I still recall the shock I experienced on first reading Tolkien, a little more than ten years ago. I had never encountered literary fantasy before, and I was startled by "The Hobbit", stunned by "The Lord of the Rings". At that time, before the cult, this was still possible; but I wonder how many readers come so unprepared and feel the same amazement. The ambush is sprung; his reputation, for good or ill, precedes him now. "The Lord of the Rings" - and inevitably any discussion of Tolkien's work is dominated by "The Lord of the Rings" - has paid the penalty of such fame, and become a trilogy more known about than known. The banners have gone up: readers are required to be for it or against it, not allowed simply to enjoy it or not. It has become a symbol: to its detractors, of an intellectual and emotional flaccidity in our society; to some of its partisans, no less damagingly, of an 'alternative society' where Tolkien himself would have been very ill at ease. "The Lord of the Rings" is judged on its philosophy, its politics, its relevance to current preoccupations - on anything rather than its qualities as a work of literature. It has become hard to see the book with fresh eyes, although that is what I have tried to do: not - God forbid - to advance a new appreciation, but to rediscover under the accretion of controversy and theory the books that Professor Tolkien wrote, and to attempt to understand what in them has provoked such a response.

> "The prime motive was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times excite them or move them deeply." (Foreword of Lord of the Rings)

Thus wrote Tolkien himself, in the foreword to the second edition of "The Lord of the Rings". It makes a useful starting point, for "The Lord of the Rings" is above all a story. There is no question that it is out of step with every current literary fashion: it's extrovert rather than introvert, it has heroes, it delights in the music of words and names, and the unselfconscious celebration of beauty; it is active, optimistic, affirmative. At a time when writers were turning inwards, making their chief concern the development and motivation of character, Tolkien was writing books that are pre-eminently narratives. Indeed, "The Lord of the Rings" is not properly a novel at all, and criticism suffers when it considers the work as such. It is a prose epic, in which, for

instance, the naturalism of the novel would be quite inappropriate. "The Hobbit" is in a lower key, and may reasonably be called a novel, but "The Lord of the Rings" is in another tradition - notice for example, the frequent insertions of poetry, typical of the epic or cante-fable. Within that tradition, it is fit to take its place beside the great romances, for it is a supreme example of the storytellers's craft. We are unused to having pre-eminence given to plot, but the structure of "The Lord of the Rings" is worth attention. Consider the control the writer exercises over his complex narrative, the mapping of movement over Middle-earth, the careful timing of the different strands of the action, so that without apparent contrivance men meet and plots mature in perfect synchronization. This must have been a task of staggering difficulty, and Tolkien's craftmanship is astonishing. The detail and complexity of the narrative ensures that the theme does not become too monolithic and predictable, and though a necessary end, the means by which it will be achieved are not betrayed too early. The many subplots provide tension, relief, surprise, reflection, and there is consumate skill in the pacing of the narrative, the acceleration, the regulation of tension, crisis, climax - and anticlimax. I do not mean anticlimax in any derogatory sense, for Tolkien does not make the mistake of leaving his audience poised on too high a peak, but leads them down through the consummations of victory, the weddings and the parties, the tying of ends, the counting of the cost: a gentle diminuendo culminating in the "Scouring of the Shire" (a neat restatement in miniature of the story's theme) and the entry of the hero into his final reward.

The deliniation of character takes second place, and again the method is epic rather than naturalistic; the characters are presented instead of being developed. Comparison with "The Hobbit" will show that this was surely deliberate, for in the earlier book the characters form the plot, they interact, they change and reveal new aspects under the pressure of events: the comic become almost tragic, the admirable turn corrupt, and the ridiculous Bilbo manifests unexpected qualities of leadership. All this is what we have come to expect - character in action - but we do not find it in "The Lord of the Rings", and with good reason. For although "The Hobbit" is more obviously the story of a search, "The Lord of the Rings" is the true quest story, and the duty of characters in a quest is not action, but suffering. They respond to events, but they do not form them, for they are undergoing an ordeal, a testing and judgement, and much of the dramatic tension arises from that fact. Their struggle refines or destroys them, but it does not essentially change them. Even the hobbits at the end of the work remain what they were at the beginning. Those too deeply flawed by pride, like Denethor and Boromir, perish, but the good and faithful are confirmed and strengthened in their goodness. 'To him that overcometh, a crown of life shall be'. This is true triumph, of which victory in the battles is a reflection and an affirmation: not that they conquered Sauron, but that they resisted him to the end. For here again, Tolkien is magnificently unfashionable. He gives us heroes, men about whom there is a scent of destiny, of dedication and sacrifice - Aragorn himself above all, who is strong and gentle, with boundless energy governed by hard-won wisdom and compassion and who has worthy companions. Tolkien has freed virtue of its prim aura and given back the true meaning of strength; he has touched goodness with grandeur.

