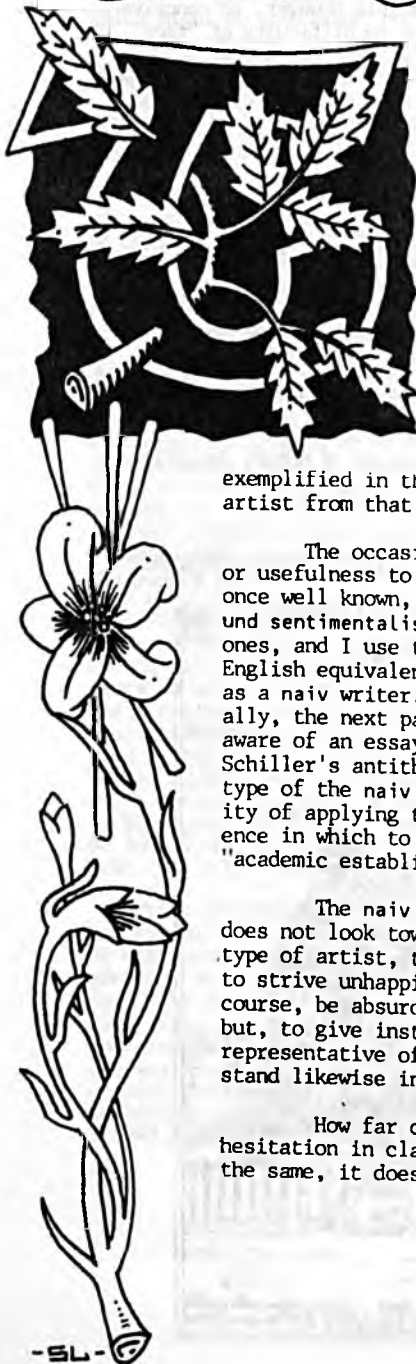
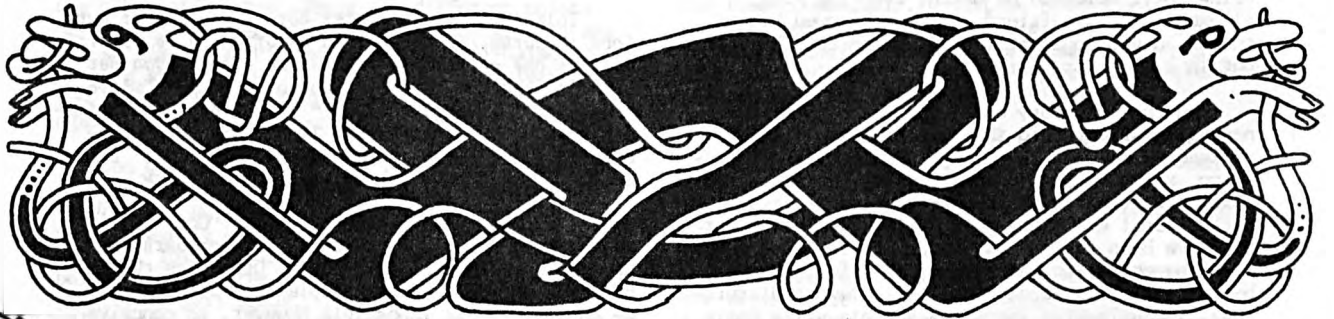




FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE:

THE 'NAIVETE'¹ OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN by JOHN ELLISON



his article

takes as its starting point the review in *Amon Hen 68* by Jessica Yates, of the recently published collection of essays edited by Robert Giddings under the title of "*J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land*"² and, at least in part, amplifies some of the points made there. The contributors to this book, or most of them, seem to react to Tolkien's work, (or rather to *The Lord of the Rings*, on which they almost exclusively concentrate), as though it represented an attempt to undermine their most cherished values and beliefs. At the same time, their "Tolkien-bashing", (for want of a better phrase), seems to arise, not out of straightforward aversion or contempt, but from a confused mixture of feelings, attraction mixed with repulsion. They seem to be determined not to accept Tolkien's work on his terms, or to admit that he is not writing with any political or didactic 'message' in view. Nothing in the book is more characteristic of it than Robert Giddings' refusal, in his introductory essay, to take seriously Humphrey Carpenter's reminder³ that Tolkien's mythology and storytelling derive their essence from his linguistic preferences. The critical method exemplified in this book are not derived from the discipline of trying to see the work of an artist from that artist's own standpoint, whatever other resources they may possess.

