The Lord of the Rings) is broadcast all over Narnia. It meets us in the rivers and on the plains and laughs in the hollows and on the hills. 'I am alive,' it seems to say, 'and I am calling you home.'

The Lord of the Rings is an autumnal, elegiac work; the Chronicles (excepting *The Last Battle*) are works of spring and summer. They both resonate with magic, but the former's is older, greyer, more restrained, whereas the latter's is younger, fresher, more exuberant. Lucy and Susan's wild romp with Aslan and their even wilder ride on his back in Chapter XV of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; the dancing fawns and Bacchic revellers in Chapters VI and XIV of *Prince Caspian*; Reepicheep's unwavering desire to reach Aslan's country in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*; the fiery land of Bism in Chapter XIV of *The Silver Chair*, where diamonds can be drunk as though they were wine; Shasta's night meeting with the numinous Aslan in Chapter XI of *The Horse and His Boy*; the hauntingly beautiful Song of Creation that Aslan sings in Chapter IX of *The Magician's Nephew*: all speak alike of a vigorous, energetic world of endless possibilities for adventure, growth and discovery. Here is a world where beauty, grace and power can be felt, touched, known.

Soon, Gandalf and the Elves will leave Middle-earth and soon the staffs will be broken, the rings will disappear, and the seeing stones will go dark, but the magic presence of Aslan will ever remain, just on the other side of a river or just behind a tree. In the last chapter of *The Magician's Nephew*, Aslan returns Polly and Digory to the Wood between the Worlds, where he gives them a stern warning before sending them back to London. "Both the children," Lewis writes,

> were looking up into the Lion's face as he spoke these words. And all at once (they never knew exactly how it happened) the face

seemed to be a sea of tossing gold in which they were floating, and such a sweetness and power rolled about them and over them and entered into them that they felt they had never really been happy or wise or good, or even alive and awake, before. And the memory of that moment stayed with them always, so that as long as they both lived, if ever they were sad or afraid or angry, the thought of all that golden goodness, and the feeling that it was still there, quite close, just round some corner or just behind some door, would come back and make them sure, deep down inside, that all was well.

I can think of no passage in the Chronicles that more perfectly captures the unique nature of Lewis's Faërie magic. For the memory that remains with Digory and Polly is like the memory that remains in our own minds when we put down the Chronicles. Just as Odysseus, returned to Ithaca, must have felt, still, around him the glory of those wonders he had encountered in his travels, so we (like Polly and Digory) feel all about us the ever-present nearness of Aslan. Our brain may tell us that this is 'only' fantasy, but our heart and soul ache to turn that corner, to open that door, to awaken, finally, from our cold and lonely slumber.

The mythic vein tapped by Tolkien lends his Faërie World an almost concrete reality, but the one tapped by Lewis lends his Faërie world something different: an incarnated Beauty that is at once the source and goal of all our deepest yearnings and desires. 〽

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Real and imaginary history in *The Lord of the Rings*

FRANCO MANNI

Reading and re-reading *The Lord of the Rings*, I feel immersed in a world that differs from that of my normal daily experience. This would in some measure be true, of course, for any interesting novel: the events are experienced by other people (the characters) and theirs are the decisions, the joys and the perils. Furthermore, in *The Lord of the Rings* I feel immersed in the Middle Ages. When I read books about medieval history, though, my mind resists this sensation; if I were to be transported in my imagination to any century of the Middle Ages, it would never be the same as the world of *The Lord of the Rings*, which is much wider than the medieval period, more complex, more idealized and closer to me and my experience (although not, of course, the greater part of it).

Tolkien wanted to talk about *our* world, and to do so he used that which he loved and which constituted his work: archaeological and philological evidence concerning the Middle Ages, especially the early medieval period. Tolkien said that the events recounted in *The Lord of the Rings* took place in Middle-earth — at latitudes corresponding to the Atlantic coast of Europe, down to the northern Mediterranean lands — in an epoch that resembles that which saw the struggles between late-Roman/barbarian kingdoms that led to the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire with

Rome as its capital. Hobbiton and Rivendell are at the same latitude as Oxford, and Minas Tirith is at that of Florence. The mouth of the Anduin and the city of Pelargir are at the latitude of ancient Troy (*Letters* No. 294). That in the passage Tolkien refers to Troy and Florence, the first an important city in classical antiquity and the second during the Renaissance, is an indication that Tolkien, although fascinated by the early medieval period in particular, was in fact fascinated by history *in general*.

An interest in history might be motivated by nostalgia (which Tolkien certainly felt) or the desire to understand the genesis of the present and thus to understand the present in greater depth than would be afforded by a mere examination of the results, with no consideration of the causes. Tolkien also possessed this, I think more important, motivation. His world — as we shall see below in greater detail — is like a *millefeuille* cake that has been cut, so that one can see how it is made. The reader can see the layers from twin perspectives because of two literary techniques used by Tolkien: vertically, giving the effect of depth, or horizontally, in greater complexity.