This is true even of the hobbits. They enter this heroic world as we do, confused outsiders, over whose shoulders we look; at first they seem pigmies in every way. Unimaginative, unadventurous, often frivolous - they are ordinary people to whom the worse happens, a predicament they lacked the power even to imagine. Yet they survive and meet the demands made on them courageously and humbly. Although to the end they retain a prosaic view of themselves they are are shown to be equal in moral stature of any Man or Elf. Indeed, Frodo surpasses all but the greatest: but Frodo and his sufferings are unique. At the conclusion he has attained more than hero's stature; he has achieved saintliness, a threshed

and winnowed holiness that divides him from the world he has saved, and entitles him, like Elijah, to enter Paradise without dying.

It is well to remember that Professor Tolkien was a devout Christian, and the underlying morality of the book is profoundly Christian. Even though this is never made explicit, for instance, from the beginning the emphasis placed on the need for mercy and the redemption of enemies rather than their destruction.

> "Many that live deserve death", says Gandalf, "and some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them ? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends." (The Fellowship of the Ring)

This is hardly the mood of a typical warrior-aristocracy; this world is not so much pagan as pre-Incarnation. Notice too, that those who perish, perish by their pride (though Boromir dies absolved) and that the humble, such as the hobbits, have other virtues added to them.

Tolkien has a fine sense of drama, indispensable in writing a tale of high adventure, not only the drama of specific events but also the drama of situation - as when, reaching the city of Minas Tirith, for so long a symbol of refuge and hope, we find the Lord Denethor and learn that even Gondor is cankered at the heart. In the appearance of the resurrected Gandalf to Aragorn and his companions this touch failed Tolkien; the wizard's return as narrated by Merry and Pippin is more moving and dramatic. However, to be able to be so specific about instances of dramatic writing says much for the writer.

Besides mastery as a storyteller, Tolkien has another gift which served him well: his ability to imagine and describe scenery. Ithilien is the example that comes most readily to mind, but look also at Dunharrow, at Tol Brandir. His eye for these effects is remarkable and his description so potent that, wary as I am of seeing autobiography in a work of fiction, I am inclined to find it in one place. I refer to the pitted, blasted landscape of Mordor, especially as described in the passage wherein the hobbits hide in a 'wide, almost circular pit' partly filled with foul ooze, after looking at the country before Mordor's gate, "like men on the edge of sleep where nightmare lurks." (The Two Towers). Tolkien was a young soldier in the First World War, and it seems possible at least that the source of these dreadful images lay in his memories of the Western Front. Whatever the truth of that, this descriptive power is valuable, for the visual vividness it gives to the landscapes of Middle-earth carries with it a strong conviction of reality.

To consider Tolkien simply as a writer is to miss half the matter. He was not only a gifted and conscientious craftsman but a great artificer, the Daedalus of his breed. He made the bricks with which he built. This fact has grown so familiar that sometimes we discount it, looking only for literary virtues to admire and forgetting the wonder. "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings" are fantasies; they are set in a world that does not exist. This of course is true of the world of any book; all writers take those elements of reality that they require and combine them as they choose. But in most cases they construct a world obviously close to that which their readers inhabit, while Tolkien chose not to do so. The dissimilarity, of course, is outward; in the inner world of thought and feeling where we all really live, the true reality, there is no difference.

> "The world is all grown strange" cries one of Tolkien's characters, "How shall a man judge ... in such times ?" "As he has ever judged" is the reply. "Good and Evil have not changed ... nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men." (The Two Towers)

(It is ironic that a story so morally austere, which lays emphasis on the acceptance of responsibility and speaks with equal force against surrender and despair, should have been charged with escapism; but it is an old argument, which Tolkien discussed long before it applied to him, in his essay "On Fairy Stories".)

