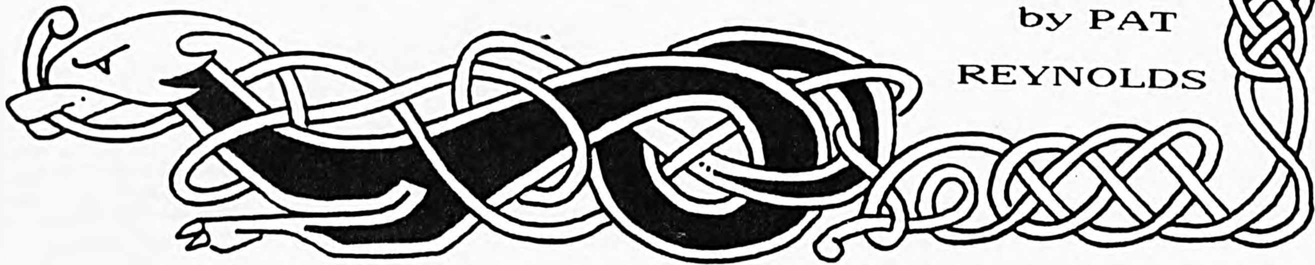
Green Rocks: White Ship

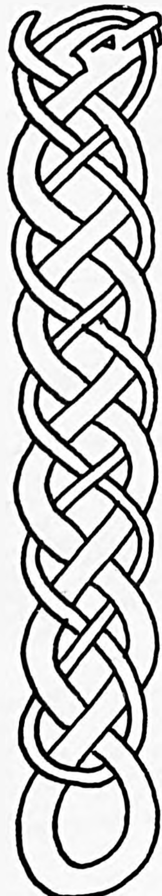
Oilima Markirya

(The Last Ark)



by PAT REYNOLDS

It is typical of Tolkien that one of his finest works, a poem which is not out of the mainstream of the twentieth century[1] is considered by him to be essentially personal. He added Oilima Markirya to his lecture A Secret Vice by way of illustration of the traits of his invented languages, and it is thus peculiarly tied to the paragraph which precedes it, in which Tolkien offers his own criticism of the poem. It is, he says, sentimental; its virtue "if there is any" is in its intimacy. Amongst other features, Tolkien defines this poetry (in general) as not written "in expectation of any audience"[2]. The original intended audience of A Secret Vice (which was instructed "Be kindly") is unknown. The instruction is to be weighed against the ideas of "cold exterior criticism" and "... critics demand".



Like all the works he loved, Tolkien could not leave the poem alone - Christopher Tolkien's edition of A Secret Vice gives us poem and translation, an 'early' version and translation, and a 'later' version which is not provided with a translation as it differs only in diction from the main poem. Paul Nolan Hyde has pointed out that the translation accompanying the poem is more closely connected to the 'later' version, and may be later than the poem as it appears in the main text.[3]

In the following analysis I intend to work from this translation with reference to the three 'Elvish' versions, other translation and glossarial commentary where appropriate.

To start with "the bare meaning", which Tolkien says is "probably trivial, not full of red blood or the heat of the world". The poem is posed as a series of questions by the poet to the listener(s) (perhaps Tolkien, in view of the comments on audiences). The first four stanzas ask "who will see the last ship leave in a storm", the fifth stanza asks "who will heed its destruction" and the sixth "Who shall see the last evening?"

The earlier version treats the same events descriptively; stanzas one to four describing the departure, stanza five the wreck. There is no parallel to the sixth stanza. The 'later' version is essentially the same as the main version, but merges the fifth and sixth stanzas.

At this level, the poem does seem trivial. And certainly, it is not full of "red blood", instead there are "pale phantoms" (l.3) or "bones" (l.35). "The heat of the world" is not there at all - from the "cold bosom" of the ship (l.4) the physical temperature of the poem is chill.

For this is not a poem about the hot red blood surging through the arteries of the living, it is a poem about the ending of things.

The question form brings to mind the "ubi sunt" poetry of the middle ages which Tolkien

used elsewhere (Namárië). This poetry asks "where are" questions such as "Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa" (Where is the treasure-giver?)[4] and "Mae'r llysoedd aml? Mae'r lleisiad?" (Where are the many courts? Where are the singers?)[5] These poems take as their theme the illusory or transitory nature of the world, often placing it as contrast to the steadfast, unchanging nature of God. God is not absent from "The Last Ark". He can be the answer. The early version of the poem did not have this form, being a description, with "Kildo kirya ninqe" (translated as "A white ship one saw") being the only personal involvement.

