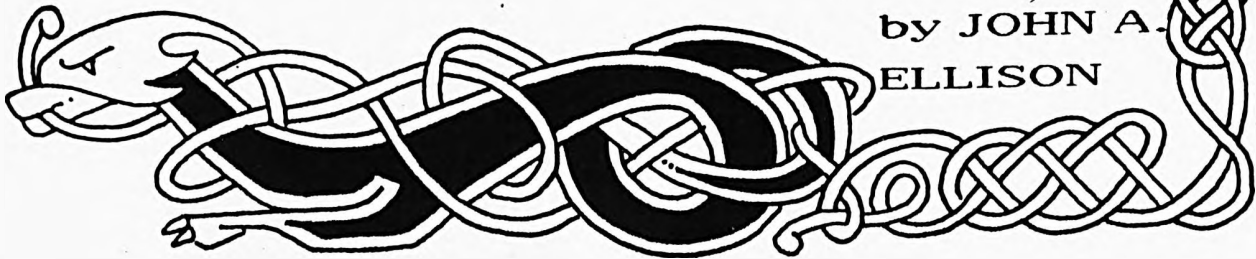




"The Legendary War and the Real One" The Lord of the Rings and the Climate of its Times.

by JOHN A.
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On November 12th, 1949 Major Warren Lewis, who had just finished reading The Lord of the Rings in the MS, recorded his impressions of it in his diary. "A great deal of it", he wrote, "can be read topically - the Shire standing for England, Rohan for France, Gondor the Germany of the future, Sauron for Stalin, ... etc." Critical reviews, he thought, might assume lines such as, "this political satire would gain greatly by compression, and the excision of such irrelevant episodes as the journey to Lothlórien." Tolkien himself reacted unfavourably to specific or allegorical interpretations of his work, as is well-known. So much so that in the foreword to the Second Edition of LotR (1966), he tried to dispel once and for all any impression that could remain that his work could have any relationship to the events of the Second World War, or of the period leading up to it. "The real war," he wrote, "does not resemble the legendary war either in its process or in its conclusion." Yet the impressions left on such an intelligent and sympathetic reader and observer as C.S. Lewis' brother are clearly genuine and spontaneous. They can hardly be dismissed out of hand.

C.S. Lewis himself was no doubt as sensitive to impressions as his brother was. Perhaps he had become aware, though, as a result of conversations with Tolkien, of the latter's dislike of having his work looked at in this kind of light. The comments attributed to him on the issue, show him dealing with it more circumspectly. "These things", he said, "were not devised to reflect any particular situation in the real world. It was the other way round; real events began, "horribly, to conform to the pattern he had freely invented." This looks plausible enough, but actually it evades the issue, however ingeniously. There either was or was not, a relationship of one kind or another, between the events in the book and those in reality. There is no meaning in a kind of pseudo-relationship arising subsequently.

Another statement by Tolkien himself on the topic occurs in the course of LotR itself. "The Mirror shows many things," says Galadriel, "and not all have yet come to pass. Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds." There, presented in the language of metaphor, is the true nature of the relationship LotR seems to bear on the history of its times explained. The Mirror appears to function as a kind of sampling device: it tests and reacts to the atmosphere around it arising out of all that is passing in Middle-earth; and from it it produces a reflection of current events and a forecast of possible outcomes. In the same way an artist or author responsive to memories and impressions from all kinds of sources, is bound to react to the climate of its times, the



course, been often obliged to fight to maintain themselves in a hard world; but in Bilbo's time that was very ancient history." This is exactly the basis of Bowling's nostalgia for England as he felt it to have been before 1914. None of the inhabitants of the little Oxfordshire town in which he lived at that time, says Orwell, could conceive of a state of affairs when "things were different." The threat posed by the dictatorships of the 1930's was, of course, widely seen in individualistic, as well as in nationalistic terms. Bilbo Baggins and "Fatty" Bowling are particular manifestations of a general trend, already well established in its hold on popular imagery. The novels of Franz Kafka, *The Good Soldier Schweik*, the films of Charlie Chaplin, all represented, in their own way, variations on the theme of the "little man" confronting power and authority in all its forms, totalitarian or otherwise. It was a fruitful subject for cartoonists, political or more general in their aims. Orwell's last "hero", Winston Smith, takes it to its logical conclusion.

