'The Ride of the Rohirrim'
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Tolkien's Style

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Recently I have been doing some work on the style used by J.K. Rowling in the Harry Potter books, and this has made me readier to see Tolkien's use of English in *The Lord of the Rings* more generously than I did over forty years ago in my *Modern Fantasy*; in fact there may be much more in Tolkien's style than I thought.[1]

Tolkien's mode is of course very different from that of Rowling, who is actually considerably indebted to his work. Rowling wants to portray a whole world of characters as vividly as she can. Tolkien's object is much less concerned with identities, and many character descriptions in *The Lord of the Rings* are designed not to give us a particular person, but an individual who is half-absorbed in nature, and whose physical appearances exist in a matrix of the conceptual. This does not make Tolkien an allegorist, but rather an 'incarnational' writer, who continuously puts before us characters whose physical aspect is married to ideas that live through flesh.

Tolkien feels that we should be pulled into his world, rather than that we should negotiate from a distance, as, say, in the fantasies of C.S. Lewis, where the worlds of Narnia and Perelandra are strange and outside our own, and we are given human intermediaries who travel there and give us their reactions to them. Tolkien starts off inside Middle-earth, and does not travel to it from our world. The best fantasy for Tolkien is that of the Elves, where the reader or audience is not left in a position of 'Secondary Belief', or where he or she is in a 'real' world to which they return after a brief excursion, but rather where they are engulfed by the story to the point of Primary Belief, that is, the point where for them the fantastic world becomes the only reality: 'If you are present at a Faërian drama you yourself are, or think that you are, bodily inside its Secondary World'. This elvish craft Tolkien calls Enchantment, and of all forms of human art a successful fantasy is the one that approaches most nearly to it.[2]

Tolkien does not deal with the astounding or the novel in his fantasy: he does not create a mystical oceanic planet of unfallen green people as in Lewis's *Perelandra* (1943), or an extraordinary isolated world like the huge castle of Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan* (1946). He may speak of how in the secondary world of fantasy a green sun may be made credible,[3] but he never tries to create such a thing. For he believes that the best fantasies deal with 'simple or fundamental things, untouched by fantasy, but their simplicities made more luminous by their setting. It was in fairy stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and

iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine'.[4] In other words, when you write fantasy, which is a story set in another world, every common thing in it automatically becomes more wonderful than it is normally seen to be.

More than this, such a common thing also begins to escape the inadequate words you use to name and possess it. Tolkien says he wants to do more than make familiar things vivid again, he wants to make them wild and dangerous, he wants to remove the sense that we should ever have become familiar with them in the first place: 'Creative fantasy, because it is trying to … make something new, may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. The gems all turn to flowers or flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you'.[5] This says not only that our minds are unable to capture reality but our language also, because only a change in perception will show us the wild reality of our world, which is as remote from us as Perelandra is from Lewis's human hero Ransom. And if this is true, how much is it true when Tolkien writes *The Lord of the Rings* in modern English instead of the Elvish in which he would have preferred to write it? How much more inadequate must our 21st-century English be to what he describes than, say, the Common Speech of Middle-earth from which he 'translates' his story?

One answer to this might be that the language of *The Lord of the Rings* is not the true form of its 'style', nor the main vehicle of the magic. That vehicle could be the fantastic world itself, the interaction of the series of peoples, actions and landscapes that makes up the whole. We may consider that there is nothing strange in this, since in folk literature 'the language of the telling' is never fixed, but varies according to the idiosyncrasies of each teller. There is no set text for instance of Grimm's 'The Juniper Tree', nor even any set characters, but only a set sequence of events. It is somewhere about here that *The Lord of the Rings*, which Tolkien specifically wrote as a fairy tale, may have its origin.