The first viewpoint is more evident and was spoken of explicitly by Tolkien himself (*Letters* No. 247). has been rigorously demonstrated by the critic Tom Shippey (*The Road to Middle-earth* pp. 272–281): *The Lord of the Rings* recounts events that occurred, over the space of about a year, at the end of the Third Age. But here and there — in fact, fairly frequently — reference is made to historical episodes from all three ages. This involves reference to tales, poems, songs, monuments, inscriptions, natural landscapes and ancient artefacts. These past events are never expounded fully, but only glimpsed partially. This technique creates an 'effect of depth' that gradually augments the appearance of reality in the imaginary world that is described. In fact, every real world has its own structured past, which is never presented in its completeness to anyone, but limited portions of which are investigated when an external event or internal motivation acts as a stimulus. An important reason that *The Lord of the Rings* is considerably more absorbing than *Silmarillion* is the fact that it contains temporal backdrops that give rise to a realistic effect of depth, whereas *The Silmarillion* does not, for it constitutes them itself. And this is also the principal reason why Tolkien preferred not to publish *The Silmarillion*, as he himself admitted (*Letters*, Nos 182, 247) and as Shippey underlines (*The Road to Middle-earth* pp. 203–204, 273–274).

The second perspective, more elusive, although abundantly present in *The Lord of the Rings*, has not (to my knowledge) received explicit critical attention, although several points are made in an article by Christina Scull[1]. This is the 'horizontal' or synchronic viewpoint, in which the various historical layers are present at the same time and 'spatialized', that is, transformed into territories of Middle-earth. The Barrow-downs represent the late Stone Age to early Bronze Age (*c.* 3000 BC); Numenor, with its gigan-

Why is there immobility in Tolkien's imaginary history?

tic funerary constructions and embalming of the dead, is ancient Egypt — and also ancient Israel which, at the time of the monarchy (*c.* 900 BC), forsook the iconless cult of Yahweh (Eru on Meneltarma) for idolatry, and Israel of the Exodus, with the flight of Elendil/Moses and the remaining faithful. Then again, the human sacrifices demanded by Sauron in the temple at Melkor bring to mind the customs of the ancient Carthaginians and the Aztecs; and the conquest for plunder and slave-taking, the markedly different foreign policy of imperial with respect to republican Rome. Arnor represents the Western Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth century, with internal struggles between the *imperatores*, as well as the complicated wars between barbarian tribes and barbarian/Roman kingdoms, in particular the Anglo-Saxons and the Merovingians' realm. The Wainriders and Easterlings represent nomadic and semi-nomadic Slavs, Magyars, Bulgars, and other tribes in their various incursions into Europe from the East during late-classical and early medieval times. The Dwarf races, with their age-old feuding, are the fifth- to eighth-century Germanic kings, as recounted, for example, in Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*.

Historical perspectives

Gondor is — in Tolkien's own words — a sort of proud and venerable (but ever more impotent) Byzantium, which reaches the peak of its power (tenth century) only to unravel in a decadent medieval period (*Letters* No. 131). Tolkien also relates that the Numenoreans in Gondor were proud, strange and archaic, just like the ultra-traditionalist ancient Egyptians, who resemble them in their love of gigantic edifices and interest in tombs and ancestors, although in their theology they are more like the Hebrews (*Letters* No. 211). In general, the Fall of Numenor signifies for Tolkien the end of the classical epoch and the beginning of the Middle Ages (*Letters* No. 131).

The Rohirrim represent the Anglo-Saxons from the fifth to eleventh centuries (Shippey *The Road to Middle-earth* pp. 111–119) and their relations with Gondor those between the Romans/barbarians and Byzantium[2]. But the Rohirrim also stand for the North American natives, with their horses, prairies and their ingenuous and strict sense of honour (Shippey *The Road to Middle-earth* pp. 115).

Mordor in general represents the despotism of the ancient eastern empires (Eygptian, Chaldean, Mesopotamian, Persian), who deported entire peoples and made widespread use of slavery (but also suggests the despotism of our own time: the 'racial' experiments and the attempt to introduce a new paganism on the part of the Nazis; whereas Saruman, who aspires to install himself in Isengard, resembles the Vichy, Bratislava and Budapest governments). The Isengard of Saruman is also the lair of powerful medieval to 18th-century pirates, like Saracen Algeria or the Caribbean island of Tortuga. Esgaroth on the Long Lake (in *The Hobbit*) is like a European Bronze-Age lake settlement combined

with a lagoon or riverside city, such as mercantile Venice or Amsterdam in late medieval times (fourteenth to fifteenth centuries).

Lorien and Rivendell are a mixture of the medieval (twelfth to thirteenth century) baronial courts of Provence, with their troubadours, and early medieval Benedictine — in particular Cluniac — abbeys[3].

At the end of this exhaustive list are the Druedain, a blend of Neolithic and nineteenth-century third-world peoples at the time of their first contacts with European colonizers.

Not only, then is Middle-earth in its entirety a mixture of different historical periods, each one referred to a geographical region, a sort of 'synchronized diachrony' (in which events separated in time are made contemporary), but also in some individual areas a certain degree of combination occurs.

The most evident example is the Shire. So as to make it compatible with the other parts of Middle-earth that will be visited by the Hobbits, it manifests certain generalized medieval (such as plumed headgear, bows and arrows, travel on foot or on horseback, and the existence of the Thain) or *Ancien Règime* qualities (extended rather than nuclear families; no electricity; little travel occurs: most people are born, live and die in one place; the economy is almost exclusively agricultural). Thus it exhibits numerous aspects of the past that lasted for millennia and are compatible with the various geographically (not temporally) expressed 'pasts' to be found elsewhere in Middle-earth.

But it also contains (blended with the ingredients outlined above) modern and contemporary elements: there are American plants, potatoes and tobacco ('pipe-weed' was called tobacco in the first drafts of *The Lord of the Rings*); a well-organized postal service exists for *everyone* (not just for the aristocracy); there is a civic museum; neither vassalage nor a rural nobility exist; there are smials or comfortable Hobbit houses; Lobelia uses an umbrella; middle-class houses have clocks hanging on the wall; Sharkey introduces the accumulation of state wealth, industrial pollution of rivers, prohibition of alcohol and tobacco, and smokestacks.