There is no single episode in *LoTR*, however, which is as suggestive of analogy with contemporary, "real", events as are the Númenórean chapters of *LR*. The whole picture is more diffuse and generalised. There is and must be an element of subjectivity about the comparisons any one person may feel inclined to make. Other people may be able to suggest or adduce equally valid ones different to those made before. A start has been made above by comparing, through another author's work, the fictional state of the Shire just before the War of the Ring, with the actual state of Britain at the end of the 30's. Perhaps one may continue by remarking on the odd but diverting impression of amateurishness pervading much of *The Fellowship of the Ring*; not on Tolkien's part, one hastens to add, but on that of the participants. "And you are lucky to be alive too, after all the absurd things you have done since you left home", says Gandalf to Frodo at Rivendell. He too, though, has been markedly "slow in the uptake", in reaching vital conclusions about the Ring, in the light of all the evidence that he had had available to him. If there is really a war in progress, being fought in order to meet and destroy a deadly menace of world-wide proportions, is not this a somewhat casual way of preparing for it, and carrying it on? Tolkien himself remarked on the evident contrast of tone between the bulk of *FoTR*, and *LoTR* as a whole. Does this not faintly recall the wholly distinct atmosphere that pervaded the early months of wartime; the sense of unreality that acquired the nickname of "the Phoney War". A sense of unreality that, in the months before Churchill became Prime Minister, arose from indications apparent to everybody of general unpreparedness, incompetence in high places, and military bungling of this and that kind. It was not long, of course, before this sense faded from everyone's consciousness as the total dedication and professionalism with which war came to be carried on, took over on all fronts and at home. "Total war" came to mean concentration on everyone's part, in or out of the forces, on the single objective of the defeat of the Axis powers to the exclusion of everything else. The latter course of the War of the Ring seems to reflect this attitude of mind, as much in regard to Gandalf as in any other respect. When he reappears, to the astonishment of Merry and Pippin, amid the débris of Isengard, he has changed in a way they find difficult to understand. He act as a briskly professional commander in the field; with, "ten thousand orcs to manage", he has no time on his hands for acting as a father-figure for a pair of rather puzzled hobbits. In a similar fashion the "Strider" of the earlier stages of the "History of the War of the Ring" becomes more impersonal and remote as "Aragorn", as the nature of his role changes, and becomes, as the war moves towards its final issues, concentrated on leadership in the field, and in battle.

To say all this is not to fall into the error of trying to invent parallels with "real" events or personalities. It would be nonsensical, for instance, to attempt to see Gandalf, or Aragorn, or Éomer, as fictional counterparts, say, of Churchill, or Eisenhower, or Montgomery. All the same, there is a genuine correspondence between one particular aspect in reality, and the "heroic" personalised outlook on warfare that is an essential part of romance. There is always a quasi-mystical aura of prestige that attaches, in popular imagery and belief, to great leaders in wartime. In terms

of a "heroic", or legendary war like Tolkien's, one hundred Riders of Rohan, say, simply represent a force of that particular strength. Put Théoden, or Éomer, at their head, and immediately their significance as a fighting unit is enlarged hundredfold. Once again, truth resides in myth as it does in reality. From just this kind of collective state of mind there arises a phenomenon like the fanatical devotion and loyalty Montgomery inspired in the troops he commanded in the field.

