

## IN DEFENCE OF TOLKEIN'S FANTASY

There has recently been published on the internet<sup>1</sup> a criticism of the fantasies of J R R Tolkein (*inter alios*) on a number of grounds but chiefly their alleged indulgence in Gnosticism and the occult, and their failures as 'channels of grace'. Its author, a priest, asserts that under the urging of another priest he had undergone 'a conversion' from addiction to these tales through 'a special grace' and has been moved to expose their shortcomings.

Is he right, or wrong about them ? Or partly right and partly wrong ? And if the latter, where is he right, and where wrong ? His text is not immune from logical defects including arguments *per accidens* and *non sequitur*. But its chief failing seems to be a confusion of the subjective with objective.

### *Preliminary*

First, let us observe that a man's whole life, from the moment he first distinguishes being from non-being (something from nothing) is a journey of discovery. Uncovering what lies hidden marks all our early development : it is essential to our education. Discovery is at the heart of all science and art, of crime detection, of all good journalism ; it drives almost all fiction.

"The urge to discover secrets is deeply ingrained in human nature ; even the least curious mind is roused by the promise of sharing knowledge withheld from others. Most of us are driven to sublimate this urge by the solving of artificial puzzles devised for our entertainment. Detective stories or crossword puzzles cater for the majority ; the solution of secret codes may be the hobby of the few."<sup>2</sup>

The preservation of secrets has spawned the world of codes, and the desire to uncover them the parallel world of code breaking. Many of the successes of the Allies in World War II turned on a secret, the secret that they had broken codes of the Axis powers and of Japan and could read their communications. In the world of spying and covert observance a knowledge by agents of the secrets they are serving is often deliberately limited by superiors. The agents do not, as the saying goes, 'need to know'. The strategy assists in preserving the secrets, or many of them, in the event of an agent being captured. Legal advisers, banks and commercial institutions use codes to preserve the secrecy of their clients' affairs. It is clear, then, that secrets can work both good and ill.

Secret knowledge, termed *Gnostic*, can be harmful when associated with religious or quasi-religious belief for it is grounded in the assertion that the 'believer' has a knowledge of things hidden from ordinary mortals, 'a higher knowledge'. This is one of the reasons Freemasonry and Mormon-ism are to be reprobated. But is such a condemnation to be extended to the world of fantasy, the world of the imaginary ?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2014/02/the-fantasy-writing-of-tolkien-was.html#more>

<sup>2</sup> John Chadwick, *The Decipherment of Linear B*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press), 1958, p. 1. This quote is used as anagraph by Simon Singh to his excellent study *The Code Book, The Secret History of Codes and Codebreaking*, New York, 1999.

### *Signified Act and Exercised Act*

The student of philosophy is taught in logic to distinguish carefully between propositions which reflect what is in mind and those which reflect what is real. The issue is well illustrated by the Ontological argument of St Anselm for the proof of the existence of God. The major premise of the argument is as follows :

*That than which a greater cannot be thought exists [because otherwise there would exist a greater, namely, that to the concept of which (as 'the greatest') there is added existence.]*

And on this premise he builds his syllogism—

*But God is that than which a greater cannot be thought.*

*Therefore, God exists.*

But the premise contains a logical flaw. If you are arguing in the real order you are bound to confine yourself to the real ; if arguing in the ideal (or conceptual) order you are bound to the conceptual. You may not pass from the one order to the other without breaching the rules of logic and having your conclusion rendered invalid. St Thomas deals with this problem with St Anselm's argument at the very beginning of the *Summa Theologiae*—

*"Granted... that everyone understands that by this word 'God' is signified something than which nothing greater can be thought, nevertheless, it does not... follow that he understands that what the word signifies exists actually, ... only that it exists mentally..."<sup>3</sup>*

To conceive of something as existing does not affirm its existence *in exercised act* only *in signified act*. So the opening phrase of St Anselm's argument reduces to this—

*That than which a greater cannot be thought may be conceived of as existing.*

And the argument suffers accordingly :

*But God is that than which a greater cannot be thought.*

*Therefore, God may be conceived of as existing.*

Now this error of confusing what is in mind with what is real is endemic in our modern society all of whose underlying philosophies are rooted in the subjective. It is the ground, for example, for the enthusiasm among scientists for evolutionary theory. Notwithstanding a complete lack of evidence for macro-evolution (the development of one species into another ; of the living from the non-living), a majority of scientists thinks that because one can *imagine* such transition it must have occurred. It is sufficient to assert its occurrence (its existence *in signified act*) to satisfy them of its existence in the real (*in exercised act*).

'Things exist in mind,' St Thomas teaches in a number of places, 'in a manner different from their existence in the real.'<sup>4</sup> The human mind may, through its concepts, reflect reality accurately, and then it performs its primary task of assisting the individual to arrive at the truth.<sup>5</sup> But the mind has the facility, too, of producing concepts only loosely connected with the real (as in, pink elephants ; mountains that

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<sup>3</sup> I, q. 2, a. 1, ad 2.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 50. a. 2.

