

Tolkien's Art

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The impulse which led to this paper's being put together was provided by the exhibition devoted to Tolkien's life and work presented last year (1992) at Oxford by the Bodleian Library. Many members of the Tolkien Society, no doubt, will have visited this, either during the Centenary Conference in August, or subsequently. Many of the exhibits were already familiar, either by repute, or in reproduction. The early manifestation of Tolkien's artistic talent it revealed was, however, quite unexpected as far as I was concerned, and I believe, also was quite a new discovery for most people. It was demonstrated in a number of drawings which he made during his school and undergraduate days, before his career was interrupted by war service. These enable his familiar artwork, all of it produced after his academic career had settled into its subsequent course, to be viewed in a different light.

There possibly are two main reasons why Tolkien's artwork has not always been treated with the attention and seriousness which it demands. The first of these is the situation, referred to above, whereby, up to now, we have seen hardly any of it dating from any earlier period than that of the group of paintings and drawings, principally associated with *The Silmarillion*, and in a different mode, with *The Father Christmas Letters*, that seem to have been made in the middle and late 1920's. Such works as the painting of Taniquetil¹ that appears on the exhibition poster, or "Glaurung sets forth to seek Túrin"², for all their charm and decorative effect, are "early" works, in their particular medium, immature from his point of view in a technical sense. Because of their prominence among his published artwork they have been taken to be

more representative of his art as a whole than, in fact, they are. He was at this time working on his concepts of the various aspects of his "legendarium" in much greater detail, and embarking on landscape watercolour, for him at this time a new direction and a new field, as a means of realising those concepts visually. These works and others of the same period like them do not represent a talent that was not developed already in other ways.

The other reason is that virtually all Tolkien's artwork from the 1920's on, with isolated and chiefly unimportant exceptions, is related or ancillary to his writings, or appears in a special context like that of *The Father Christmas Letters*. From this time on, he never drew independent scenes of any importance, real or imaginary, and does not seem to have sketched or painted from real life, or out of doors (although his drawings of trees and plants do show close observation of nature). It is now evident, on the other hand, that he did so quite extensively in his 'teens and early twenties. The response that his art as a whole has always evoked, in consequence, has been to see it as a sideline, an accompaniment of Tolkien's real life's work and eventual achievement, interesting and often delightful, but essentially subordinate to all his main concerns. It has not generally been seen as of separate importance and worth studying in its own right. Very probably the former was Tolkien's own view of it, more or less. "The pictures seem to me mostly only to prove that the author cannot draw,"³ as he commented to Allen and Unwin, when submitting the drawings for *The Hobbit*, prior to its first publication. As we know, Allen and Unwin did not agree⁴.

¹ Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue No. 209 and cover illustration, *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien*, Edited with Foreword and Notes by Christopher Tolkien, first edition, George Allen and Unwin, 1979 No. 31

² Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue No. 207, p. 68, *Pictures by Tolkien* No. 38

³ Tolkien, quoted in Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biography* p. 181.

⁴ Carpenter, *ibid.* p. 181.

Another difficulty arises from the possibility that further examples of Tolkien's artwork exist, apart from those that have been exhibited or published, and it is not clear what proportion of the whole the latter represents; are there many more "discoveries" to be made, comparable with several items in the Bodleian's exhibition? Probably a full assessment will have to wait the appearance of a complete *corpus* or "catalogue raisonné". For the present what can perhaps be done is to look at and reassess the material in the light of what is now available, and consider it both in itself and in its relationship to Tolkien's writings, especially, of course, *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