The chapters which cover the hobbits' stay in the "Prancing Pony" at Bree offer a different sort of suggestion or echo. Frodo, who has been alarmed, first by the appearance of several of the Men in the Common Room of the inn, and then by his conversation with Strider, and the hints dropped by the latter, is sufficiently alarmed to start wondering if all the Bree-landers are not in league against him, and "to suspect even old Butterbur's fat face of concealing dark designs". The result is that Strider faces a distinctly cold reception from both Frodo and Sam when he subsequently makes his appearance in the parlour where they had previously held their supper; and Sam's hostility continues after the arrival and reading of Gandalf's letter. Anyone old enough to recall it will remember the national obsession with spies and "fifth-columnists" that was particularly prevalent in the early years of the war; and how a suspicious atmosphere was inclined to accumulate around any person whose status or antecedents were not readily apparent or explainable. National advertising was promoted to encourage it, as though the most trivial remark was liable to be relayed to some office or operation's room in Berlin. "Careless talk costs lives" was a slogan for the times which could as well fit the mood of Strider's hints and warnings to Frodo and the others, following the Common Room episode. Of course the significance of impressions such as this lies in the "applicability" of the fictional tale, as Tolkien would have put it. The episode in question might equally call to mind the parallel of "Reds Under the Bed", or any other instance of national or public scaremongering.

There is one particular episode in *LoTR* which, perhaps, illustrates its relationship to "real", contemporary events more clearly than any other one. As everywhere else, the relationship is seen, not in any resemblance between the fictional events, and those that had taken place, or were taking place, at the time they were set down, but in the associated imagery. The episode concerned is that of the madness and suicide of Denethor, and the distinguishing feature of it is the severity of the author's treatment of him. He is not, like Boromir, allowed to redeem himself at the last; he rejects the opportunity or possibility of doing so. "Your part," says Gandalf, "is to go out to the battle of your City, where maybe death awaits you. This you know in your heart." Denethor's moral collapse ends with the only suicide in *LoTR*; a "mortal sin", in Tolkien's eyes as a practising Catholic. The passage continues with one of the rare indications in *LoTR* of the existence of a system of religious belief. "Authority is not given to you, Steward of Gondor, to order the hour of your death ... And only the heathen kings, under the domination of the Dark Power, did this, slaying themselves in pride and despair, murdering their kin to ease their own death." Denethor's determination to cling on to what is left of his power to the last, and at the price of his own destruction, suggests that he is wholly enslaved by the Ring, even without possession of it. "I would have things as they were in all the days of my life ... but if doom denies this to me then I will have naught, neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated." The implications are shocking; the words seem like an approach towards the nihilism of the Nazi *Weltmacht oder Niedergang*. The method of Denethor's suicide, by self-immolation on a pyre: "we will burn like heathen kings before ever a ship sailed from the West", seems to recall the popular imagery that became associated with the death of Hitler. He apparently welcomes and relishes the prospect of the holocaust that he sees as about to overwhelm the West: "Against the Power that now arises there is no victory ... The West has failed. Go back and burn!" One can recall, in the light of this, that in the last weeks of the war Hitler determined that what was left of Germany would be destroyed with him; that he tried to ensure the destruction of all heavy

currents of opinion and popular feeling that surround him" as they do everyone else. The result, if one can employ another metaphor of Tolkien's, is to impart a particular flavouring to, "the Soup".

For Tolkien, it is clear, was no cloistered academic, naively unaware of what was happening in the world outside as he wrote. An entry in Warren Lewis' diary, made as early as 1934, describes experiences reported by one of his brother's pupils who had returned from a visit to Germany, and who bore news of the methods the Nazi apparatus of terror was employing to establish its hold; the deaths in the concentration camps; arrests and disappearances; Himmler and the Gestapo. It is easy to imagine Major Lewis discussing these appalling tidings with his brother, and with others in his circle. When Tolkien came, two or three years later to write the "Númenórean" chapters of *The Lost Road*, he must have been quite aware of the possible realities of life under a dictatorship. Here, more plainly than in any passage in *LotR* itself, we seem to be looking at the history of the times "reflected by the Mirror". Númenor, in the years immediately preceding its annihilation, has become a fascist-style dictatorship displaying all the distinctive ingredients of such. Militarism is dominant; youth is regimented; informers and secret police are everywhere; unexplained disappearances happen; "torture chambers" are rumoured to operate; a minority is persecuted. Over it hangs a pervasive atmosphere of retribution - of a coming holocaust and the dissolution of the existing fabric of life. Tolkien was of course writing against the background of the Stalinist terror in Russia, as well as against that of Nazi Germany. He would, as a devout and practising Christian, have felt a special antipathy towards the atheistic nature of Soviet communism, as he would have seen it.