The occasional flash of insight encountered by the way may, all the same, lend interest or usefulness to such a book as this. One of these is Fred Inglis' reference⁴ to an essay, once well known, by Friedrich von Schiller "*On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*" (*Über der naiver und sentimentalische Dichtung*", 1796). The epithets, as used by Schiller are not derogatory ones, and I use the German words from now on, in order to avoid the implications of their English equivalents. They are complementary opposites, and Inglis appears to represent Tolkien as a naive writer, although he does not pursue the implications very far. Perhaps coincidentally, the next paragraph of his essay refers to the operas of Verdi. He does not seem to be aware of an essay by Isaiah Berlin "*The Naiveté of Verdi*"⁵, which examines the scope of Schiller's antithesis in relation both to music and literature, and which takes Verdi as a type of the naive artist, almost the last of his line. Our special interest is in the possibility of applying the distinction in Tolkien's case; it provides an interesting frame of reference in which to view the opinions of his work which appear to be held by many in the literary "academic establishment", and which are evident in several of the essays in this book.

The naive artist⁶ is the type who engages in creative work as an end in itself, and does not look towards achieving any sort of external aim or ideal by means of it. The other type of artist, the sentimentalisch, tends to be of a self-divided, unfulfilled nature, and to strive unhappily to pursue external aims or ideals which seem unattainable. It would, of course, be absurd to try to develop a system of pigeonholing all creative artists in this way, but, to give instances, Shakespeare or Dickens, Bach, Handel or Verdi himself might stand as representative of the first class, and Flaubert or Dostoevsky, Beethoven or Wagner, might stand likewise in respect of the second.

How far can the distinction be applied to Tolkien? Probably he would have had no hesitation in claiming to be identified with the first group, if anyone had asked him. All the same, it does not look as if he fits into the typical figure of the naive artist, at least

not fully. For him to philosophize about the essentials of his art, as in the Andrew Lang lecture *On Fairy Stories*, or to construct an allegorical figure of it, as in *Leaf by Niggle*, would seem to take him rather beyond the scope of his work "as an end in itself", and to look rather like a typical instance of the sentimentalisch. He was, though, in a most unusual position for an artist, in that he derived the substance of his creative work from the scholarship that occupied his professional life. The occupation of the true scholar, who pursues learning for its own sake, without external motive, is itself, in the best possible sense naïv. Tolkien's occasional explanatory and allegorical gestures came as a result of being forced outside the shelter of his work as scholar and linguist, as he was bound to be in an age in which the pressures placed on artists of every kind to explain their own "significance", are overwhelming. The sentimentalisch in art will most likely dominate periods of political turmoil, war or violent social upheaval; perhaps the truly naïv artist has become something of an anachronism in the twentieth century.

Perhaps also the general reaction of antipathy, as far as Tolkien is concerned, on the part of the "high brow", literary establishment, arises from envy of a kind, not crudely materialist envy of the commercial success of LOTR, but envy of another sort. The sophisticated intellectual may experience, without acknowledging it, real envy of the creative instinct able to express itself without painful soul-searching or self-analysis. The hostile attitude of many of Verdi's contemporaries, their contempt for his supposed "vulgarity", his popular appeal, and his capacity for adaptation to his own purposes of what were thought to be outmoded self-expression, display this form of envy to perfection. So do the authors of several of the essays in Mr. Giddings book.