The first serious indication of Tolkien's artistic talent is provided by a drawing of his boyhood⁵. Entitled "What is Home without a Mother (or a Wife)?", this depicts a domestic scene in a ruefully humorous mood. Despite its technical naïveté (only to be expected from an artist aged twelve), it brings its subject matter to life and characterises it with remarkable vividness for a boy's drawing – the two figures (Tolkien himself and an uncle) emerge as distinct personalities, and their mutual feeling of slight disgust at the task they are performing – darning their own socks – is quite apparent. The gift for expression of character by means of line, seen here in embryo, reappears later on in Tolkien's early artwork, and another item that illustrates it is a card⁶ advertising an Exeter College "smoker" designed and drawn by him in his undergraduate days. This appears to show a group of revellers making their way along the Turl after what has plainly been quite an alcoholic lunch – or dinner. The drawing of the miniature figures is crude, but remarkably vivid in the way it evokes the mood of the scene; this is the sort of gift that is possessed, for instance, by the professional cartoonist. The limitations of the figures contrasts strongly with the assured treatment of the details of the buildings along the

street frontage and the church behind, and here one can compare a slightly earlier line drawing (1910) of the harbour front at Whitby, Yorkshire⁷. This is a remarkable performance by any standards, and displays a delight in the possibilities of varied surface textures, and a skill in handling them, that is to prove a permanent distinctive element of Tolkien's artwork in all of the media he uses for the rest of his life. He is still a little unsure of himself as regards perspective, and it is a pity that the exhibition catalogue does not reproduce either of the similar, but more mature, drawings, done two years later, of a cottage and of a main street at Eastbury, Berkshire⁸. These have the delicacy and finish of a fine etching; they are so good that one might think them the work of a professional artist, instead of one whose only drawing lessons had been given to him by his mother during childhood. They come from a sketchbook, and it is plain that Tolkien must have been very active as artist and draughtsman at this time, and have produced a large quantity of work.

The War now intervened, and it does not seem as if Tolkien ever did subject drawings like those of Whitby and Eastbury again. The exhibition did, however, include a very interesting sheet of miniature drawings⁹, "High Life at Gypsy Green", which depicts scenes from his early family life with his wife and first child. The delicacy and finish of these drawings is not fully apparent in reproduction; they need to be seen at only a few inches distance, but the extent to which they show his gift for vivid and quietly humorous characterization does all the same come through. Tolkien perhaps would have relished (and perhaps anyway realised) a comparison with the marginal decorative figures and scenes, called "babewyns", that are such a feature of manuscript illumination in the later Middle Ages, especially in England; they are considered a particularly English conceit, although they do occur in France and the Low Countries to some extent¹⁰. The comparison is

⁵ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 15, p. 14

⁶ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 39, p. 26

⁷ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 21, p. 19

⁸ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 41, not illustrated

⁹ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 64, p. 38

¹⁰ The early 14th century "East Anglian" school of illumination, as represented by the "Luttrell", "Gorleston" or "St. Omer" Psalters, displays a variety of such marginal scenes of everyday life, animals, grotesques, etc. These have been often illustrated, e.g. Janet Backhouse, *The Illuminated Manuscript*, Thames and Hudson, 1979, pp. 47 – 51.

apt also in view of Tolkien's parallel development of his own style of calligraphy, the inspiration for which also came from his mother, whose own calligraphic style, as seen in a letter shown in the exhibition¹¹, had great refinement. He was, in this instance, consciously harking back to early medieval manuscript sources as an inspiration and precedent, and his interest in this direction also developed early on, as shown in an example in the exhibition dating from his undergraduate days¹².

The course of Tolkien's academic and professional life becomes settled with his appointment at Leeds University, and his removal to Oxford to hold the chair of Anglo-Saxon five years later. This of course is the period of his first really intensive development of the *Silmarillion* texts; at the same time, with a growing family to entertain, he begins, as a kind of counterpoint to his serious work on the "legendarium", to produce stories and the series of *Father Christmas Letters*. At this time a sudden "bulge" in his artistic output also occurs, associated with both sides of his activity as writer and storyteller. Much of his work at this time is in watercolour, which he does not seem to have taken up much, if at all, earlier than this. The problem that it presents is that at any time in his life he was, reasonably enough, inclined to suit his style to the occasion, and that very often the occasion did not call for elaborately detailed or highly finished work. This was particularly the case with *The Father Christmas Letters* or with *Mr. Bliss*, where such refinement would in any case have been unsuitable, and would have demanded too much of his time for its execution. They required a considerable amount of "staffage" in the form of small figures, or figured scenes, and the execution of these remains, in terms of technique, limited and crude, though always retaining the vitality and vividness evident in earlier work such as the Exeter