The subject-matter of much of the writing of George Orwell, principally, of course, 1984, obviously offers a comparison of a kind. "The Party", and "Big Brother", exercise power for its own sake; like Morgoth and like Sauron, they require no ideological 'rationale' for their policies or their activities. "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - for ever", says O' Brien to Winston Smith; and that is no more and no less that what would become of Middle-earth if Sauron were to recover the Ring and, "cover all the lands in a second darkness". But Orwell and Tolkien were viewing the phenomena of power, as they were visible in the world in the 1930's, from very different standpoints; Orwell's stance as a non-believer and a socialist, joining the Republican side to fight in the Spanish Civil War, was poles apart from Tolkien's. There seems to be such a wide gulf separating them, that it would seem both superfluous and impossible to try to compare them in any more detail. In reality, however, this is not so. There is a very definite link between them; a shared consciousness of, "Englishness", not in a nationistic or jingoistic sense, but in the way both of them look back on and draw inspiration from, the land and landscape of their forebears. Orwell's writing frequently betrays a grief and distress over the rape of the English countryside by the products of development, industrial or otherwise, that recalls Tolkien's. There is one particular novel of Orwell's that has special significance in this direction. This is, *Coming Up for Air*, his last pre-war book, published a few weeks before the actual outbreak of the Second World War. It was written, in fact, at the very time *LotR* was beginning to take shape as we see it doing in *The Return of the Shadow*, and like it, it is concerned with the public impression produced in a small, "offshore", country, by a threat of continental, or world-wide dimensions. For those who have not read it, a brief outline may be helpful.

The story is told in the first person by George "Fatty" Bowling, a lower middle-class insurance salesman who lives, with his querulous wife and two children, in an undistinguished London suburb. (Perhaps if Orwell, and not Tolkien, had conceived of Bilbo Baggins, he would have been rather like this). On a day spent away from work, he indulges himself in reminiscences of his childhood and adolescence. He was brought up as a small shopkeeper's son in a little town in the midst of the Oxfordshire countryside (shades of "The Shire", indeed!). His memories are all of days in summer, spent in fishing, or in similar pursuits, with his friends, others like him. He went to school in the town, and then to work in his father's shop. And then, in August 1914, his way of life came suddenly to a stop. The outbreak

of war came on him, and on all the local inhabitants, with total unexpectedness. Bowling joined the army, and this marked a complete break with his past life. Other than to attend the funeral of his mother, she having died not long afterwards, he never returned to the scene until 1938, the "present-day", time in which the novel itself is set.

The picture of pre-1914 rural life which Orwell draws is not idealised in any way. The hardships faced by people of that class are made plain. Bowling and his boyhood associates behave like the unpleasant little "horrors" that they are, and that so many small boys have always been. But although the author is not trying to "glamorize" the past, it is clear that he views it with a kind of nostalgia, and is not in the least ashamed of doing so. The appeal of the vanished rural England is as real to him as it is to Tolkien; he would have understood exactly what Tolkien felt about Sarehole and its mill, for instance. Bowling, in the end, insists that he is "not being sentimental about it." "I tell you it was a good world to live in," says he to the reader. "I belong to it. So do you."