Middle-earth is not unique in being a fantasy world as many still believe, but it is uniquely successful. No other invented realm has such depth and solidity. Of all the dimensions Tolkien gave his world that of time is the most impressive. He keeps us always conscious if the awesomely long history of the struggle whose final phase we witness and of the fact that we see only a corner of Middle-earth, set in a period of decline. There is the intoxicating sense that much more may be told if he or we had time; whether this is true, the artistic achievement of inducing such belief is the same. It is a feeling that he made explicit. both in its delight and pain, in the short story "Leaf by Niggle", which may fairly be called his literary autobiography and which I recommend, along with "On Fairy Stories" to anyone interested in seeing the mind of a fantasist at work:

> "There was one picture in particular which bothered him. It had begun with a leaf caught in the wind, and became a tree; and the tree grew, sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out fantastic roots. Strange birds came and settled on the twigs, and had to be attended to. Then all around the Tree, and behind it, through the gaps in the leaves and the boughs, a country began to open out; and there were glimpses of a forest marching over the land, and of mountains tipped with snow." (Leaf by Niggle)

Tolkien's own word for what is commonly called fantasy is 'sub-creation' the making of a secondary world with the integrity and coherence of reality. The two requisites for this activity he defines as imagination coupled with art; that is, not only the power to summon, but the skill to control. It is in this second point that he so far surpasses his competitors. The imagination of something that has no existence is dangerously easy, and many writers of fantasy have succumbed to the facility of invention, piling strangeness upon strangeness until the mind sickens, for it is all only words. But Middle-earth is real; it has an existence now independent of its creator. It has this reality because its parts relate to and modify each other, because it has balance and harmony, though neither too perfectly for truth. Tolkien avoided the trap of utopianism, as he avoided the trap of surrealism. Even at its strangest, Middle-earth is not bizzare, and there is enough prosaic detail to anchor the invention. A lesser writer, for example, would not have paused to calculate how long it would take twenty thousand Rohirrim to pass through Stonewain Valley, nor endured the ten-hour delay; such attention to detail induces us to give the same credence to more fantastic events. He uses the faulty reasoning to which we are all prone to his own ends: the adherence to the nature we know of most Middle-earth gives conviction to the departures from nature, like Fangorn. Nor is what we are shown ever improbable. If Ents existed, surely they would have behaved just as Tolkien describes. Treebeard is impossible, but not incredible. Throughout the work there is this restraint and discipline and no anarchy of imagination.

I have said that Tolkien made the bricks with which he built, but he did not make the straw and clay. As far as winning our belief in his creation is concerned, his masterstroke was to enlarge his Kindreds from originals already familiar to his audience. Some measure of belief or acceptance at least, already exists for Elves and Dwarves; when Tolkien has deepened and extended their natures, restoring to the Elder Kindred their terrible splendour, and freeing the Dwarves from the taint of buffoonery, giving to them dour secretive dignity, they are not only entirely credible but they bring with them a host of associations that Tolkien need

only evoke, not create. He does the same with Men, linking them with the myth of Altantis, which is well known yet shadowy enough to be used as he chose: even the names - Númenor, Dúnedain - seem names we have heard before, laden with majestic sorrow. He exploits this echoing of the half-familiar with great skill, using archaisms that suggest Anglo-Saxon, and hinting at the identification of the hobbits with the little people of Western legend. Indeed he continuously asserts that Middle-earth is our own world, even our own continent, only parted from us by the abyss of time. Even the Ents are not without parallels, for the European imagination is full of the incipient vitality of trees, while wood-sprites and gods abound. Only the Balrog is entirely invented, and having no echo in our minds, it fails to move so successfully. We catch only the rebound of the characters' fear; we inherit none.

Tolkien does not make the mistake of destroying the glamour of Middle-earth, particularly, Elvendom, by too much explanation. He leaves a jaggedness of outline on which the imagination may catch and gaps for our imagination to fill: he does not surfeit the appetite he stimulates. There is in moving from "The Hobbit" to "The Lord of the Rings" the frisson of realising that the world seen on that scale was in fact larger and more dangerous; that when Bilbo was a guest at Rivendell Aragorn was there, a boy of ten or so; that doubtless among the Wood-elves who imprisoned the Dwarves in Mirkwood was the Elf-King's son, Legolas. The delight Tolkien took in his own creation and the fascination it held are obvious and irresistable. For those who go on to read "Tom Bombadil" the charm of a man who can play a game solemnly is added to other charms; by this stage the reader is watching delightedly to see if his face will crack.

Yet a large part of Tolkien's work remains unexplained. However regrettably in some views, "The Lord of the Rings" became the the focus of a cult. Why ? Why did the creation of this academic, this orthodox Christian, become part of the drug culture, beloved of strange mystic sects ? What element, or blend of elements, give it such power ? Here I am aware of setting foot on dangerous ground; but as I said previously, I do not intend to search for any meanings, only the source of the extraordinary fascination "The Lotd of the Rings" has exercised over some of its readers.

