much as the reality, and cannot contemplate the prospect of giving them up. The Ring seems to be working on him even though physically he is never anywhere near it. Unlike Saruman, until we actually meet him, "onstage," he has not displayed any special symptoms of moral decline, but he has insisted, and continues to insist, that by virtue of his position he is the only person qualified to lead, or capable of leading and organising, the defence of Gondor. The advice neither of Faramir, nor of Gandalf, nor of anyone else who might offer counsel or assistance in this crisis, is of much value in his eyes; Pippin of course he doesn't take seriously. Consequently when the crisis really arrives he is left, psychologically speaking, without any defence. He reacts to the visions of the might of Mordor shown in the palantir rather as a present day Prime Minister might react to news of a catastrophic slide in the opinion polls; (were those visions all they seemed? one might wonder? You surely couldn't show a great deal in the space available in a palantir, and Sauron might simply have marched the same orc-troop past repeatedly, decking it out with a different device or set of devices each time!). Denethor throws up the sponge, morally speaking, abdicates responsibility for the defence of the City, and in his preparations for his own death attempts to take Faramir (and by implication as much else as he can), with him. This is a different "decline and fall", from Saruman's, but one just as complete. Tolkien, by making him commit suicide (the only one in *The Lord of the Rings* other than collective suicides among the host of Mordor-following the last Battle), as a committed Christian and Catholic, passes the severest judgment on him, suicide being "a mortal sin."

The "human," characters so far considered are all independent agents, that is, independent of Barad-dûr, but Sauron's own servants and agents (and a number of Saruman's) present a quite different problem. Once they are allowed to speak they start to display individuality and character of a sort, however nasty. So far the "images of evil" discussed have fallen into two clearly definable groups; static, often nature-symbols, primarily territorial, and wholly or predominantly without speech, and not characterized, and dynamic, not originally evil or wicked but in their various characters displaying the progressive effects of power-mania on personality. The orcs, from the start of *The Two Towers* onwards, fall somewhere in between the two groups. We have to assume that they are all inherently wicked with no redeeming qualities whatever, but if they display any kind of individuality, it is very difficult, as many have found, to do this quite satisfactorily. Their origin in the mythology, rather than in the history, of Arda accounts for the difficulty; in the former one can readily accept that they are "constructs," rather than individuals, "manufactured", not created, by Melkor. One may recall the early narration of the Fall of Gondolin, where the Balrogs seems like mechanical monsters rather than spirits - as somebody suggested, World War One tanks. They might today be thought of as "genetically modified Elves" - once again Tolkien's world discloses startling resonances with our own. And of course in the earlier mythology orcs only make their appearance collectively, and have no speech and no individuality. By accepting the convention, which underlies all Tolkien's fiction, that the Evil One, the Devil, or however he is called, can appear in the world as an incarnate being, you impliedly accept the convention that the hosts of Hell can do likewise. As soon as orcs are permitted to speak, and to behave and react as each situation demands, they acquire personalities and character of a sort, however degraded, and therefore they enter claims, however ill-founded, on the sympathies of the reader. Can Tolkien's resources of characterisation meet the challenge of endowing them with some semblance of humanity, even at the lowest level?

He was, no doubt, perfectly well aware of the problem, and did what he could to deal with it by giving different groups of orcs different levels of nastiness. The orcs of Mordor, quarrelling with the Isengarders in the course of Merry's and Pippin's forced march across Rohan, are obviously the more advanced representatives of evil and they wear their colours less conspicuously, and adopt a quieter made of speech; "That is a most interesting remark. I may have to report that." Human exemplars of "absolute evil" (assuming that such exist[18], which from a theological standpoint is, I believe, very doubtful) do not, or are not thought to, announce themselves to the rest of humanity by displaying goat feet or any other of the traditional symbolic props. Some of those persons who appeared by reason of the horror and enormity of their crimes, as monsters in human form, seemed to all outward appearance wholly undistinguished

17. Tolkien "Letters" no 183, p241.

18. Tolkien in any case did not, as he said "deal in Absolute Evil." "I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero.....I do not think that...any "rational being" is wholly evil." See "letters" no 183 p 243.