Later on in the book, Bowling contrives to absent himself from home for a few days, in a mood of frustration engendered by the realities of his existence in 1938. His wife later discovers that the explanation he has given for his absence is fictitious, and presumes that he has been with another woman, but what he in fact intends to do is to revisit the scenes of his early life. When he does so he finds them transformed and vandalized. In his case, though, there is not to be any "Scouring of the Shire". The small country town has become the nucleus of a suburban sprawl; the woods and fields that once surrounded it have been buried under speculative housing developments; new factories have been opened all the way around its outskirts. The hardest stroke of all comes when he discovers that the place which was his particular preserve, the secluded pool among trees with the special fish in it which he always dreamed of catching, has not been destroyed, but still exists in isolated preservation, in the midst of an "upmarket" housing development as a "Pixy Glen". All that he can do is return home, his dream shattered, to face the wrath of his wife, and his own fear of the impending catastrophe. "It will happen in 1941, they tell me," says he, and he pictures to himself the aftermath of totalitarian occupation; food queues; "police shooting out of first-floor windows" and other images of the same sort as make up the "Oceania" of 1984. The whole story is overshadowed by Bowling's expectation of the approaching war, and especially, of his terror at the prospect of bombing raids. This is dramatically symbolized in an episode towards the end of the book, in which an R.A.F. aircraft on a training flight accidentally drops a bomb on the town, killing a number of people, while Bowling is staying there. Orwell's narrative is wholly realistic, but remarkably, he succeeds at the same time in erecting a kind of "myth", regarding the vanishing English countryside and way of life, around it. He seems to be saying that both attitudes of mind, the "realistic" and the "mythic", are quite consistent one with the other, each representing an aspect of the truth. One presents the realities; the other concerns itself with the way these realities impress themselves on the popular imagination, with our collective attitude to the past. This is a profoundly important consideration in relation to Tolkien's work, which will be looked at again at the close of this essay.

Any reader of *LotR* will easily draw a parallel between its early chapters and much of the above. A small and insignificant land, contented with its way of life, and also perhaps a trifle complacent about it, becomes aware of a vague and distant menace, not properly understood or entirely comprehensible. "The land of Mordor ... like a shadow in the background of their memories ... ominous and disquieting ... away from east and south there were wars and growing fear. Orcs were multiplying again in the mountains. Trolls were abroad, no longer dull-witted, but cunning and armed with dreadful weapons. And there were murmured hints of creatures more terrible than all these, but they had no name." It is evident that the Hobbits' satisfaction with their way of life largely arises out of their sense that its conditions have always been what, as the story of *LotR* opens, they are. "In olden days they had, of

industry, and that he turned on and railed at the German people, who as he said had failed him and forfeited their claim to "historical greatness".

Of course Denethor's death is not the same as Hitler's; his end is tragic and pitiful because of what he was originally. There was nothing tragic or pitiful about Hitler's end, as everyone knows: he killed himself with Eva Brown in squalid circumstances, and the bodies were then hastily burned in order to conceal them from the advancing Russians. The facts were established, so far as was possible, by H.R. Trevor-Roper (now Lord Dacre), the officer appointed by the Allied authorities, at the end of the war, to undertake this task, and they were related by him in the well-known book he subsequently wrote, in which he set out his findings as to the circumstances surrounding Hitler's death, and described his search for the evidence relating to them. His purpose as historian was to destroy as effectively as possible the myth or myths that were, at the time, expected to accumulate around the events of the last days of the war in Berlin. This he achieved successfully, but it is rather remarkable how, in the book, a kind of "mythic" outlook on events seems to arise as a kind of by-product, independently of the facts being established. History never lost anything by being "good box-office", after all; and the extent to which the story of Hitler's last days embraces the imagery of the half-insane ruler surrounded by his court, immolating himself to the accompaniment of the sacrificial deaths of his servants and adherents, does nothing to lessen its readability. "Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad", a popular enough 'quote', at any time of crisis or catastrophe, was never more popular than at the end of the war (it makes its appearance in the original foreword, by Lord Tedder, to Trevor-Roper's book), and it equally befits Denethor's tragic end. Myth and reality share in the embodiment of truth; the popular imagery surrounding events, and its resulting effects on the climate of public opinion, are as much historical fact as the events themselves.