So does it have a linguistic style at all? It is to be supposed that any work of literature, if it is to be effective, must have one. It is to be believed that a philologist of Tolkien's standing would have cared deeply about the effects of the words he used. And what kind of words does he use? I opened the one-volume *Lord of the Rings* at random and found this:

> That morning they lit a fire in a deep hollow shrouded by great bushes of holly, and their supper-breakfast was merrier than it had been since they set out. They did not hurry to bed afterwards, for they expected to have all the night to sleep in, and they did not mean to go on again until the evening of the next day. Only

> Aragorn was silent and restless. After a while he left the Company and wandered on to the ridge; there he stood in the shadow of a tree, looking out southwards and westwards, with his head posed as if he was listening. Then he returned to the brink of the dell and looked down at the others laughing and talking. (301)

The language here is as 'straightforward' as the journey itself. The sentences are indicative, mostly linked by 'and'. Only one sentence does not run straight on – 'They did not hurry to bed, for they expected…' The workmanlike words, mostly monosyllabic, are offered without commentary or attempts to recreate the scene in such a way that we will feel we are there. One reason for this is that 'we' are not supposed to settle there, but to feel only transiently relaxed. This is a narrative style, whose concern is always with what has happened, is happening, and may happen: time is the very fabric of the story. The travellers are relaxed because they have shelter enough after several days of hard travelling to light a fire and have a good meal. But their joy may be transient. Aragorn, who is always sharp-eyed and perceptive, has withdrawn, uneasy. When he returns to the edge of the dell and stands looking down at the others enjoying themselves, there is a trace of the meaning 'looking down *on*', that is, feeling faint irritation, perhaps. But much more there is the ironic contrast between his care and their carelessness, and even the sense of fate looking on the happy ignorance of mortals. And together with it all there is the feeling of Aragorn's ceaseless responsibility for them all, and the importance of the quest they have temporarily put aside.

All through the passage there is the sense of time: 'That morning,' 'supper-breakfast,' 'since they set out,' 'Afterwards,' 'all the night,' 'evening of the next day,' 'After a while,' 'Then'. And again all this is conveyed in tiny instants, through the simplest of language and the quietest of patterns, without the slightest disturbance of the primary narrative. By contrast C.S. Lewis, in his story *Perelandra* of a journey to another world, disturbs things: he breaks off his narrative to reflect on what Ransom is seeing, he tries to put us in his story, he makes more evident stylistic effects. And that is the point: Tolkien's effects are at one with the narrative; they do not involve elaborate comparisons, which take us away from what is happening to what it is like, they do not have a mind between us and the material. When Tolkien uses a comparison, it is usually brief and uses the materials of his own world: the snowy peaks of the mountains reflected in Mirrormere are like 'plumes of white flame' (352); Gollum's wet locks hang 'like rank weed' over his brows (716); when Saruman is killed his spirit slowly ascends 'like smoke from a fire' (1058).

Consider another passage, this time the picture of the Rohirrim, the mounted army of Rohan, attacking the enemy host besieging Minas Tirith:

> Suddenly the king cried to Snowmane and the horse sprang away. Behind him his banner blew in the wind, white horse upon a field of green, but he outpaced it. After him thundered the knights of his house, but he was ever before them. Éomer rode there, the white horsetail on his helm floating in his speed, and the front of the first éored roared like a breaker foaming to the shore, but Théoden could not be overtaken. Fey he seemed, or the battle-fury of his fathers ran like new fire in his veins, and he was borne up on Snowmane like a god of old, even as Örome the Great in the battle of the Valar when the world was young. His golden shield was uncovered, and lo! it shone like an image of the Sun, and the grass flamed into green about the white feet of his steed. For morning came, morning and a wind from the sea, and darkness was removed, and the hosts of Mordor wailed, and terror took them, and they fled, and died, and the hoofs of wrath rode over them. And then all the host of Rohan burst into song, and they sang as they slew, for the joy of battle was on them, and the sound of their singing that was fair and terrible came even to the city. (870-1)