As Emilia Lodigiani has observed, the Shire represents "everyday life",[4] which cannot exist or sustain itself in isolation from a much wider cultural, political and military background: the Hobbits as a race were relatives of Men, who themselves had received language, writing and science from the Elves; in particular, there was peace in the Shire only because the Elves and Men (the last of which were the Rangers) had curbed the forces of evil. Similarly, the Shire symbolizes the actual present, with which the reader identifies (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are written — in 'The Red Book of Westmarch' — from the point of view of the Hobbits). And the present cannot exist without the past, or survive without a sense of history (or *historia magistra vitae*, which is developed for the Hobbit population by a few selected individuals, especially Bilbo and Frodo).

If we enter into the intimate life of the Shire, we find a well-fed Hobbit (Bilbo, or Frodo before his voyage) in his comfortable home, Bag End, seated in a comfortable arm-chair, smoking a pipe, while the clock on the wall and the crackling of the fire mark the passing of time spent waiting for the scones and sponge cake which is being baked for afternoon tea; outside, the gardener is attending to the lawn and flowerbeds. This authentic personal life of the Shire is very childish and celibate[5] (psychologically), very petit-bourgeois (socially), very countrified (from a geographical point of view) and very 20th-century (temporally). It portrays, in other words, a style of life disconnected from an awareness of great historical events. We know that Bilbo and Frodo have 'Tookish blood', take part in important adventures and meet Elves and Wizards, but these facts are what make them different, and distinguish them from — rather than making them fit into — the Shire.

It seems then, that when Tolkien speaks of Hobbits, he makes reference to his readers (as well as to a part of himself — *Letters* No. 213) towards whom he feels both sympathy and critical doubt. When he speaks of the Elves, Aragorn, Treebeard and, especially, of Gandalf, he is talking about that minority of people (as well as about another part of himself) who fulfil the vital role of 'eye-openers' and, in particular, curators of that sense of history that is essential for the defence and promotion of everyday life. (Although this knowledge of history may be necessary for the defence and encouragement of 'normal' existence, it is certainly not sufficient to guarantee it: Saruman is a scholar-expert in the tradition of the Rings and many other historical matters, but this knowledge does not enable him to avoid becoming a great deceiver and victim of self-deception.)

Sense in the Shire

If the Hobbits represent twentieth-century readers, the regions of Middle-earth are a historical atlas and characters such as Gandalf, Elrond and Aragorn are history professors, why did Tolkien state more than once that the events recounted in his saga are episodes that took place in our world, in particular in Europe, but in the distant past (*Letters* Nos 211, 294, 183)? Tolkien was, in fact, quite detailed: his present, and that of *The Lord of the Rings*' readers (the second half of the twentieth century) corresponds to the end of the Sixth Age or the beginning of the seventh. As an Age lasts for about 2,000 years, between the end of the Third Age — and the happenings chronicled in *The Lord of the Rings* — and the publication of the book, 6,000 years would have passed[6].

But what sense is there in constructing a Shire that somewhat resembles the home of Wodehouse's Jeeves, and then saying that this land — with its clocks, umbrella-carrying widows, well-tended lawns and five-o'clock tea — existed 6,000 years ago, between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age?

The most plausible explanation is, I think, the following: it is because neither the twentieth-century Shire, nor Byzantine Gondor, nor indeed any other component of the Middle-earth *tableau historique* are real; all are idealized. In the Shire, for example there are few weapons, almost no crime of any kind, and such incidence of epidemics, starva-

tion and warfare as are described happened conveniently beyond living memory. Gondorian Byzantium, unlike the real Byzantium[7], seems to have a sort of feudal system (manifested in Prince Imrahil and the other Lords who gathered to defend Minas Tirith in its hour of need), but there are not the chronic feudal wars that were all too common in, say, medieval western Europe.

It is true that few readers of *The Lord of the Rings* would be able, or interested, to recognize the marked incongruities that exist between Tolkien's imaginary medieval worlds and the actual Middle Ages; but nearly all of these readers, whether they like it or not, cannot avoid accepting the rural England of the Shire as real. Indeed, that 'Shire' is too idealized! Thus, by pushing the apparent modernity of the Shire (together with the surrounding medieval regions) back to 6,000 years ago, Tolkien is able to make the two things compatible: readers identify with the Shire's twentieth-century features, but this identification is not ruined by unsustainable comparisons.

On the other hand, shifting the time of the War of the Ring to 6,000 years ago has the result that the First Age commenced 12,000 years ago, and this happens — as every reader of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* knows — without transforming the 'medieval' status of Elvish, Dwarfish and human civilizations (without considering the Hobbits of the Shire, whose recorded history begins no earlier than the Third Age). In all three ages we find a single and unchanging level of civilization, the 'medieval'.

A question of time

This brings us to consider two further problems of Tolkien's use of history in his works of fiction. The first is that, in one sense, time passes (kingdoms are born and destroyed; continents change; characters are born, perform actions and then die), but in a second sense it seems not to pass (scientific, technological, artistic, literary, jurisprudential and religious notions do not change). It is as though civilization was immobile, as though only brief events (such a battles, adventures and deaths) occurred, in the absence of long-term processes (such as the spread of feudalism, industrialization, changes in modes of government and family structure).

The second problem is that this very immobility sustains the 'medieval': the same type of armour, castles, hereditary monarchy and the same absence of industrialization are found both at the onset of the First Age and at the end of the Third, as is the lack of widespread slavery. Whence this inertia? I will consider the second question first.