The rhythm can best be understood in terms of the Anglo-Saxon poetic half-lines described by E. Sievers[6] with two strongly stressed syllables, and two or more lightly or untressed syllables. Most lines are of the C form typified by the mnemonic line 'in KEEN conflict'[7], where two stressed syllables are placed together in the middle of the line. This is, as the mnemonic suggests, a dramatic rhythm. The metrical arrangement has produced (as Tolkien observed happening in Beowulf) "frequent asyndeton, and ... short parallel sentences".[8] Asyndeton, a rhetorical feature omitting conjunctions can be observed, for example, in lines 10-13.

The translation uses a great deal of alliteration and assonance: in the fourth stanza, for example, there is assonance between roaring/forest/corpse/storm, with alliteration on M, hard C, R, F, H, both types of L, W and S. The emphasis on these sounds gives the poem something of the sound of the sea. The repetition "in the moon ..." and the repeated use of present participles serves to bind the stanza more tightly. Thes culminates in the final line of the poem (... last evening?) where evening has the sound of a present participle, but is not one.

Similar patterns of alliteration and assonance are to be observed in the original: it is notable that T and N are used rather than F and H, and K is used more than it is in the English translation, however the greater use of L and R means that the sound impression is quite similar. The early version uses alliteration and assonance, but also uses a complex rhyme scheme (ABAB CDEF CBGB HIHIHI JKJKJKLKM).

The use of the future and continual present tenses gives the poem a great immediacy. In one sense, the question "Who shall see ...?" is answered "the reader": the poem thus has the power of the early christian and end-of-millenia works where the end of the world is expected in the lifetime of the reader. The use of the past tense in the early version means that it lacks this effect.

The title, The Last Ark was a change from an earlier: The Last Ship. This change brought in many connotations. The Ark of Noah, of course, is a symbol of refuge and salvation. The word "ark" meant, in Old English, "chest" or "box" - perhaps an oblique reminder of the coffin. The Quenya "Markirya" - "dwellingship" suggests this, also the ark of the covenant. The word "ship" is retained throughout the rest of the translation.

The first stanza owes a debt to the Anglo-Saxon poem The Seafarer lines 18-23, another poem dealing with the passing of the worldly joys. The poet, bereft of companions, makes replacements from the sounds of seabirds "mæw singende fore medodrince" - "singing seagull for mead in the hall". The lost companions are here as "pale phantoms" (l.3), and they bring to mind seabirds, not the other way round.

The second stanza is much as the early version: the early "pinilya wilwarindon" (l.2) - "small as a butterfly" has been changed to "valkane wilwarindon" (l.6) which Paul Nolan Hyde glosses as "tortured butterfly-like", to the poem's "vague as a butterfly" (l.7). This contains the idea of the smallness and fragility of the ship found in the early version, but adds an image of her path and also the hint that the ship is indistinct (perhaps in mist): in the Quenya it also fits better the alliterative scheme. The late version has "wilwarin wilwa" (l.7) - "butterfly fluttering to and fro" which fits still more tightly, but looses the image of a partially obscured ship, which is particularly appropriate, in the context of the question "Who shall see ...?".

The early version has altogether a more gentle approach - for example its second stanza has "waves crowned with flowers", an image which is not used in the later versions.

There is a subtle shift of meaning from

"Kaivo i sapsanta
Rána númetar" (ll. 13-14)
- "As a corpse into the grave the moon went down in the West"

to

"lanta-ránar,
ve kaivo-kalma" (ll. 18-19)
- "in the moon falling
a corpse-candle" (ll. 19-20)

The change is from the moon being the corpse, to an omen of death. The corpse-candle is supposed to show the path of a funeral procession - and in this the light shows the ship's path. Conversely, the moon is the only corpse in the early version: the bones do not gleam on the shore.

There is a slightly different emphasis in the timing of the poems: the early poem, which ends "after the last night", and the later poems, which specify the morning and evening of the last day.

Neither Tolkien nor his son tie the poem into his mythology.

The obvious place is with the departure of the Elves:

> "In that time the last of the Noldor set sail from the Havens and left Middle-earth for ever... In the twilight of Autumn it sailed out of Mithlond, until the seas of the Bent World fell away beneath it, and the winds of the round sky troubled it no more, and borne upon the high airs above the mists of the world it passed into the Ancient West, and an end was come for the Eldar of story and of song."[9]

This (white) ship does not, however, end wrecked, a "broken ship". If the setting is the departure of the last of the Noldor (a Pevensiesque removal from this world?) then this is because this is a poem of leave-taking rather than a poem of apocalypse.