and unmemorable; "the banality of evil," as a popular journalistic phrase puts it. There is virtually no literary equivalent of this kind of phenomenon; how, for instance, would any writer of fiction try to portray, say, Eichmann or Frederick West? Tolkien presumably met a number of variously unpleasant people in the course of his life, but it may be seriously doubted if he ever came across any person who could have been taken as wholly or irredeemably evil, or that he would or could have recognised one as such if he had. In practice the orcish characters sometimes display a grim kind of black humour in expressions such as, "You'll get bed and breakfast all right, more than you can stomach", or "I don't suppose he's been in lovely Lugburz, so he mayn't know what to expect." And the mutual hostility, and quarrelsomeness of different groups, Mordovians, Isengarders, and Northemers, is wholly believable. Shagrat, Gorbag and Snaga, the principal representatives once the Mordovian border is crossed, are portrayed with a great deal of energy, if precious little subtlety, a quality admittedly not much required here, and the only query that might occur is that they could easily remind one of the traditional "Obersturmbannführer" character, the "narsty Nazi," hallowed by generations of documentary dramas, "Vee haf vaze of making you talk." What perhaps saves the orcs from too obvious staginess, is their universal distrust of anyone in higher authority, which seems to increase the further down the "lowerarchy", in C.S. Lewis' phrase, one gets. Tom Shippey always claims to find the two quarrelling orcs overheard by the hobbits in the Morgai quite delightful, and each of them would, clearly, be ready to set himself up on his own, "with a few trusty lads," if he ever got the opportunity. The last group of orcs we encounter, the troop that overtakes the hobbits on the way to Udûn, is a group of, "lesser breeds," "driven unwillingly to the Dark Lord's wars." Tolkien seems to be writing out of past experience in the first world war, displaying a certain sympathy with the rank-and-file of Sauron's armies, the "poor bloody infantry," and also giving a portrait of one or two very nasty N.C.O.s in charge. But this tendency to differentiate according to rank or status does not help us to conceive of all orcs as being wholly evil and beyond redemption. We can only assume that if they are, existence in a conscious and physical state in Middle-earth is torment and utter misery for them, and that death and total oblivion is the only release for which they can hope.

I have so far kept away, intentionally, from the earlier mythology, as principally represented by *The Silmarillion*, and have concentrated on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as representing storytelling in a straightforward narrative and dramatic sense. There are powerfully dramatic episodes in *The Silmarillion,* and still more so in the post-war writings dealing with the First Age, but if *The Silmarillion*, with its associated writings can be thought of, as a whole, as "drama", it must be in quite another sense. It could be staged (I can more easily imagine it so than with *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings)*, but it would have to be a much more ritualised, hieratic kind of presentation, such as one would associate, say, with Aeschylus or Sophocles. Good and evil are dramatically opposed; Morgoth and Sauron, who speak on occasion, are powerful but one-dimensional figures. Fëanor is a very distant forerunner of Boromir in so far as he stands, morally speaking at the cross roads; in that position he provides the hinge on which the whole "morality" turns. But for him no possibility exists of his redeeming himself; the question is irrelevant. All he can do is to play out a role marked out for him in advance by fate; he is the victim of ANANGKE like the heroes in classical Greek drama. We can be moved by the story of Beren and Luthien, but when it is played out there remains a feeling that in no way could it have developed or ended otherwise; no actions on anyone's part, elvish or human, could have changed or made any difference to the outcome. Túrin Turambar, is the one whom many readers claim to find the most tiresome, or at least the most unsympathetic, figure in the whole mythology, but if one can state a case for him, it is that as a "heroic" figure, he has no reason for presenting himself in realistic terms; the element of freewill is wholly absent from his career and actions constantly hampered or denied by pitiless fate. All these people are too remote, too distanced from us, for us to feel for them and become interested in them as personalities,; this "remoteness," inherent in the earlier mythology, gives its specialist appeal apart from the more familiar "Third Age," writing, but also prevents many aficionados of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* from following Tolkien into the more rarefied air of the earlier mythology. In the post-war rewrite of the "Túrin saga", Túrin's career is traced in much fuller detail, but we still view him in the old way, despite the enlarged background and much more realistic treatment of such characters as the Petty-dwarf Mîm, and it consequently becomes even harder to accept him for what he is and to fit him into the centre of the tale. He is without the faculty of relieving his emotional side in song, and should really have had a major role in opera, like Verdi's Manrico[19]. In those terms he's a true *tenore di forza*, and behaves in a precisely similar, fate-driven way. The dynamics of mid-nineteenth century Italian opera do chime to a remarkable extent with the "Northem heroic", atmosphere and values exemplified in *The Silmarillion.*

The "remoteness" of the early mythology also resides in the sense the reader has of the dawn of "real" or true history, to its realisation in later Ages. The various, "nature-inspired," "images of evil," in the *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* have their origin in Melkor's induced distortions of the natural world following the birth of Arda. Correspondingly the mythological concept of the individual controlled and driven by fate evolves in Tolkien's maturity into that of the individual possessing freewill, responsible for his own fate, individual in his efforts or lack of them, to avoid or resist temptation. Many such individuals, "fail" in various ways, and on varying scales. That resistance is possible and essential in a "fallen world," is demonstrated, both by Frodo Baggins, who only "fails", at the last gasp, and by Aragorn, who in this way concludes the whole great history to the opening of the Fourth Age. An accident of birth has placed him in line for the kingship; but no fate determines his succession to it. The story of his life and errantries before he appears on the page as we read, reminds us that he has had to earn his throne by the most strenuous and long-drawn-out apprenticeship.

19 The lead tenor role in Verdi's "Il Trovatore".