It should be made clear at the outset that this 'medieval' character is expressed between inverted commas for several reasons: it includes elements of antiquity, such as the deification of Sauron and slavery in Mordor and, generally, the *extreme* slowness of change (in the 4,000 years of the ancient civilized world, cultural and social changes were much slower than in the 1,000 years of the Middle Ages, from late classical to Renaissance). Then there are ingredients from

the modern age, such as the presence of national rather than feudal monarchies; the presence of armies composed largely of foot-soldiers; and the ideology noted by Shippey, who refers to Lord Acton's aphorism that power always corrupts and therefore that someone who seeks power cannot remain untainted[8].

Furthermore, the scenario of an alliance of many peoples (the 'Free Peoples of Middle-earth') who, *in the name of freedom* and other values that go beyond the mere politics of state power, fight against a common enemy that aims to conquer and enslave the whole world, is an idea not to be found in the Middle Ages or the *Ancien Régime*, but appears in European alliances only at the time of the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte. In addition, as mentioned above, there is neither clear-cut vassalage (the word is used only with regard to Gwaihir and his eagles), nor serfdom. In particular, there is no organized church with related customs rooted in the life of the populace.

Perhaps Tolkien chose the medieval period because the classical civilizations had aspects too different from ours (human sacrifice, polytheism, gladiatorial contests, deification of rulers, sexual licence, slavery), which would have created obstacles to reader identification. On the other hand, the modern age did not easily lend itself to the landscapes and characters Tolkien had in mind: elements such as bureaucracy, industrialization and mass culture would have resembled hard, unfantasized reality a bit too much.

The Middle Ages also lend themselves well to the expression of the Germanic ideals of *Beowulf*, according to which "heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose, more proud the spirit as our power lessens". Tolkien, however wanted this ideal in the following form (as he says explicitly in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son*): desperate courage is a moral value only if uncorrupted by a desire for glory, for personal recognition, but is motivated only by the loyalty of a subordinate to his superiors. (At first glance, it could seem that Tolkien did not realize that this identical position was adopted in the defence of Nazis at the Nuremberg trials.) And this adjustment could only have widespread social approval in a Christian society such as in the medieval epoch, in contrast to ancient pagan societies.

Other motives: medieval times are fascinating because of the stratification of previous cultures (Theodoric's keeping of the Roman senate; Frederick II, who mixed elements of ancient Roman with Byzantine, Norman, Arab and Frankish feudal in his Palermo palace)[9], a stratification that also existed in the ancient world but about which we, from our greater distance in time, know much less. In medieval, but not ancient, times an original English civilization and language were born (from a synthesis of British Celts, Romans and Anglo-Saxons). Pre-Reformation medieval England was still Catholic, not yet become insular, but with deep linguistic, cultural and dynastic ties with the continent — and so different from in the modern age. Lastly, in the

> It seems then, that when Tolkien speaks of Hobbits, he makes reference to his readers

Middle Ages Tolkien could make appropriate use of a series of languages of his own invention, based on the Germanic and Celtic tongues that he loved[10].

If one reads a serious book on medieval history[11], one immediately makes the (predictable) discovery that all medieval kings were — in varying proportions, of course — both good and bad, and there is never a moment during these 1,000 years when an alliance that clearly aims at conquest, enslavement and massacre is opposed by an alliance that proposes to defend liberty and promote justice. Such groupings — either in practice or, at least, in theory — may be found from the time of the French Revolution onwards and, especially, from the time of the Second World War.

Following Tom Shippey's analysis, it seems to me that Tolkien *also* wants (it is not his principal aim) to talk about the mid-twentieth century and its particular political problems. But, like other British fantasy writers of the same period (T. H. White, Orwell, C. S. Lewis and Golding), he could not do so using a form of literary realism. None of these authors addressed politics and social problems *directly*, because they felt that beneath them lay other more important issues (for example, the investigation of the nature of evil) that many 'realist' writers were tempted to avoid or completely ignore[12]. Tolkien elected to use medieval fantasy, like White, whereas Orwell chose the near future, Golding a mid-oceanic desert island, and Lewis, an interplanetary voyage.

In order to reply to the second question posed above (why does Tolkien 'immobilize' history?), let us begin by noting that the Middle Ages — as commonly perceived — seem to embody the idea of immobility; we do not find it easy to distinguish the various subdivisions of western medieval history (such as the phases of feudalism)[13]. We clearly perceive the differences between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, but not those between the seventh and ninth or eleventh and thirteenth centuries; it seems to us as though each generation of medieval peasants, monks, nuns, housewives and warriors absorbed entirely and without additions the heritage of ideas and habits bequeathed by the preceding generation. Whether this might really be due to the existence of an objective medieval inertia (which was still more pronounced in antiquity), or alternatively to our subjective obtuseness in discriminating, is a complex problem that I will not discuss here. The fact, though, remains.

Certainly, medieval historians were not aware of important historical changes; they recorded bundles of events, but did not notice fundamental changes: and Tolkien in *The Silmarillion* and the retrospective passages of *The Lord of the Rings* does not describe past centuries and millennia after the fashion of a modern historian, but rather he recounts them as might have Paul the Deacon in his *Historia Langobardorum*[14].