It is an apocalyptic vision: it owes some of its imagery to the Icelandic version of Ragnarök used by Snorri Sturluson[10] - where "mountains will crash down" and "the sky will be rent asunder". A ship, made from dead-men's nails will be launched upon a tempestuous sea. Snorri quotes from an older poem, The Sybil's Vision,

"the serpent churns up waves
screaming for joy
ghastly eagle will tear
dead bodies with his beak

From the east sails a ship"

The poem also bears a relation to The Last Ark as it asks the questions

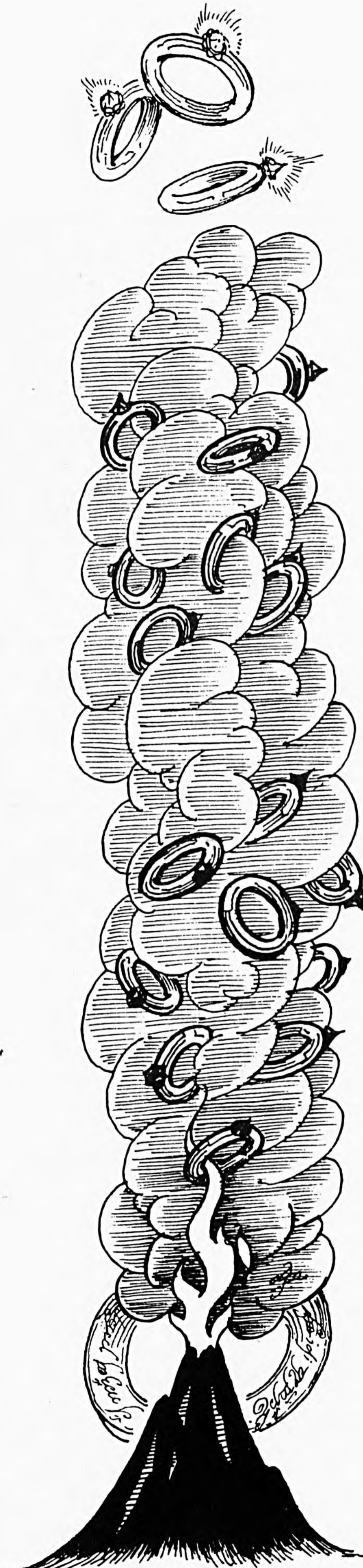
"How fare the sir? How fare the Elves (álfum)?
... Well, would you know more?"

Christian Apocalypses - such as Revelation 7: 12-17 are also seminal. Revelation 7: 17 also ends with a question "For the Great Day of his anger has come, and who can survive it?"[11] These are more overwhelming than The Last Ship, which is concentrated upon a single event. A single shipwreck is the central image of this End - totally different in tone to "a third of all ships were destroyed" (Revelation 8: 10).[12]

The poem does not loose anything because it cannot be placed within the mythological framework. While it is, as Tolkien says, a personal and private poem, it was written in English and therefore has meaning(s) for at least some of the English-speaking community. Rather, it gains significance for an audience which knows The Silmarillion, just as it does for an audience which knows The Eddas.

Tolkien ends his paper by commenting that "such fragments ... do not satisfy all the instincts that go to make poetry". I have puzzled over this. I think it might need a "good" before the last word - the sentence is akin to "M*c D*n*lds doesn't serve food". The 'instinct' which Tolkien particularly notes as lacking is "the pattern and interplay of the notions

adhering to each word": he makes no apology for this, as his interest and delight is in the sounds. This is clearly seen in the Nieninqe, which follows Oilima Markirya in the paper. However, the English poem The Last Ark as it appeared in A Secret Vice is poetry, and furthermore, it is good, satisfying, poetry.



Notes

1. Yeats Three Things and McNeice's Fire and Ice spring to mind.

2. This and following un-numbered references are to A Secret Vice in The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays, pp. 213-23.

3. Oilima Markirya: A Ship in Time in Mythlore 57 (Spring 1989), pp. 31-57.

4. The Wanderer in Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader, p. 163.

5. Siôn Cent, I Wagedd ac Oferedd y Byd in The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse, p. 101.

6. A simplified account of Siever's system is to be found in Hamer A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse, pp. 16-17.

7. A mnemonic that goes

   ANna ANgry
   and BYRHtnoth BOLD
   in KEEN CONflict
   DING DOWN foemen
   EACH one with EDGE

8. On Translating Beowulf in The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays, p. 65.

9. The Silmarillion, p. 304.

10. References are to The Prose Edda, trans. J.I. Young, pp. 86-90.

11. The Jerusalem Bible: Standard Edition.

12. ibid.