I once said of this, 'Every word and cadence carries a gush of *voulu* emotion, and hits a false note … Tolkien so gets in the way with these excited cries that he becomes the sole audience of what he describes.' But what Tolkien may be doing here is turning the northern mystique of battle into a critique. If his prose is emotive, it is not quite his emotion: rather it invites us in so that we can feel at first hand the madness of the death or glory culture, even while it is glorious. 'C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre.' Théoden rides far ahead of his éored: twice we are told that he outpaces them; he is even too far ahead of his own banner. He seems 'fey', which means strange or wild, or maybe the battle-fury of his fathers ran in him, but no-one can tell, for he is at a distance. (*OED* also gives the Scottish meaning of 'fey' as 'about to die soon'.) We remember how this same Théoden was perverted by his supposed 'counsellor' Grimá Wormtongue into cutting his kingdom off from other peoples, and shutting himself in his hall. A culture that looks to personal glory alone as the test of a man is insecure: if you lose touch with the world, then another can shape it for you. Individualism is not enough. And this is what Théoden shows again on the battlefield of Gondor.

The glory that each of the Rohirrim covets is caught in the wrought image of Théoden, 'His golden shield was uncovered, and lo! it shone like the Sun, and the grass flamed into green about the white feet of his steed.' It is beautiful, and for a moment we

are caught up in it, as we are meant to be, only to feel the spasm of emotion pass as we sense, in the sudden rich colours of green and white and gold, that Théoden is in some way turning himself into a picture of glory here, and that he is partly making a grand moment which will be remembered, just like the picture of his ancestor Éorl the Young in his own great hall. This indeed becomes '*voulu* emotion', but it is not Tolkien's emotion, only that of Théoden. The glory lust, the love of battle, even the love of death, are all part of a romanticism founded on the deeds of the individual as part of a family more than as part of an army. At the siege of Gondor, seeing Théoden far ahead of battle with few men about him, the Haradrim chieftain attacks. Théoden wins that contest, but immediately afterwards he is overcome by the Lord of the Nazgûl.

The passage quoted continually refers to horses, for this is a horse culture. It is Snowmane who 'sprang away'. Théoden's banner portrays only a horse. Éomer's helm has a horsetail as its plume. Théoden is 'borne up' by his horse. His 'steed' makes the grass flame into green about its feet. It is right that the Rohirrim should give honour to the horse that makes them so unbeatable a cavalry, but a horse is after all only a beast, not a conscious animal, and valuing them so highly seems a little fetishistic. And this is borne out in Théoden's end. His horse Snowmane no sooner encounters the descending shape of the Nazgûl flying lizard than, unlike its human rider, it panics, rearing, and then as a dart strikes it, crashes on its side and mortally wounds Théoden beneath it. The tragic irony is obvious.

Here we have seen Tolkien's style work in a very subtle and again almost invisible way. He seems himself to be caught up in this battle-lust, but that is not so, for he only wants us to feel what it is like, and then feel what it lacks. The question automatically arises: Would the average reader feel all this? To which the answer is, as it almost must be, that the average reader need not articulate it to have felt it. His or her sensibility is responding to the material even while his or her reason does not know it. If we do not accept this then we must think that the enormous popularity of Tolkien's work is down simply to its exciting plot or some other crowd-pleasing aspect of the work. And this will produce a reductive view both of Tolkien's readership and of his fame. While it is not the case that popularity, however universal, proves excellence, it can sometimes be a response to what is deep in a work as well as to what is more superficial.

For our last look at passages from Tolkien, there is the initial description of Éowyn, daughter of Théoden:

> Grave and thoughtful was her glance, as she looked on the king with cool pity in her eyes. Very fair was her face, and her long hair was like a river of gold. Slender and tall she was in her white robe girt with silver, but strong she seemed and stern as steel, a daughter of kings.