To a certain extent Tolkien accepts, as a philosophical basis for this immobility, the Platonic theory: for Plato all

knowledge is pre-existent to history, it exists from the birth of the heavens, and during life it is remembered, but neither augmented nor modified; progress does not exist. Thus for Tolkien some knowledge is innate or 'natural' such as that concerning family organization[15] whereas all other knowledge (such as astronomical, artistic, military or linguistic) was taught by the Valar to the Elves at the beginning of their history: more to the Eldar and less to the Moriquendi, but at the beginning a body of knowledge was transmitted and afterwards basically conserved without change (there were some specific developments, such as the art of precious metalwork in Feanor and Celembribor, but these had no general significance for the Elves' social practices). The circumstances of Men during the first three Ages are little different, except that for them the Valar's role is played by the Elves.

It is true that in the Fourth Age the Men break away from the tutelage of the Elves and the Istari (and, in the final analysis, the Valar) and develop a 'Time of Men' which leads to our actual history, and up to our present, which is no longer 'medieval', and therefore presupposes that historical change had been 'set in motion'. But the Fourth Age is *not* described by Tolkien: he eliminated the proposed Epilogue of *The Lord of the Rings* and aborted the sequel set after the death of Aragorn[16].

As Shippey has rightly observed (*The Road to Middle-earth* p. 199) the dialogue between Legolas and Gimli in Minas Tirith has a particular importance in *The Lord of the Rings*: the representatives of the two main non-human races of Middle-earth discuss history and the role of Men in it: the latter are described as the new protagonists who will replace the old, with the principal defect of inconstancy and the principal merit of being enterprising. This is a prophecy whose meaning is ambiguous: Legolas, arguing against Gimli who plays the part of detractor, emphasizes the human qualities that will guarantee (according to the Elf's prophecy) their survival after the disappearance of Elves and Dwarves. But what is the value of this vitality if what Gimli says — that Men are unable to complete the projects they undertake or to conserve what is good from the past — is true (and the allegation is not contradicted by Legolas)?

Aragorn Elfstone, although the first king of the Fourth Age — the Age of Men — does not seem to fit the descriptions of Legolas and Gimli: certainly not that of Gimli, because he is constancy personified, able to live anonymously at length, carrying out an unrecognised service for which he postpones political action and marriage until he is able to complete, at the right moment, his mission. But neither does he correspond to Legolas's description: he *re*-forges the broken sword, *re*unites the divided kingdom, *re*plants the withered tree, but sows no 'new seeds', takes no new initiatives. He conserves tradition; he sets off the Fourth Age not because he interprets its special destiny, but simply because he presides over the passage from the Third Age. He saves the freedom of the peoples of Middle-earth, but does not use that freedom to create anything new.

> The point of view of the Valar follows the Platonic model of 'emanation' and 'return'

What does he conserve? In accordance with the name he is known by (Elessar = Elf-stone), he (who grew up in the house of Elrond and his son-in-law, was a descendant of the Numenoreans of Elendil, that is those faithful both to the Elves of Tol Eressëa and the Middle-earth Elves) is the human who conserves the tradition of the *Elves*.

Now Tolkien did not intend to narrate the events of the Time of Men (the Fourth Age and onwards), whereas he recounted in great detail the three eras of the Time of the Elves. The eras of Men are those of our actual history and therefore are full of historical changes, as Tolkien well under-stood. The three Elvish ages, in contrast, do not have any-thing analogous to our Renaissance or Protestant Reforms, the conversion of entire populations to Christianity, feudali-zation of societies, birth of city-states or bourgeois power, constitution of nation-states, the English liberal revolution, democratic revolution in the United States, liberal-demo-cratic and partly socialist revolution in France; or to the Copernican, Galilean, Newtonian, Darwinian, Einstein-ian or Freudian scientific revolutions; the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Positivism; the discovery of the New World, colonization, decolonization; the agricultural, industrial,

Old man willow

Sue Wookey

transport, telecommunications or information technology revolutions; the demographic boom or the advent of mass culture, bureaucratization, constitution of the welfare state or the growth of the division of labour in a complex society: No, the Time of the Elves is a 'frozen' history, filled with happenings, but without changes. Except one.

Although from the First to Third Ages the Elves do not develop new knowledge or modify their social organization, they still experience a real, though isolated, historical change during this period. This transformation is essentially internal, notwithstanding its important external results, and cannot correctly be called intellectual, political or social; it is really a *moral* change.

The Elves whose history Tolkien narrates are not the Vanyar or Teleri of Valinor, but rather those of Middle-earth: the Moriquendi who refused to leave and the Noldor who wished to return. Elf lineages who loved Middle-earth, because of its beauty, because they could found there a dominion inde-

Goldberry
Sue Wookey

pendently of the Valar, enough to stay there for thousands of years, even though they knew it was inhabited by Melkor and his servants. These Middle-earth Elves, though, change greatly between the First Age and the end of the Third: at first they are founders of kingdoms, builders of cities, makers of rings, teachers of peoples and generals in great wars. At the end of the Third Age they are elusive woodland dwellers, reduced to giving shelter, curing and giving advice in the 'monasteries' of Rivendell and Lorien, progressively disillusioned with Middle-earth and on the point of leaving for somewhere beyond the sea, or 'fading away'.

The Elf who most typifies the First Age is Fëanor, with his great bravery, but also his overweening pride (and thus, though to a less marked extent, are also Finrod, Thingol and Turgon). The most typical Third-Age Elf is Elrond (A Half-elven who has chose the destiny of the Firstborn): with no earthly ambition, 'abbot' of Rivendell and with his heart already beyond the Sea. The only Elves living in Middle-earth in both the First and Third Ages are Glorfindel and, in particular, Galadriel. Glorfindel in the First Age is the heroic warrior who falls defending what is left of his homeland, Gondolin. Glorfindel reborn at the end of the Third Age is a messenger and scout for individuals from other peoples, Aragorn and Frodo, in whose campaigns he takes no part.