College "smoker" drawing – the limitations do not matter as the style is entirely appropriate for its purpose. The illustrations for the latter are noteworthy above all for the decorative element they display. Tolkien exploited the opportunities they gave him for the use of a variety of patterns and textures, and for decorative borders, and in a particularly interesting one (1934)¹³ (in the exhibition but not illustrated in the catalogue) much of the design has been transformed into a linear abstract surface pattern of a kind which is to recur from time to time in his work, and which reaches its fullest extent in a remarkable late work, "The Hills of the Morning", referred to below. The whole experience of the *Father Christmas Letters* was plainly of value in the impetus it gave to Tolkien's developing sense of design; the "Winter Picture" (1927)¹⁴, for instance, anticipates the post-war book-jacket designs, notably that for *The Two Towers*¹⁵.

As to *The Silmarillion* itself, the watercolours of the period are well represented by the "Taniquetil" and "Glauring" paintings which display Tolkien's "stylized" approach. Two drawings of the same period^{16, 17} clearly reflect his determination to visualise his imaginary world in much fuller detail than he had done up to then, and no doubt provided one means of doing so. These drawings (also published as coloured by another hand) are more elaborate than the contemporary water-colours, and one of them, "Tol Sirion"¹⁸, is more naturalistic. At the same time the penchant for decorative borders and patterning was becoming established as a permanent element of his style in just the same way as it was doing with *The Father Christmas Letters*. The latter of two examples^{19, 20}, "Lake Mithrim", a miniature landscape enclosed in a border, is a particularly beautiful one, the softly rounded hills being a little characteristic of his landscapes of this time;

¹¹ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 6, p. 10

¹² *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 42, p. 27

¹³ *The Father Christmas Letters* ed Baillie Tolkien, George Allen & Unwin 1976, Unwin Paperbacks 1990, letter for 1934

¹⁴ *The Father Christmas Letters*, letter for 1927

¹⁵ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 170, p. 87

¹⁶ *Pictures by Tolkien* No. 35

¹⁷ *Pictures by Tolkien* No. 36

¹⁸ *Pictures by Tolkien* No. 36

¹⁹ *Pictures by Tolkien* No. 42

²⁰ *Pictures by Tolkien* No. 32

only close inspection of the original can show the care with which the layers of paint have been applied, and the refinement of colour achieved.

The extremes of Tolkien's style at this time are shown by two water-colours made to illustrate the story "Roverandom" shown in the exhibition, which have not been widely known up to now. One of them²¹ is a simple stylised landscape typical of his work of the period (the little "babewyns" in the lower border are especially charming). The other one²² is possibly the most elaborate and accomplished painting that Tolkien ever accomplished: "The Gardens of the Merking's palace". His love of semi-abstract patterning and rich surface texture again displays itself, and the colours have an almost oriental richness and decorative quality; one can easily imagine this as a theatre or ballet design. Certainly there is nothing immature or naive about the technique he has developed for himself here; it would be interesting to know if there was any special reason why he wanted to elaborate this particular scene so carefully.

From this time onwards the figurative element in Tolkien's art disappears almost without trace, whereas the decorative, textural element is to become increasingly important, and, at the end, to take it over almost wholly. This is no doubt one reason why Tolkien, as it seems, never tried to illustrate, or make drawings for, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *Leaf by Niggle*, or *Smith of Wootton Major*, all of which would have required a predominantly figurative treatment. It may be suggested that his writings display a similar movement, but in the reverse direction. The florid language and elaborately decorative kind of descriptive writing, characteristic of *The Book of Lost Tales*, becomes increasingly "slimmed down" as he continues to write; in the end he attains the command of the kind of descriptive writing typical of *The Lord of the Rings*, evocative, but also economical and straightforward. The gift for characterization in minuscule, so noteworthy in his early art, becomes transferred to Bilbo Baggins, and then

to the other Hobbits, and the liveliness and vitality Tolkien gives them contributes to a convincing picture of society and culture in the Shire, and provides, as *The Father Christmas Letters* has done for the early "Silmarillion" watercolours, a counterpoint to the heroic, or "medieval" societies and cultures inhabiting Middle-earth as a whole. It appears that each side of Tolkien's creativity, the artistic and the literary, took from the other that which it needed to make itself complete.