Take, for instance Derek Robinson in *The Hasty Stroke Goes Oft Astray: Tolkien and Humour*,⁷ who bases his dislike of LOTR on what he sees as the limited and inadequate nature of the humourous element in it. He spends some time in demonstrating that Tolkien's humour is elementary, heavy-handed, and above all, lacking in essential "bad feeling". "There is no such thing as a completely non-malicious joke", he pontificates, and thereby commits a "howler", of heroic proportions: whatever is one to say of Wodehouse on those terms? (Incidentally, Wodehouse is as good an example of the naïv artist as one could possibly be). Do Mr. Robinson, and several of his colleagues here, one is inclined to ask, really believe that the legions of Tolkien's admirers are blind to what they themselves see? If "humour" be treated in isolation as if it was a required ingredient of the literary recipe, obtainable out of a tin, then of course anyone can see that Tolkien's brand of it is fairly unsophisticated, and hardly calculated to do more than raise a slight smile now and then. It would be useless for its necessary purpose if it were anything else. The important point is that Tolkien instinctively avoids subtleties or artifice that would introduce incongruities or clashes of style and this indicates clearly enough that we are dealing with a naïv type of artist. All Mr. Robinson has succeeded in doing is to disguise his personal taste (perfectly legitimate, of course, in itself), as objective

criticism.

Donald McLeish, in *The Rippingest Yarn of them All*⁸ contributes one the more interesting essays in this book; it certainly deserves more consideration than the rather silly title would lead one to believe it merits. The interest particularly lies in the author's ambivalent feelings about Tolkien, which are of the kind noted at the beginning of this article. He has obviously enjoyed the experience of reading LOTR immensely, but feels ashamed to admit it without qualification, and a delicious sense of guilt. (Again, Wodehouse provides a parallel instance. A surprisingly large amount of people will not "own up" to reading him unless they can be assured that it is safe for them to do so). Consequently, instead of looking at the work in a straightforward way, he begins by making all sorts of assumptions about it in advance; essentially his problem is one of simple non-comprehension of the evidence. The prime instance of this is his extraordinary statement, (on p.133), that "God himself is rigorously excluded from Tolkien's cosmology"; of course he has been misled by the absence of references to organised religion in LOTR.

The special interest of this in the present connection is that this absence is, once again, thoroughly naïv, Tolkien's whole world-view being bound up as it was with a Christian faith of a very traditional kind. He assumed, as he openly said, that the reader who shared his most deeply held beliefs would recognise them as being embodied in his work without any specific reference to them. Not many artists in this century would be likely to make this kind of assumption: not C.S. Lewis, certainly. Of course, that does not imply that only those people who are committed to the essentials of Christianity are qualified to experience LOTR fully as a work of art. It does mean, however, that its author's description of it as a "fundamentally religious and catholic" work is a classification, just as it would be in the case of, say, Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*.

It is, therefore, a pointless exercise to discuss the alleged "political" overtones of LOTR in isolation, as so many people do, and as Mr. McLeish does here. He has a lot to say on this topic, insisting despite all that Tolkien can do to assure him otherwise, that his work represents an allegorical view of the world of today, interpreted in the simplistic light of "the ethical verities of a vanished Victorian era." We should all be warned, according to him, against treating it as "any kind of answer to the world's problems." The last thing that Tolkien wanted was to have it so treated; the only kind of answer he would have propounded would have been one stated in the terms of his religious faith, of which his "politics"; (whatever they may have been), could only have been a derivative.

Mr. McLeish has been misled too by the curious impression that LOTR undoubtedly does give, of "reflecting" real events at one or two removes. It is as though the history of the times, both of its writing and of the conception of Tolkien's whole mythology, were being shown to us in a looking-glass held some distance away and in a slightly different plane. He is not prepared for the "naïveté" of Tolkien's actual procedure; the convention by which the "imaginary" world is treated as though its history was recorded reality, which the author's task is

to "report". This is indeed a somewhat dangerous exercise, but not in Mr. McLeish's sense. History does not repeat itself, just like that, but is always giving us the tantalising sense that it is doing so, or is about to do so. The selection of extracts from the past, suitably edited, and the calling of them as evidence for one's cause, is as popular an occupation with the so-called "progressive" left as it is with the so-called "reactionary" right. The freedom of the reader, as Tolkien calls it, allows anyone to treat the history of the "imagined" world in like manner as that of the real one. There can be very few authors of significance who cannot be thought of as "dangerous", on some or other terms.