Galadriel in the First Age is a proud Noldor princess who goes to Middle-earth against the wishes of the Valar, neither to recover the Silmarils like Fëanor, nor to influence their leadership, like Fingolfin. She seeks in Middle-earth a "dominion of her own"[17]. Galadriel at the end of the Third Age is the woman who stays close to her husband Celeborn[18]; who secretly keeps the Ring, Nenya; who keeps an eye on the movements of the enemy; who gives shelter to and encourages the Fellowship of the Ring; who refuses — in a memorable scene with Frodo — any prospect of independence; who goes with Elrond and Gandalf to the Grey Havens and leaves Middle-earth for ever.

Historical inertia makes sense because it applies to the Time of Elves. A history of mankind without cultural and social change would make no sense and would result in theological scepticism and desperation: why should innumerable generations of individuals be born and die if this served no purpose for future generations, if no journey was undertaken, no mission fulfilled? Real antiquity certainly had its historical changes, but ancient historiography was not aware of them; human nature was held immutable, and time, cyclical; this fed a profound scepticism towards the traditional gods and a pitiful sense of desperation that — like a karstic stream — re-emerge, despite their best intentions, in Thucydides and Tacitus. But Tolkien's Elves live for thousands of years and can therefore experience *personally* the passage of time: individual experiences that, during the course of their lives, slowly and painfully, lead to a moral maturation.

This, then, seems to me the answer to the question that I posed above (why is there immobility in Tolkien's imaginary history?). Tolkien, by means of the Elves, wants to talk about an aspect of human experience[19]. Not humanity's collective experience, that which we call 'history', but the personal experience of individuals, which we simply call 'life'. In fact, that which happens to the Elves collectively during the three Ages — there are no important cultural and social changes — occurs during the life of each single human being: the 'character' does not change, because the cultural and social factors in the world that led to its formation are unchangeable: a thirteenth-century man, be he Dante Alighieri or the humblest serf, could never think, feel and act like an eighteenth or twentieth-century man, as is well understood by the historians of human mentality[20].

Even if character cannot change, the life of a person makes sense because he changes his own 'response' to that character. Free will does not consist of trying to be a different person or living an external or internal life different from that which destiny has bestowed; it consists of trying to understand and thus make a *critical analysis* — which are the good points, and which the bad — and to behave accordingly. This is moral maturity, which is the only change recorded in Tolkien's history of the Elves, inasmuch, I believe, as this history was not really about history, but about life. Using a literary technique not the least bit 'medieval' or 'traditional', but instead similar to Samuel Beckett's in *Waiting for Godot* (as Delle Rupi has observed), Tolkien makes Frodo and Sam realize, when they are near Cirith Ungol, that they are fictitious characters: "characters become legends, narrators become characters and listeners become narrators"[21]. The three authors of the *Red Book of Westmark* — Bilbo, Frodo and Sam — are protagonists of the events that are recounted and are aware that these serve as material for a narration. They serve, that is, the hearer or reader who will receive a message, a teaching, that will help them to understand that they now are the actor who must continue the story. *De te fabula docet*: the story speaks of your own life.

Conservative attitudes

Apart from Melkor, the Ainur were content with the first Music of Iluvatar: their attitude was *conservative*. When Melkor introduced dissonance, the Ainur would have preferred to eliminate it. Iluvatar maintained it, though, and incorporated it into a new music, more glorious than the old. When shaping Arda, the Ainur (who then became the Valar) wanted to perform the first music, and then wished to conserve the result. After the coming of the Firstborn, the Valar aimed to take them away from Middle-earth — where, clearly not by chance, Iluvatar had placed them — and have them live in Valinor so that they could share together the contemplation of unchanging beauty. When the Noldor decide to return to Middle-earth, they are influenced by the false accusations against the Valar spread by Melkor ("the Valar want you to stay in Valinor in order to rule over you") and shaken by the violent arguments between Fëanor and his half-brothers, motivated, at least partially, by the prospect of vindictive greed (the reconquest of the Silmarils), and the killing of the related Teleri race. There are all the ingredients here of the biblical account of the Fall in *Genesis 3*: the falsehoods recounted by the Serpent-Satan against

Yahweh, the advent of the incomprehension and reciprocal accusations between Adam and Eve, the desire for the forbidden fruit and the slaying of Abel by Cain. The Valar condemn the Noldors' emigration, gathered in council and influenced by the first prophecy of Mandos.

However, even if it is true that the emigration of the Noldor took place *in practice* against a background of wrong-doing, might not it have been possible *in theory* for it to have occurred righteously? And would not the Valar, beside the fact that they condemned it on grounds of sinfulness, have opposed it anyway, at least in their hearts — even if it had been conducted in exemplary fashion?

Although one cannot be certain of the answer to the first of these questions, there is no doubt of that to the second, as may seen from the Valar's behaviour prior to the Noldor's misdeeds. According to the conservative historical perspective of the Valar, it would have been preferable for the Elves to live out their time in Valinor, rather than going to Middle-earth (which was probably unforeseen on the part of the Valar).

I have argued above that the imaginary history Tolkien recounts is not really history, but principally a metaphor for the life of the individual. I would now like to suggest that the meaning of life embodied in *The Lord of the Rings* does not follow exclusively the conservative viewpoint of the Valar, but also partially the creative perspective of Iluvatar.