The next phase in the evolution of Tolkien's art is associated with the writing of *The Hobbit* and is principally concerned with landscape, on which he concentrates more exclusively than at any other time in his career. The material mainly consists of the eight drawings included in the original first edition, together with the watercolours produced for the second printing and the first U.S.A. (Houghton Mifflin) edition. There are a number of additional drawings and watercolours, including one or two "working drawings". These works all display a marked stylistic advance on the *Silmarillion* works of the 1920's; as landscapes they are more ambitious and are richer in detail: stylised elements, mountains and rocks, trees and tree shapes are employed more systematically, and with considerably greater confidence and freedom. A picture like "Bilbo woke early with the early sun in his eyes"²³, in the handling of the landscape forms and the sense of distance produced, shows that Tolkien now knows exactly what he requires of the medium employed, and that his technique is now equal to the task of conveying his imaginative intuition. Perhaps the most successful of this group is "Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves"²⁴ which presents such a powerful image that, not surprisingly, it has often been treated as a representative "type" of Tolkien's art as a whole, having been used for a previous exhibition poster, for instance, and also for a record-album box cover²⁵. The "Rivendell" painting²⁶ shows the elements of his style in harmony with each

²¹ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 31, p. 29

²² *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 130, p. 59

²³ *Pictures by Tolkien* No. 9

²⁴ *Pictures by Tolkien* No. 14

²⁵ The Decca-Argo recording of Nicol Williamson's "dramatic reading" of *The Hobbit*.

²⁶ *Pictures by Tolkien* No. 6

other; the stylization of the landscape which is built up out of the semi-abstract surface patterns, set off by the decorative border underneath. Tolkien's annoyance at its mutilation by Houghton Mifflin, who sliced off the top and bottom border, is easy to understand.

The Hobbit is, indeed, the one book whose landscapes he illustrated comprehensively. He did not attempt the Gollum episode, but that is essentially a figurative scene, and otherwise virtually all the major scenes are covered. With the period of *The Lord of the Rings*, a notable change of emphasis makes itself felt. The descriptions of place and scenery in *The Hobbit* are fairly limited in scope and extent, and no doubt Tolkien felt a need to "flesh them out", by means of full-scale illustration. With the enlargement of his descriptive powers in *The Lord of the Rings* to their full extent, one has the feeling that the need on his part to visualise every individual scene and landscape has largely gone. Those powers were largely undeveloped in the pre-LotR period of work on the "Silmarillion", and it is the relative lack of convincing description of place and landscape which at least in part accounts for the fact that many people, coming to *The Silmarillion*, after they have encountered *The Lord of the Rings*, find the former such heavy going.

The visual presentation of scene therefore has in *The Lord of the Rings* become a much more *ad hoc* affair. The impression it gives is that Tolkien only drew, or coloured, when he needed to in order to enable him to clarify features of a particular scene or place, as part of the essential task of setting the whole down in words. The partly completed drawing of Minas Tirith ("Steinborg")²⁷ provides a typical instance; he has taken the whole drawing only as far as he needs to do for his purposes, but the

portions of it that he particularly requires to visualise have been very carefully outlined and coloured; the delicate drawing of the detail of the gateway is notable. One likewise finds small "working drawings" interspersed with manuscript drafts (the pass of Cirith Ungol²⁸) or odd sheets of examination script pressed into service (Helm's Deep²⁹). The best example of all is provide by the varying versions of the tower of Orthanc^{30, 31}, the detail of which plainly gave him considerable trouble to work out. This produced one of his most beautiful drawings³², not published until volume 7 of "The History of Middle-earth" Series. Here he clearly wants to visualise the scene as a whole, and not merely the details of the tower itself, and inspection of the original (of which the reproduction gives only a limited idea) enables one to appreciate how swiftly and vividly he sketches the outlines of the ring of Isengard, and also the effect of recession in the distant hills behind.