Janet Menzies, in *Middle-Earth and the Adolescent?* concerns herself with character development, and at least finds herself in a position of arguing on a more substantial foundation of evidence than some of her colleagues in this book. One may even so suspect that the conclusion reached, namely that LOTR is a superficially attractive work which lacks a "moral centre", because in its characterisation is imposed from outside, rather than being developed from within, reflects an experience biased in favour of the novel. The great novelists, later than Dickens have tended very much to the sentimental persuasion, and Ms. Menzies' argument, carefully and intelligently presented though it is, amounts in reality to no more than an expression of personal preference, for the intellectually calculated as against the instinctive in art. Her principal contention is that Frodo, carrying the responsibilities of the official "hero" of LOTR, is not developed enough as a character to carry such a burden from the reader's point of view. The task, according to her, should have been allotted to Aragorn, who ceases to develop as a character halfway through LOTR, and thereafter becomes "remote", (so he does, of course).

Ms. Menzies (like Mr. McLeish, though in a different way), has misunderstood Tolkien's method; he is at once too simple and too subtle for her. As the typical approach of the novelist is the only one that attracts her sympathy, she has assumed it to be the only valid way of indicating the development of character. It would not be possible for it to be assimilated in Tolkien's carefully articulated structure, which depends on a symmetrical balancing of argument and dialogue against cumulative dramatic tension. Pace, Ms. Menzies, Frodo's character is the subject of a very full and sustained development from within, but it does have to be reconciled with the requirement of having the dénouement in Orodruin come as a complete surprise, to Frodo himself as much as to the reader. It is of course, the best kind of dramatic surprise, the one which, as soon as it has been sprung, is seen to have been inevitable all along. It is perhaps indicative of Tolkien's own "naivete", that a letter of his to Christopher Tolkien shows that as late as November 1944 he still did not know himself how the Ring was to be destroyed.

The novelist's freedom to act as commentator and interpreter is thus denied to Tolkien, who virtually never appears in this guise all the way through LOTR. He did so, of course, in *The Hobbit*, in the form of the frequent avuncular "asides", which punctuate the narrative and in which he addresses the young reader in person. Significantly, it was this particular feature of the earlier work that he later came to think of as misconceived. On the other hand, Ms. Menzies clearly hankers after just this kind of auctorial "direction", not seeming to realise that its purpose can be achieved in a different way; implication can replace express statement. In successive stages during the narrative, Frodo's gradual evolution, his acquisition of stature and power, is implied, and, as a result, felt, from the simple Hobbit who sets out from the Shire, to the, "Lord (if only for a few seconds) of the Ring." The taming of Smeagol, and later, Frodo's obvious assumption, in his dealings with Faramir, of equality in their confrontation, are two such stages. Another one, more subtle, because indirect, is Sam's vision of himself, temporarily carrying the burden of the Ring, as "a vast and ominous threat halted upon the walls of Mordor"¹ a vision that transfers it self in the reader's mind as a reality to Frodo once the latter is reunited with Sam in the Tower of Cirith Ungol. At any one moment, it can be said that the reader is only being permitted to look at Frodo's personality from the outside. When all these glimpses, or "revelations" as Ms. Menzies calls them, are collated, the character is seen to have been built up from within, in a series of "steps", as it were. Tolkien deals with coincidence, in fact, in the same way; its frequency has been used against taking LOTR seriously as a handling of the "quest" theme, but the method is actually to repeat coincidences in a progressive ascending spiral of tension.