The point of view of the Valar follows the Platonic model of 'emanation' and 'return' (*mimesis* and *metexis*): the temporal world is an emanation of the eternal world, and returns to it. This emanation is an imperfect copy of the perfect archetype and represents an infelicitous descent, in the cycle of rebirth, from the state of beatitude. The primordial condition is restored by the process of return, compared to which the intervening time adds nothing new or significant. Thus the Elves, after their errors in Middle-earth, return to Valinor, except for those who go to the Halls of Mandos (the dead), or to Eldamar (those who chose to sail the Great Sea).

When Bilbo, in *The Hobbit* (which is subtitled 'There and Back Again'), returns to the Shire after his adventure, he is essentially unchanged: Tolkien ends the work with "and he lived happy and content", underlining the resumption of that interrupted 'bourgeois' and 'infantile' state of beatitude in his comfortable home. It is true that now Bilbo is not merely well-to-do, but has become decidedly prosperous. And it is also true that he has managed to avoid forgetting his 'Tookish' part, but instead has put it to the test and found in himself great reserves of courage, sagacity and generosity. But all this, in 1937, was a theme still undeveloped (the book was, after all, expressly aimed at children), and *The Hobbit* concludes with the Platonic model: the return to a life of good square meals, friendly jokes, pipe-smoking and dozing.

In *The Lord of the Rings* — which opens with abundant meals and friendly joking — something of this perspective

> **The presence of history in Tolkien's works symbolizes diverse aspects of the meaning of human life**

remains: Frodo and Sam do not die on Mount Doom, but are saved by the (*Deus ex machina*) eagles and return to the Shire, which in the meantime has become corrupt and polluted, but which is rapidly restored and cleaned up. Flowers and lawns once more surround the house at Bag End and — at least for Sam — the cycle of peaceful days restarts. He says, in fact, in the book's last line, "Well, I'm back".

Together with this perspective, though, there is another, which predominates in *The Lord of the Rings*: Frodo cannot remain in the Shire, some wounds cannot be healed, he must leave for the sea and death. Sam, too, knows that he cannot expect to see again Galadriel in Lorien, Elrond in Rivendell, Gildor Inglorion in the woods of the Shire or Gandalf in Bag End. They have gone for ever. Sam himself will go to the Grey Havens (as is recounted in the Appendix).

As Middle-earth is our Earth, once magical, but now longer magical, so life, as it progresses, leaves behind childhood, which can be remembered but cannot — and must not — be returned to[22]. Fiorenzo Delle Rupi rightly observes, in his essay on the modernity of *The Lord of the Rings*, that in this work — in contrast to *The Hobbit* — return is denied from the very beginning[23]. Life has a meaning because Iluvatar suffers no restrictions, and continually creates a realistic context in which our existential adventures — which necessarily include knowledge, pain and death — are not just wanderings or errors, but become an integral part of a future music of unimagined beauty.

This is obviously a Christian point of view. Whereas in certain Greek thought 'it is best for a man not to be born, or to die at an early age', for a Christian, despite the knowledge that a child as it grows will suffer and commit many sins, it is not to be desired that children should die so as to return immediately to heaven and the angels. For Christianity, temporal events are opportunities to be saved; there is no return for the soul to a heaven or an earthly paradise; human nature is not unchangeable, but is called to transform itself into a divine super-nature[24]; suffering gives privileged access to this transformation; death is not cancellation, but fulfilment. It is, however, the death of *all* the person, body *and* soul, and not just of the body — as for Plato or the Elves (while the body is mortal, the soul is immortal and ready for reincarnation) — and sin is in fact a '*felix culpa*'[25].

Real history?

The abundant use of elements taken from real history in *The Lord of the Rings* does not mean, I would suggest, that Tolkien's primary aim was to talk of real history, long past or recent. Tolkien disapproved of the use of allegory, in which there is a one-to-one relationship between a signifying element *X* and a signified element *Y*, a relation that leaves freedom to neither the sender of the message nor its receiver. He explained that his work contained 'large symbolism', in which the relations between signifier and signified are manifold, rather than unambiguous and predetermined[26].

In this free and unconstrained manner, the presence of history in Tolkien's works symbolizes diverse aspects of the meaning of human life:

• openness to the complexity and dramatic nature of the world, of which an important precondition is historical awareness;

• the immobility of individual characters, over and above the multiplicity of events;

• the possibility of moral maturation as an unconstrained response to immobility of character;

• acceptance of unforeseen innovations, of the confluence of individual paths into a vast Way with no return, which presupposes, at least implicitly, the acceptance of the creative role of Iluvatar with respect to evil (among other things).

The idealization of isolated historical elements, the spatialization of time that makes later and earlier historical components contemporary, and the assimilation of all historical ingredients into a generalized medieval period are all literary techniques that serve to achieve the philosophical aims of Tolkien's historical symbolism.

The effect of depth created by the detailed construction of a long-past imaginary history predating the epoch in which *The Lord of the Rings*' events are set constitutes a literary stratagem that serves a different purpose, the aesthetic need to give the work 'the intimate consistence of reality', to make of it a 'subcreation' in which readers could imagine living. Direct references to recent history or contemporary events (for example, Sauron's totalitarian experiments and Saruman's bureaucratic and anti-ecological administration of the Shire) are also certainly present (Shippey *The Road to Middle-earth* pp. 152–156) and are important, but occupy a secondary role with regard to the author's intentions.