This phase of Tolkien's art is characterised by his increased use of crayon as a colouring medium, which seems to replace water-colour altogether in his work³³. He had used this medium previously in one or two of the later *Father Christmas Letters*, and also for one or two "working drawings" for *The Hobbit*, of which one, of Gandalf approaching Bag End³⁴, shown in the exhibition, interestingly seems to approach the *Lord of the Rings* style. A crayon drawing, "Rivendell looking East"³⁵ originally thought to belong with the illustrations for *The Hobbit*, is now, it seems, thought on stylistic grounds to date from the period of the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. The use of the new medium also goes hand in hand with a new kind of stylization in regards to landscape, seen typically in scenes like "Moria Gate"³⁶ and "Dunharrow"³⁷. The

²⁷ Pictures by Tolkien No. 27

²⁸ Pictures by Tolkien No. 28

²⁹ Pictures by Tolkien No. 26. The candidate's writing has been edited out in the published version.

³⁰ Pictures by Tolkien No. 27

³¹ *The Treason of Isengard*, "The History of Middle-earth", volume 7 (Unwin Hyman 1989, frontispiece)

³² *The Treason of Isengard*, "The History of Middle-earth", volume 7 (Unwin Hyman 1989, frontispiece)

³³ This may well also have been the result of wartime shortage, as was Tolkien's use of unconventional materials like examination scripts.

³⁴ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 105, p. 48

³⁵ Pictures by Tolkien No. 5

³⁶ Pictures by Tolkien No. 22

³⁷ Pictures by Tolkien No. 29

new style has the air of a kind of visual “shorthand” as though Tolkien was not so much trying to produce fully “composed” versions of the scenes involved as trying to get “total impressions” of them clear in his own mind. The “blocking out” of the mountain sides, and rocks in a series of rectangular or geometrical shapes, as in “Moria Gate”, is characteristic, although this technique does go back to drawings of earlier periods as one of Gondolin (not the coloured version) shows³⁸.

If it seems that by the time of writing most of *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien was no longer primarily interested in scenic illustrations by means of artwork for its own sake, there are, of course, some important exceptions, and, not surprisingly, these are provided by trees and plants. The crayon drawings of Old Man Willow³⁹, and of the mallorns of Lothlórien in spring⁴⁰, the former given almost an Impressionist feeling, like a late Monet, by the use of the crayon medium, represent a development and refinement of earlier styles as exemplified by the “Tol Sirion”⁴¹ drawing or the painting “Taur-nu-Fuin”⁴² (later called “Fangorn Forest”) made in the late 1920’s.

Another exception is of another kind: this is the crayon drawing of Barad-dûr⁴³ itself, which is exceptionally detailed and realistic; on close inspection it is evident that even the tooling on the stones is clearly shown. The “exception” in this case proves the rule, for of course Barad-dûr, seen from close quarters in the drawing, is not approached in the text of *The Lord of the Rings*, or even described except in the brief vision that Frodo has of it on Amon Hen, and that Frodo and Sam have of it as they emerge from the Sammath Naur just prior to its destruction. It is evident that it was only the detail of the fortress itself that particularly concerned Tolkien; the surrounding landscape and Mount Doom are roughly “blocked in”, in his late style.

For the remainder of his life, once *The Lord of the Rings* had been finished, he seems to have

almost entirely given up the illustrative side of his artwork. When the artist originally proposed for the illustrations to *Farmer Giles of Ham* proved unsuited to the task, he never seems to have contemplated doing the job himself, although happily in Pauline Baynes he soon recognised an artist whose inspiration was closely in sympathy with his own, and who later on was, likewise, ideally suited for the late works, the “Tom Bombadil” poems, and *Smith of Wootton Major*. The throes of publication of *The Lord of the Rings* involved him in the design of book-jackets, of which the splendid design for *The Two Towers* (sadly unused) represents a clear line of descent from pages of *The Father Christmas Letters* such as the “winter picture” referred to above. But there are no “working drawings” for the late works (at least, so far as we know at the moment), and his final period, associated in a literary sense with the development of the *Silmarillion* texts, and the Númenórean material and the Akallabêth, expresses itself almost exclusively in imaginary plant forms and abstract patterns of various kinds. The examples illustrated in past calendars⁴⁴ display the endless delight he found in elaborating these, and in adapting them for the designs of “Númenórean” tiles and textiles, and for the heraldic devices distinguishing the various houses and descents of Elves and Men and their branches. From this late period in Tolkien’s life there are also the numerous “doodles”⁴⁵, which similarly reflect his delight in pattern and texture, and which often display considerable ingenuity and sophistication. One of these, in the exhibition but not illustrated, is of special interest in a context referred to below.