If it be accepted that Tolkien was influenced - unconsciously one presumes - by contemporary events, or rather, by the views and feelings of his contemporaries, it can still be argued that this was, after all, only one of numerous influences or sources of inspiration available to him. We are all aware of the various literary sources that contributed to the formation of Tolkien's world, and of *LotR*, but in the last resort it is the product distilled from them that interests us: the cake rather than the ingredients. Tolkien would not have had it otherwise: "he", as T.A. Shippey says, "did not approve of the academic search for 'sources'." But this particular source is exceptional; its significance, which is bound up with the collective response of Tolkien's readership, is different from that of any of the others.

When *LotR* first appeared, in the 1950's, the response to it was powerful and immediate. Its success clearly came as a surprise to its publishers, George Allen & Unwin, maybe also to Tolkien himself. Its first readers, or nearly all of them, were people who had had the Second World War as a central part of their experience. This took all kinds of forms of course - service in the fighting forces; living through air raids or the blitz; or simply the humdrum discomforts and frustrations of wartime "on the home front". The attitudes and emotions of wartime, fed by news and propaganda, whether directed at the enemy, or at the Allies, or at one's own people and one's friends, conditioned everyone's experience. When that experience was over, and for a number of years afterwards, people everywhere, who had been buoyed up through the war years by a vision and a hope of the new and better world and the new and better Britain expected to follow it, fell into a trough of anticlimax. Tolkien, again in the foreword to the Second Edition of *LotR*, refers to the notion which had gained some currency (absurd though it no doubt was) that the degradation of the Shire under Saruman was intended to reflect conditions in Britain under the Labour government elected in 1945. (If it reflects anything at all, it is much more likely that the knowledge of the experience of the countries that suffered occupation during the war provided some kind of background). All the same, leaving aside any political stance, there is truth of a kind in the comparison. This sense of anticlimax, a feeling of "this is not what we have just spent six years of our lives fighting for", would have been there whichever party had been in

power after 1945, and whatever policies it had followed, and of course the situation had been much the same after 1918. The parallel was drawn because many people felt that here, at the end of *LotR*, just as everywhere else in it, they saw embodied the truth of their own experience, both their hopes and their fears, for the present and future. And though the surface pattern of world events has assumed differing and varying forms in the years that have followed, succeeding generations (and, to take a notable instance, the one that came to maturity against the background of Cuba and Vietnam) have found the truth of their own experience reflected likewise. It seems more than likely that succeeding generations will continue to do so. Tolkien's mode is that of fantasy, but the message it carries is as "realist" as the most intentionally realistic of fiction. Fantasy is simply "the continuance of realistic narrative by other means."

Notes

- 1 Brothers and Friends. The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis, ed. C.S. Kilby and M.L. Mead. Harper & Row (San Francisco), 1982, p.231.
- 2 By Humphrey Carpenter in J.R.R. Tolkien. A Biography, George Allen & Unwin, 1977, p.190.
- 3 The Diaries of Major W.H. Lewis, p.162.
- 4 For an extended comparison between *LotR* and 1984, see Mason Harris, "The Psychology of Power in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Orwell's 1984 and Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*", Mythlore 55, (Autumn 1988), pp.46-56.
- 5 This is not to imply that Tolkien's "politics" can be defined in any particular way "right-wing" or otherwise. However his sympathies as regards Spain were clearly on the side of the government, or rather, the Church. See The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien (ed. H. Carpenter), George Allen & Unwin, 1981, (n° 83, pp. 95-96).
- 6 Other than the collective act of "creatures of Sauron", following the downfall of Barad-dûr. (*LotR*, Bk.VI, Ch.4, III, 1).
- 7 For a more sympathetic view of Denethor's end and the events leading up to it, see "Sméagol" Dealing with Denethor in Amon Hen, n° 83, pp.17-18, and subsequent correspondence arising from it. The present writer is, however, not able to accept the plea that Denethor was "not responsible for his actions".
- 8 H.R. Trevor-Roper, The last Days of Hitler, (originally published by Macmillan, 1947), re-edited and reprinted many times.
- 9 The Road to Middle-earth, George Allen & Unwin, 1981, p.220.
- 10 "War is the continuance of diplomacy by other means". (von Clausewitz).