Tolkien keeps to a monosyllabic vocabulary. His aim is to bring words as close to their roots as he can. Scarcely one word here does not have its source in Anglo-Saxon; and it would be interesting to know just how many Norman and French-derived words Tolkien allows into *The Lord of the Rings* at all. But the need for simplicity may go further than this, into taking his language far enough back to its basics in order to glance at a time when words and the things they described might have been more closely bound together. This is one of the ideas of Owen Barfield, by whom Tolkien has been shown (by Verlyn Flieger in her *Splintered Light*) to have been considerably influenced. The description of Éowyn is not vivid in the way that her portrayal in a novel might be. But that is because we are looking at a figure which is the interplay of qualities. And all those qualities feed into her from the narrative before and back into the narrative that comes after: she is not only an individual but a kind of crystallisation, a symbol even, of the events surrounding her appearance, and of the culture from which she springs. She is grave and thoughtful from having watched over her weakening father for so long; she looks at him with 'cool pity' because she knows that his recovery is fragile; she is beautiful, slender and tall, but also strong. When she is described as having long hair and being slender and tall in a white robe girt with silver, and then that she was strong and 'stern as steel', we sense at an unconscious level that she is like a sword, the instrument by which her people live. And so she proves in the Pelennor Fields, when she stands protecting her wounded father with her sword and kills both the flying monster and the Lord of the Nazgûl that attacked him. There too she is described as 'slender but as a steel-blade, fair yet terrible' (875). What seem analogies turn out to be almost literal truth. When we are told that 'her long hair was like a river of gold', we feel the 'riverness' of her hair, because her identity as a physical, individual person is made so indefinite. There is a real interrelation of people and their surroundings in *The Lord of the Rings*: for instance Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin are not only hobbits but living pieces of the Shire at its best, Gimli is a sort of walking Moria, and Legolas a living forest who fights with the weapon of the forest, a bow and arrows.

But long ago in *Modern Fantasy* I said that the nature analogies in this very passage, and also in a not entirely dissimilar description of Arwen (243), were 'the result of an inability to concentrate on the human figure alone and to see it vividly; indeed Tolkien seems to have lost track of what he is supposed to be describing when he describes Éowyn, seen by Aragorn, as "a morning of pale spring that is not yet come to womanhood."' Now I am saying here that Tolkien's object is precisely not to make individuals stand out, but to show them as parts of a natural and moral context, just as the evil are parts of an unnatural one. Which is right?

Of course, the hobbits stand out, and Tolkien was later to remark that *The Silmarillion* lacked popular appeal because it was not 'hobbitised' enough to give the reader a sense that he or she was not just reading about remote warriors and heroes but that there were ordinary folk with ordinary needs and fears right at the centre. But that is not the point: they are not only carriers of the Ring but of virtues of stubbornness, good humour and natural goodness that sustain them through their whole journey.

Hobbits, we know, are especially intimate with the physical world, living in holes below ground, and the ground they tread on reflects them. When Sam and Frodo, Merry and Pippin first set out, the countryside is lush, in the Shire and the woods about it. The earth is welcoming, for the hobbits live in it: they are in a sense earth people. But as we travel, the landscape becomes barer. The clambering the hobbits have to do along the cliff-edged Emyn Muil, the stinking marsh they have to cross, Ithilien the desolate garden of Gondor, where the great trees have died and been replaced with a riot of tangled shrubs, all these are heralds of the bleak bare rocks of Mordor, on which only low thorny bushes can grow, and finally the ash pile of the volcano itself. Everything is gradually stripped away to the naked landscape of a world that has gone back down to basement level: Mount Doom sits in a plain almost devoid of life, much like the earth itself seemed for billions of years of its existence. This is what Sauron means: a regress to the Archean period of fire and slag.

This geographical devolution is paralleled by one in Frodo. For as he carries the ring further towards Mordor he becomes increasingly worn down, longing to give up his task and continually tempted by the Ring. Only his will and Sam hold him together during the long journey, and at the last, when the Ring has to be thrown into Mount Doom, his will fails him. His very body has thinned and become more insubstantial: on the edge of Mordor he and Sam are 'squeaking ghosts'. The changing landscape that Frodo covers in *The Lord of the Rings* can thus be seen as a larger version of his own spiritual journey.