If, perhaps, it seems rather disappointing that *The Lord of the Rings* was not illustrated by the author, in terms of scene and landscape, more extensively than it was, and the late *Silmarillion* writings not at all, it may be that he himself was now happy to feel that the descriptive requirements of his imagined world could now

³⁸ Pictures by Tolkien No. 35

³⁹ Pictures by Tolkien No. 21

⁴⁰ Pictures by Tolkien No. 25

⁴¹ Pictures by Tolkien No. 36

⁴² Pictures by Tolkien No. 37

⁴³ Pictures by Tolkien No. 30

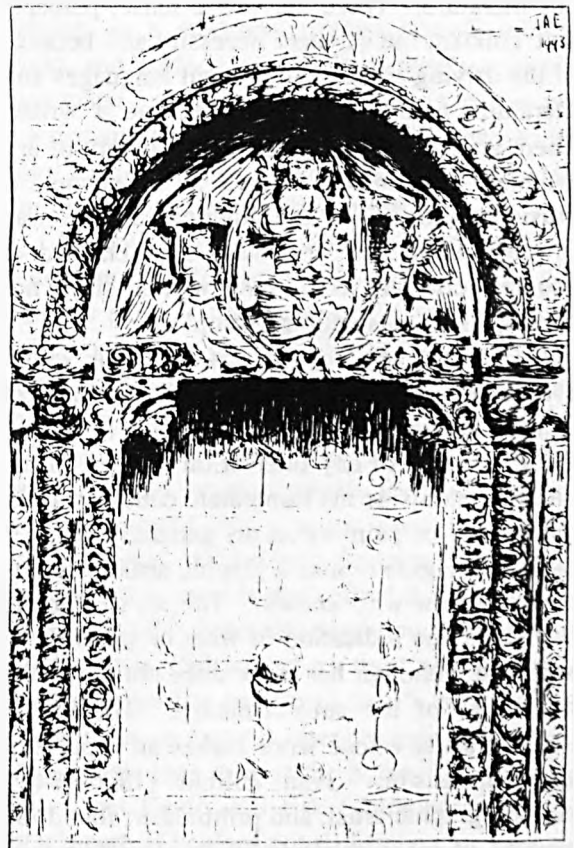
⁴⁴ Pictures by Tolkien Nos. 41 and 44 – 47

⁴⁵ Pictures by Tolkien No. 43

be fully answered by words unaided, and that each individual reader's imagination would have all possible scope for constructing a personal scenic interpretation of that world. This is the feeling that one has on looking at the one late "subject" piece in the exhibition, an unpublished crayon drawing, "The Hills of the Morning" (1961)⁴⁶. A central rayed sun and a dark outline suggestive of far distant hills are incorporated in a purely abstract design that represents a final refinement of the "linear abstract" style developed years before in works like the 1934 *Father Christmas Letters* drawing previously mentioned. This marvellous little work makes a suitable climax and summing up of Tolkien's artistic life; the medium and the delicacy of its execution would make it difficult to reproduce satisfactorily, but its eventual publication would all the same be highly desirable.

