

# THE SILMARILLION - a review by

Charles Noad



O at long last, after the accumulated expectations of years, we have The Silmarillion. Does it live up to those expectations? As far as this reviewer is concerned, no and yes; 'no' in the sense that such enormous hopes as were built up over the period could not possibly have been fulfilled - neither by The Silmarillion nor by any other book that has ever been written. It was as though the expected book would reproduce that mythic power

(to coin a phrase) of The Lord of the Rings which can only be felt, if at all, after prolonged consideration, in a manner both more intense and more immediate: and that would have been too much to ask of any book; 'yes' in the sense that in The Silmarillion we have a book at once so unique, so strange, so various, so rich in invention, and so burdened with the irrecoverable losses wrought by time and by fate that it can only be classified, in the fullest sense of the word, as mythology: a new mythology, akin to those of the past, but informed with the sensibilities of humanity long fallen from innocence.

Apart from its content, The Silmarillion resembles mythology in another way: any particular corpus of myth and legend is usually drawn from a variety of sources, each of which has its own peculiar style and draws on its own unique roots, in so doing usually making an attempt to achieve a level of self-consistency. The result is that any one body of myth comes to us in a variety of styles, and is often not altogether self-consistent; and, up to a point, The Silmarillion is like that. As Christopher Tolkien says in the foreword "... my father came to conceive The Silmarillion as a compilation, a compendious narrative, made long after from sources of great diversity... and this conception has indeed its parallel in the actual history of the book, for a great deal of earlier prose and poetry does underlie it, and it is to some extent a compendium in fact and not only in theory. To this may be ascribed... some differences of tone and portrayal, some obscurities, and, here and there, some lack of cohesion." It goes without saying (but should be said anyway) that an enormous debt is owed by Professor Tolkien's readers to Christopher Tolkien for his labours in collating the original manuscripts of the book.

I shall not attempt to outline the book's contents; readers of Mallorn will likely have read it at least twice by now already, and to rehearse the

details of the narrative would merely waste space; nevertheless, a few remarks may be in order.

The above likening of the book to mythology underlines the fact that The Silmarillion is unlike almost anything else that has been published in a very long time; and among the things it is unlike are The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Those are among other things, continuous narratives of adventure and peril, enlivened with humour and ornamented by unfolding characteristics. The Silmarillion, by contrast, is composed of more or less self-contained episodes written mostly in an elevated, sometimes stark, sometimes biblical, style, and it is hardly likely that all those who like the earlier books will care for this one.

The story of Beren and Lúthien is perhaps the most memorable single episode. The tale of how Beren pledged to recover a Silmaril from Morgoth's crown as the bride-price of Lúthien, of how Huan the hound of Valinor fought both Sauron in the form of a wolf and Carcharoth of Angband, and of how the song and transcendent beauty of Lúthien bewitched Morgoth himself and moved the heart even of the un pitying Mandos for the only time ever, is amongst the finest things to have come from Tolkien's pen.

Concerning the Silmarils themselves, it may be observed that they seem to possess properties other than just containing the light of the Two Trees: Mandos foretells that the fates of Arda, earth, sea, and air, lie locked within them (P.67); after stealing them, Morgoth calls himself King of the World and in token of this sets the Silmarils in his iron crown (P.81); Melian tells her husband Thingol that "the light of Aman and the fate of Arda lie locked now in these things (i.e. the Silmarils)" (P.127); and Morgoth later calls himself the "Master of the fates of Arda" (P.197). Just how the Silmarils tie in with the destiny of the world is never made explicit, but this and much else in The Silmarillion will surely provide rich material for speculation and extrapolation in the years to come (though perhaps mention should be made of the fact that it has made nonsense of a great deal of speculation concerning it, this reviewer's not least!). It is to be hoped that future delvings will not all conclude with the expectation that the supplementary materials about Middle-earth, narrative, linguistic, historical, and philosophical that Christopher Tolkien hopes one day to publish will supply all the answers.

The time-scale of the story is interesting: up until the return of the Noldor to Middle-earth, uncounted millenia have passed; but only about five-and-a-half centuries elapse between the raising of the moon and Eärendil's voyage at almost the end of the first age. And by the end of the third age, nearly seven thousand years have passed since the return of the Noldor and the raising of the moon and sun.

A central theme of The Silmarillion is perhaps that of the problem of evil: the story passes "from the high and the beautiful to darkness and ruin", which fall is primarily caused by Morgoth; and one may well ask why the Valar, or even Ilúvatar himself, sit back and let him, a being of far greater power than the inhabitants of Middle-earth, wreak such evil. It may be argued that it was the Noldor who brought evil on their own heads in even attempting to regain the Silmarils from Morgoth; but if so, then evil was also brought down on the undeserving heads of many others. It is only when Morgoth's victory is all but

complete that the Valar are persuaded to intervene.

Possibly one reason why the Valar were so seemingly lax lies in the importance that in Tolkien's cosmos appears to be attached to individual free will and the consequences of unforced decisions. In his book on Tolkien, Paul Kocher shows the importance to the working-out of providence of the freedom of choice of people choosing which of several different possible courses to take; perhaps a similar consideration applies to the choice of the Noldor: the consequences of their rebellion must be taken to their conclusion before Morgoth can be dealt with.

Christopher Tolkien has carried out the daunting and laborious task of bringing the material of The Silmarillion into a coherent form with both scholarly precision and the sympathetic insight of long familiarity with the subject-matter, and it is to him that we owe the present appearance of his father's awe-inspiring and unforgettable creation.