Ms. Menzies is of course right in saying that Tolkien's preoccupation with early and medieval literature predisposed him to a view of narrative as dominated by action over introspection. "In sagas," (she says), "a man is defined more by his acts (gestes), than his thoughts"² Not only in sagas, though; nearer our own time, in opera very widely, and in Verdi's operas most of all, is this a truism. The remark just quoted is actually a commonplace of Verdian criticism. Music tends to impose on the composer for the lyric stage the same kind of limitations in terms of characterisation as Tolkien imposes upon himself. There is something peculiarly "operatic" about the way Frodo's internal crisis of self-confidence, preparing to face the decision to go alone to Mordor if need be as the dramatic climax of the last act of LOTR unfolds, is dramatised as a "confrontation duet" with Boromir (one for tenor and baritone, one is tempted to add). The same tendency appears later, in the dramatisation of Gollum's internal conflict as the "dialogue", overheard by Sam by the slagheaps at the edge of the Morannon, and in Sam himself, whose internal doubts and decisions are several times dramatised in the same way.

The extent of Ms. Menzies' misunderstanding of Tolkien's method of character presentation is shown by her failure to understand the necessity for or the purpose of, his epilogue. For her to accept Gollum's fall with the Ring into the fires of Orodruin as "the organic conclusion of the story", is in its way as remarkable a piece of misinterpretation as Mr. McLeish's (quoted above). The tragic

outcome of the quest is Frodo's loss of that which is the birthright of all Hobbits, his innocence. The price he pays for the ransoming of Middle-Earth is more poignant than any physical death could have been. Every thing that happens afterwards is a preparation for the closing "revelation", which occurs when Frodo refuses to allow Saruman to be killed because: "it is useless to meet revenge with revenge: it will heal nothing." 'You are wise, Halfling', says Saruman, and it is true; here is the "moral centre", of the epic, for which Ms. Menzies has looked in every place except the right one. Frodo has taken over Saruman's place among "the Wise", and the "wisdom" he has gained is the direct counterpart of the "innocence" he has lost, and the outcome of its loss. The predisposition towards violence, which was an integral part of that "innocence" is still plainly to be seen in the other Hobbits who surround him. Frodo, if you like to put it that way, understands himself and Saruman as now part of himself, and his acceptance brings LOTR to an ending in a moral ambiguity which the "literary-critical" school of commentators have not begun to realise is there.

Although one may speak of Tolkien's "method" or "technique" of character portrayal, of which Frodo's is the most fully developed instance, words like this clearly do not apply in any conscious or deliberate sense. He has simply left it to the reader to deduce the inner development of character, as a theatre audience does, from a combination of direct evidence in the form of speech and dialogue, and indirect evidence, the totality of action and situation. If such a procedure, in its naivete, baffles the critics, it might, perhaps, have been designed with W.H. Auden in mind, Auden, that is, the opera-lover and librettist, as well as poet; appropriately enough, the essay by Isaiah Berlin cited above is dedicated to Auden. It is most fitting that the tragedy of LOTR should centre on the loss of innocence, the basic attribute of Tolkien as an artist.



Footnotes

- 1: See Note 5.
- 2: R. Giddings, Ed.: "*J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land.*" Vision Press/Barnes & Noble, 1983. Cited from now on as TFL.
- 3: See R. Giddings' TFL, introduction p.19 and note 24, p.23, quoting Carpenter in a Radio broadcast BBC 'Kaleidoscope'. Radio 4, January 2nd, 1981.
- 4: F. Inglis: "*Erutility (? Ed.) & Powerlessness: Tolkien and the New Class.*" TFL, pp. 25-41 (reference on pp.36-7).
- 5: See: *The Verdi Companion*, Ed. W. Weaver and M. Chusid, Gollancz, 1980, pp. 1-12. Reprinted in *Opera Magazine*, Ed. H.D. Rosenthal, February 1980, pp.128-35.
- 6: This paragraph is a summary, necessarily very condensed, of the exposition of Schiller's antithesis by Isaiah Berlin in the essay cited above.
- 7: TFL, pp.108-124.
- 8: TFL, pp.125-136.
- 9: TFL, pp.56-71.
- 10: See *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Ed. Humphrey Carpenter, Allen & Unwin, 1981, pp.103-4.
- 11: *The Return of the King*, (2nd Hk. ed.), Allen & Unwin, 1966, p.177.
- 12: TFL, p.70.



The Glendil Stone