A late "doodle", shown in the exhibition, but not illustrated, was titled "Númenórean ceramic" by Tolkien. It is in fact an excellent specimen of "Celtic spiral interlace", which, familiar in the metalwork of the later pre-Roman Iron Age, surfaces in Britain again after the Roman occupation, and reaches its apogee in Anglo-Saxon art, and especially with the Lindisfarne Gospels and the other great manuscripts. This has often been brought forward by art historians as an early indicator of certain special and individual tendencies which distinguish "the Englishness of English art", to employ the title of the famous essay (by Nikolaus Pevsner)⁴⁷ that has influenced thought in this direction ever since it first appeared. These have especially embraced a partiality towards the emphasis of flat surface patterning and enriched surface decoration and flowing line, as against the bringing foremost of the "sculptural", "in-depth" attributes of matter and mass in space. Certainly, "the cap fits" perfectly, as far as Tolkien's art is concerned; it is essentially an art of line, surface pattern, texture and graphic design. He leaves the attributes of the three-dimensional form – actual depth and

mass in space – more or less unexplored, though if he had ever undergone formal art training, he would no doubt have been encouraged in the opposite direction – probably much against his inclinations. But it does seem remarkably easy to find in English architecture and art of almost any period, most of all in the Middle Ages, illustrations and precedents for the same kind of love of decorative surface patterning and texture; from even one particular building, Ely Cathedral, one can cull a range of examples from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries⁴⁸. And what better reflection of Tolkien's lifelong interest in plant forms and their development in his artwork could one have than the carved capitals of about 1300 in the chapter house of Southwell Minster, "The Leaves of Southwell"⁴⁹?



The Prior's Door, Ely Cathedral

⁴⁶ *Bodleian Exhibition Catalogue* No. 215, not illustrated

⁴⁷ Originally delivered as the B.B.C. Reith lectures in 1955. First published in book form by Architectural Press 1956, Penguin Books 1964, since then frequently reprinted.

⁴⁸ "The Prior's Door" (12th Century), page 28; Wall arcading in the Lady Chapel, circa 1340, page 28; Bishop West's Chapel, vaulting, 1533 (Renaissance detail) page 2.

⁴⁹ Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Leaves of Southwell*, King Penguin, 1945

When one looks at Tolkien's artwork as a whole, and considers the wide range it covers and the variety of media he employed at one time or another, it raises a question which so far has not received any answer: what is its significance in comparison with his achievement as author? Or, more simply, what sort of an artist was he? Had he trained formally as an artist (as did Mervyn Peake, though that was a talent of a very different kind), could he have pursued a professional career and become anything like as well-known as an artist as he did as author and storyteller? An independent observer, called on for a verdict on the best of his early drawings, such as "Eastbury" and then on his earliest literary efforts such as "Goblin Feet", or "The Cottage of Lost Play", might have advised him, perhaps, that his real bent was towards art and not literature. There may be a sense, perhaps, that Tolkien, out of sheer necessity and because of the driving impulse of ancient languages and literature, forced himself to become a writer. There are parallel instances in the history of art. Wagner, who forced himself to become a musician (his initial and lifelong-impulse was towards drama and not music as such, and in another period he would have written plays, not operas), is an outstanding example.

I cannot see, myself, that Tolkien would ever have developed into a figurative or subject painter; for one thing, there seems to be no evidence at all of any interest on his part in the visual arts outside his immediate concerns, or in the history of painting or art generally. But if one can imagine him as a graphic artist or printmaker – then who knows? The art of Pauline Baynes is one indication of what he might have achieved, although her work does not cover the full range of his subject-matter. There is a Russian artist whose work makes an especially apt comparison. Ivan Bilibin (1876-1942), painter, graphic artist, and printmaker, found the sources of his inspiration in Russian fairytale, legend and folklore; a nice correspondence indeed to the sources of Tolkien's inspiration in languages and literature of his own land and the Northern world. Bilibin's art displays the same love of surface patterning and decoration, of forms merging into abstract shapes and patterns, the same feeling for calligraphy. It similarly exploits all the possibilities of decorative borders

filled with scenes and figures in miniature. To conceive of Tolkien as an English Bilibin may be a fantasy, but an interesting and attractive one. At least it enables one to end with the thought that it would have pleased him to feel that his art, both in its inspiration and in its realisation, was perfectly at one with his ambition to create "a mythology for England".



Wall arcading in the Lady Chapel, Ely Cathedral