Many have felt that this fascination was most readily accounted for by assuming the book is an allegory. We live in a utilitarian age and tend to believe that everything has a purpose. Tolkien, in "On Fairy-stories", gave a warning to those inclined to theorise in this way:

> "Ignorance or forgetfulness of the nature of a story, (as a thing told in its entirety) has often led such enquirers into strange judgements." (On Fairy-stories)

In the Foreword to the second edition of "The Lord of the Rings", he said quite specifically:

> "As for any meaning or message, it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical ... I cordially dislike allegory in all its forms ... I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author." (Introduction to "The Lord of the Rings", second edition)

The key to understanding lies, I believe, in the word 'applicability'. The stories of Middle-earth have no 'meaning'; but they have relevance because Tolkien, consciously of unconsciously, identified, isolated, and wove into a single story the most emotionally powerful elements of our folktale heritage.

Those who have been most disturbed by it are, I suspect, (it can only be suspicion) those most estranged from the tradition that was Tolkien's inspiration: "The Lord of the Rings" is their first experience of what should be their imaginative heritage, and they over-react either with rejection, or surrendering too completely.

Magic consists of the naming of sacred objects and, by extension, of the identification of those objects. This is where Tolkien gathered the power he used so effectively. I have mentioned already how well judged it was to use Elves and Dragons, rather than inventing substitutes of his own, which would have had no emotional resonance; he extends this method, though more subtly, to his characters, too. I cannot examine everyone, but examples will suffice. Gandalf is the abstraction of all wizards, though fuller and rounder than any other - Merlin himself does not have the solidity of Gandalf - but he evokes other traditions too. He is the Wanderer, who comes when he is most sorely needed, but cannot be summoned; he is the Grey Pilgrim, which gives him the aura of the saints; he is rustic, pipe-smoking grandfather, showering treats; he is Stormcrow, the prophet who goes unheeded; he echoes Odin, with his grey garments and his miraculous horse; he dies and is resurrected. Of course these are not made explicit, and of course Gandalf is not Christ, any more than Aragorn is, or Faramir, though they too both echo him. But we make the unconscious associations, and shiver with recognition.

Aragorn is also the distillation of many heroes. He is the lost or hidden heir, the prince who must be exiled to the wilderness before he can come to his kingdom; the lover who serves long years for his bride; he is the 'perfect gentle knight'; the Prince who must achieve the Quest to win his Princess; and the promised King whose return brings the Golden Age. He inherits the emotions of his originals, and adds to them the attraction of a clearly drawn, impressive character. Galadriel, the Lady of Lórien, is clearly the perilous beautiful fay, the Queen of Elfland or Gore, but she has the aura of Norn or Goddess to add to the beauty and mystery of the gift-giving Fairy Queen, and her Golden Wood is every enchanted forest, every forbidden garden, Eden itself, the place unstained by sin or sorrow; it is Gramarye too. The tale could go on: Tom Bombadil, the indestructible merry spirit of the earth, Pan and Puck, the Green Man; the flawed knight; the faithful servant; the King with the prophesied death; the wicked magician and the forlorn Princess.

Besides the characters, whose situation he extends and adapts superbly, Tolkein uses other potent elements of legend. There is the last stand of the beleaguered city; there is the One Ring, the legendary treasure that carries a curse, and the lesser rings that bind the Nazgûl, echoing the rings once given by Kings as rewards and marks of fealty. Aragorn bears a famous sword, named and itself the subject of story; Boromir a horn reminiscent of Oliphant. A favourite motive of the folktale, the irresistable metal, in our culture the memory of the impact of iron on the Bronze Age (as are the swords of whose line Andúril comes) appears here as mithril, true-silver, beautiful and more desirable than gold, by association with the Elves, almost magical. Even the constant reference to the West, and the longing for the Western Lands call forth a strong response that needs never be defined.