Tolkien's style, in which we saw how one individual or quality flows into another, is part of the essence of Middle-earth in another way. For it embodies the way he sees people cooperating in a society. The Fellowship of the Ring is a single body of nine different individuals. The Company is a cross-section of the races of Middle-earth, excluding orcs: there are four hobbits, a Dwarf, an Elf and two men besides the wizard Gandalf. Beyond the need to take the Ring to Mount Doom is the need for peoples of Middle-earth to come together against Sauron, who threatens them all and will destroy them the more readily if they are disunited. Indeed, engaging the cooperation of others – the Elves, the Riders of Rohan, Treebeard and the Ents, the Steward of Gondor Denethor and the dead who have a bond to help the living – all this is difficult and takes up much of the story. Several people have been too much on their own – Théoden listening in his dim hall to the evil councils of Wormtongue, Denethor in his high room in Minas Tirith brooding on the death of

Boromir and falling into despair. Even the Ents have been for too long shut away in Fangorn, and are not even aware of the harm done by Saruman to their fellows near Isengard until the hobbits Merry and Pippin take Treebeard there to see it. Meanwhile Prince Faramir is exiled, Prince Éomer takes the Rohirrim where he will, and Aragorn has become a Ranger of the moors. In the end, it is evil to be cut off from others. Saruman and Sauron, who do not wish company, live solitarily in great impregnable towers; and Saruman meets his end by being continually contemptuous towards Wormtongue when they are thrown together. The very object of the book is to destroy the megalomania, the ravening self, embodied in the endless circle of the One Ring.

And the kind of literature that Tolkien writes is social too – and universal. This is no novel with a limited range of characters and human behaviour, no intimate tale of one place or time, but a heroic story that belongs with all other heroic stories of Middle-earth. It is a leaf from the Tree of Tales. The Company come across the Barrow-Wights who record an ancient battle, they meet Tom Bombadil who has been in Middle-earth since it began, they hear of Beren and Tinuviel, of Numenor's fall, of Gilgalad and Elendil and Isuldur's Bane. And *The Lord of the Rings* is but one story in the long battle against the evil that Melkor wove into the original song of creation of the Ainur. Gandal calls it 'the long defeat', for even though Sauron is gone, other evils will come, and evil will never be wholly crushed within this world and within time. This is an epic of a whole world of peoples.

Indeed it is fair to say that Tolkien does not want to be original in the conventional sense. He always reminds us wherever we are that such a character or action is like another and perhaps greater before it, and that whatever strange place we may come to, it has been trodden into history by some other being before this time. Tolkien's objective was always to create the society through the individual, the history that lives on in the present, the myth that breathes through the facts. He speaks of awakening through his descriptions of hills and rivers and valleys 'The Hill, The River, The Valley': but this is no conceptualising, it is a return to essences. In that sense all Tolkien's story is mystical: it is predicated on a recreation of the past which ultimately takes us to the first songs of the Ainur about the creator Ilúvatar. And Ilúvatar is our God in another existence, just as Maleldil is in C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra* or Aslan is in Narnia.

Then is *The Lord of the Rings* a Christian story? Tolkien believed that the fairy tale has special access to truth, because the story of Christ is a fairy tale made literally true, and the genre of fairy tale is hallowed by it as no other. The essential rhythm behind the universe is Eucatastrophic: out of the deepest loss and pain comes miraculous and unlooked-for joy. 'The birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's

history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy'.[6] Tolkien writes against the isolation of modern man and modern story from the sustaining force of that one great fairy story. This is the deepest meaning of the *Lord of the Rings* to us – not allegory, not relevance to the contemporary, not politics, not morality, but continued participation in that one great rhythm of divine love that matters more than all others, told through the hallowed genre of fairy story, through which 'All tales may come true'.[7]

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Notes

Page numbers taken from J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969).

1. This essay was originally presented as a conference paper at the Tolkien centenary conference held near Aberystwyth in 2008, a year before the appearance of Steve Walker's excellent *The Power of Tolkien's Prose: Middle Earth's Magical Style* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), which effectively renders it a footnote.
2. J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', *Tree and Leaf* (Allen and Unwin, 1964).
3. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 45.
4. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 53.
5. *Ibid*.
6. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 63.
7. *Ibid*.