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1. Scull, C. 'The Influence of Archaeology and History on Tolkien's World' in *Scholarship and Fantasy: Proceedings of the Tolkien Phenomenon, May 1992, Turku, Finland* (ed. K. J. Battarbee) 34 (Univ. Turku, 1993), which discusses the "feeling that some readers have that Tolkien's writings recover a lost part of actual history".
2. Ostrogorsky, G. *Storia dell'impero bizantino (Geschichte des Byzantinischen Staates)* 39 (Einaudi, 1968).
3. Pognon, E. *La vita quotidiana nell'Anno Mille (La vie quotidienne en l'an Mille)* 115–132 (Rizzoli, 1989).
4. *Invito alla lettura di Tolkien* 95 (Mursia, 1982).
5. The married-couple version, after criticism from others and personal doubts, was excised from the definitive version of *LOTR*. See 'The Epilogue' in Tolkien, J. R. R. *Sauron Defeated. History of Middle Earth, Vol. IX*, 114–135 (HarperCollins, 1992).
6. Tolkien, J. R. R. *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (eds H. Carpenter & C. Tolkien) No. 211, 283 (George Allen & Unwin, 1981). The idea of living at the end of the Sixth Age of the world ,or at the beginning of the Seventh, is not original to Tolkien, but may be found in the writings of an eighth-century English monk, the Venerable Bede *De temporum Ratione* (see ref. 3 pp. 71–73).
7. A difference between the Byzantine and Holy Roman Empires was that the former did not experience feudalism, judged by some historians (such as ref. 2) as a positive feature, but by others (such as Kazhdan, A. P. *Bisanzio e la sua civiltà (Vizantijskaja kul'tura),* (Laterza, 1995)) as a negative one.
8. Lord Acton (a late nineteenth-century English historian) famously said: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Shippey discusses this notion, central to *LOTR*, and correctly notes that the idea is not present in antiquity or the Middle Ages, but is specifically modern; neither Plato nor Thomas Aquinas would have had it, because they thought that those who managed to gain power could use it for both good and evil purposes: Shippey, T. *The Road to Middle-earth* 125 (HarperCollins, 1992).
9. Horst, E. *Federico II (Friederich der staufer. Eine biographie)* 169–215 (Rizzoli, 1995).
10. Shippey, T. 'Tolkien as a Postwar Writer' in *Scholarship and Fantasy: Proceedings of the Tolkien Phenomenon, May 1992, Turku, Finland* (ed. K. J. Battarbee) 217–236 (Univ. Turku, 1993).
11. Bloch, M. *La società feudale (La société féodale (1939)),* (Einaudi, 1987); Pirenne, H. *Storia d'Europa dalle invasioni al XVI secolo (Histoire de l'Europe des invasions au XVI siècle (1937)),* (Garzanti, 1967); Huizinga, J. *L'autunno del Medioevo (Herfsttij der middeleeuwen (1919)),* (Sansoni, 1966).
12. Shippey observes that all five of these British writers had had direct experience of the tragedies of war, and that Britain was the only Western country (apart from its enemies, Austria and Germany) at war for 10 out of 31 years: 1914–18 and 1939–45 (ref. 10).
13. Bloch, M. *La società feudale* 171–270, 363–375, 442–455, 471–489 (Einaudi, 1987).
14. Paul the Deacon *History of the Langobards*
15. Tolkien, J. R. R. 'Laws and Customs among the Eldars' in *Morgoth's Ring. History of Middle Earth, Vol. X* (ed. C. Tolkien) 207–217 (HarperCollins, 1994).
16. Tolkien, J. R. R. 'The New Shadow' in *The Peoples of Middle-earth. History of Middle Earth, Vol XII* (ed. C. Tolkien) 409–421 (HarperCollins, 1996).
17. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion*: "But Galadriel, the only woman of the Noldor to stand that day tall and valiant among the contending princes, was eager to be gone. No oaths she swore, but the words of Feanor concerning Middle-earth had kindled in her heart, for she yearned to wide unguarded lands and to rule there a realm at her own will" (p. 90).
18. In contrast to earlier times: Tolkien, J. R. R. 'The History of Galadriel and Celeborn' in *Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle- earth* (ed. C. Tolkien), (George Allen & Unwin, 1980).
19. Tolkien, J. R. R. *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (eds H. Carpenter & C. Tolkien) No. 153, 189 (George Allen & Unwin, 1981): "Elves are certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires."
20. 'Mentality' is defined as that group of notions that accumulate in all people of a certain historical and geographical, independently of their level of education, personal ability, gender, profession, wealth or age. See, for example, Vovelle, M. *Ideologies and Mentalities* (Polity Press, 1990).
21. Delle Rupi, F. 'The Lord of the Rings come romanzo moderno'. *Terra di Mezzo* No. 1 (nuova serie), 37–39 (April 1995); reprinted in *Introduzione a Tolkien* (ed. F. Manni) 168–175 (Simonelli, 2002). See also Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* 739–740 (Unwin paperback, 1983).
22. Delle Rupi, F. 'The Lord of the Rings come romanzo moderno'. *Terra di Mezzo* No. 1 (nuova serie), 38 (April 1995).
23. Delle Rupi, F. 'The Lord of the Rings come romanzo moderno'. *Terra di Mezzo* No. 1 (nuova serie), 30–31 (April 1995).
24. As happened, by means of a diametrically opposed pathway (humiliation rather than pride) with respect to Satan's prophetic lie to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3: "*eritis sicut Dii*". See Ladaria, L. F. *Antropologia teologica* 214 (Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1983).
25. As sung in Roman liturgy, in the Easter vigil Exultet.
26. Tolkien, J. R. R. Foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*; see also Shippey, T. *The Road to Middle-earth* 150–152 (HarperCollins, 1992).