All these elements are very potent magic, and only to recite them would be moving; but Tolkien knew that "a spell both means a story told, and a formula of power" (On Fairy-stories) and he combined all these strands in a story, itself blending themes of legend, the burden of which, the averting of the end of the world, could hardly be more momentous. The title he gives it in "The Red Book of Westmarch" is fitter for it than the abbreviated form we use - "The Downfall of the Lord of the Rings and the Return of the King". The Quest must be followed, the City defended, and the Last Battle joined as the gates of Hell open. Judgement, Armageddon, Ragnarok. Beneath the swift-moving events the motifs of struggle and doom latent in all nurtured by our North European culture and Judæo-Christian beliefs is sensed like movement

felt through the ground, and in many ways he deepens the tradition. In this story, the treasure is not to be won, but to be renounced; only by the destruction of the most precious thing in it may Middle-earth be preserved. The message of renunciation and sacrifice recurs; Faramir noble and guiltless offering himself for his city: Arwen renouncing her immortality for Love. Most immense and moving of all is the sacrifice of the Elves, who fight knowing that they will fall with their enemy, that with the Ring will perish their power, and victory to them will mean the loss of Middle-earth. This grief behind the triumph, the elegaic note, gives a greater emotional depth than a simple celebration of triumph.

Tolkien was wise in the limitations he set on his heroes' victory. There is no suggestion that it is permanent: Gandalf warns that the enemy will return, they have fought only

> "... so that those who live after may have clean earth to till, What weather they shall have it not ours to rule." (The Return of the King)

Tolkien as a Christian would not suggest that final salvation could be achieved by Men or Elves, or even Gandalf.

Yet though the acknowledgement of the impossibility of final victory and the accent on loss-in-gain might suggest an ending melancholy in tone, this would be wrong. Tolkien saw one of the functions of a story of this kind as 'consolation', and the most important 'consolation' that of the happy ending, to use his own word - eucatastrophe - which he defines as being

> " ... a sudden and miraculous grace, never to be counted on to recur . It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure; the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence if you will) universal final defeat, and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief." (On Fairy-stories)

It is a criterion which he fulfills triumphantly. Quotations out of context cannot convey the lift and the glory that he can achieve, but as an instance, think of the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, when Éomer looks on certain destruction and his own death, and sings.

> "For once more lust of battle was upon him; and he was still unscathed, and he was young, and he was King; the lord of a fell people. And Lo! even as he laughed at despair he looked out again on the black ships and he lifted up his sword to defy them.
>
> And then wonder took him, and a great joy; and he cast his sword up in the sunlight and sang as he caught it. And all eyes followed his gaze, and behold! on the foremost ship a great standard broke, and the wind displayed it as she turned towards the Harlond. There flowered a white tree, and that was for Gondor; but seven stars were about it, and a high crown above it, the signs of Elendil that no lord had borne for years beyond count. And the stars flamed in the sunlight, for they were wrought of gems by Arwen daughter of Elrond and the crown was bright in the morning, for it was wrought of mithril and gold.
>
> Thus came Aragorn son of Arathorn, Elessar, Isildur's heir, out of the Paths of the Dead, borne upon a wind from the sea to the Kingdom of Gondor ... " (The Return of the King)

Remember too the restoration to life of Faramir, Sam and Frodo waking on the Field of Cormallen, when they had closed their eyes on Mount Doom, and our last sight of Frodo, as he looks back from the deck of the Elf-ship and sees

the rain-curtain roll back to reveal the shores of the West. He tells us the story we always knew, but had forgotten and he gives it the ending we always desired it should have. There is a wholesome air to Middle-earth, redolent of energy, generosity and hope.

> "To the Elvish craft, Enchantment, Fantasy aspires, and when it is successul of all forms of human art most nearly approaches." (On Fairy-stories)

Appreciation cannot be complete until "The Silmarillion" is published; but there can be no doubt that the creation of Middle-earth and the writing of its annals was a great achievement. We can already say with certainty that Tolkien's fantasy is successful, and that what he attained does indeed approach Enchantment.

Niggle never finished painting his picture. He was summoned to begin the journey he dreaded when his Tree was incomplete, and when he had gone, the canvas was used to patch his neighbour's roof: but after the little man's purgatory, he too was granted a eucatastrophe:

> "Before long he found that the path on which he had started has disappeared, and the bicycle was rolling along over a marvellous turf. It was green and close, and yet he could see every blade distinctly. He seemed to remember having seen or dreamed of that sweep of grass somewhere or other. The curves of the land were familiar somehow. Yes: the ground was becoming level, as it should, and now of course, it was beginning to rise again. A great green shadow came between him and the sun. Niggle looked up and fell off his bicycle.
> Before him stood the Tree,his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that he had felt many times and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the tree, and slowly lifted his arms and opened them wide.
> "It's a gift!" he said."
> (Tree and Leaf)

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