<sup>5</sup> When it acts as a pure sign, something vicarious of the reality it signifies, representing the form of what is known, its immaterial component or essence, since knowledge is *habere aliquid in se formaliter et non materialiter*. (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 14, a. 1) Knowledge means the existence of the thing known is somehow in the knower. (*QQ. Disp. De Verit.* q. 2, a. 5, ad 15)

reach to heaven ; triangles with internal angles greater than 180° ; five day weeks ; or the view that things have but one intrinsic cause, matter). This is mental being based in the real. Again the mind may produce concepts which are impossible of real existence (a square circle ; a God capable of creating another God equal to Himself ; non-being conceived as if it was something existing). These are instances of mental being *not* based in the real.

The mind uses both these facilities. We use the second, for instance, to give a positive name to something negative. *Night* is not a reality but the name the mind gives to the absence of a reality, the absence of light (n [signifying a lack] + light). *Void* is not a reality but the name the mind gives to the absence of a reality, the absence of being.

Confusing what is in mind with what is real not limited to the ideological. It appears in the arguments of good priests and theologians. It affects, and has affected, the thoughts and words even of popes.<sup>6</sup> The disposing condition for this evil among the clergy is the systematic abandonment by bishops and seminary heads, against the Church's explicit directives (e.g., Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 12.8.1950), of the philosophy of St Thomas, and its replacement by one or other of the varieties of modern philosophy.

#### *Commentary*

Tolkein has essayed in a number of tales of fantasy, notably *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, to posit worlds and creatures *based on* real being and to point morals consistent with the natural law and with God's revelation. These works are instances of *signified act*, i.e., things existing in mind only, not of exercised act. Indeed, no author of fantasy asserts more than that *one may imagine* the worlds, the characters, settings, attitudes, he has invented to be real.

Such tales give an author a certain freedom from reality's demands. The condemnation of what is secretive does not apply with the same rigour in the world of imagination as it does in the real order. Thus, while it is true that there is no good, as distinct from bad, magic in the real world, one is not prevented *from imagining* there to be a good magic, as with the influence of Cinderella's 'Fairy God-Mother', her magic coach and her glass slippers.

Provided the author does not suggest a breach of the moral law (except as something to be abhorred, to be corrected or punished) or some metaphysical impossibility such as the existence of a creature with none but an evil end (both of which defects are to be found in the inventions of J K Rowling in her *Harry Potter* series), there is no reason to shun or avoid them as harmful to the psyche or to one's moral or religious life. Tolkein is notable for the way he reflects metaphysical

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., Pope John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (4.3. 1979), where he endeavours to give the subjective ('conscious', 'consciousness', 'self-awareness') objective force ; his endorsement of feminist theory which leads him (in his early Wednesday Audiences) to endeavour a re-interpretation of sacred scripture ; his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (14.9.1998) n. 14, where he supports St Anselm's Ontological argument uncritically.

principle in his fantasies. In the first book of *The Lord of the Rings* we read these words in the mouth of Elrond, the Earl King—

*"[No]thing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron [the Dark Lord of his tale] was not so..."*<sup>7</sup>

Everything that exists is good because created by God : its very existence—*that it is*—is an exercise in goodness. As St John of the Cross says—

*"God created all things and left in them some semblance of Himself, not only by creating them out of nothing, but also by endowing them with innumerable graces and qualities. He... increased their beauty by the admirable order and the unfailing dependence that unites them one to another..."*<sup>8</sup>

Tolkein makes no mention of God, it is true, but what fairy tale ever does ? What matters is that, the scope of imagination being admitted, the story is not inconsistent with reality.

Tolkein's tales contain much else that is edifying and uplifting ; of the presence of evil and the need constantly to confront it ; of the weakness of human will and the heroic efforts necessary for self mastery. The critic misunderstands Tolkein's use of the character Gollum. There is great pathos in this character's dividedness over sins unrepented. Has any writer expressed better in fiction the internal debate of the sinner with his soul than occurs in Gollum's monologues ?

When (in Book IV of *The Lord of the Rings*) Frodo is tempted to kill Gollum he hears "quite plainly but far off, voices from out of the past", a conversation the good wizard, Gandalf, had had with him which is related in Book I—

*"What a pity Bilbo did not stab the vile creature, when he had a chance !"*

*"Pity ? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy : not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity."*

...

*"I do not feel any pity for Gollum, He deserves death."*

*"Deserves it ! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some die that deserve life. Can you give it to them ? Then be not too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end ; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least..."*<sup>9</sup>

This passage is grounded in sound theological principle : of the need of a man to forgive his enemies—of Christ's command that we do so ; of the truth that no soul is so sunk in evil that he is not redeemable—his salvation remains a possibility till he dies. The burden of evil is a fact of real life, as is the certainty that many suffer evil without fault. There is resonance here with the content of *Ecclesiastes*. Everything

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<sup>7</sup> *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Bk II, Ch. ii, The Council of Elrond

<sup>8</sup> St John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, stanza 5, Commentary.

<sup>9</sup> *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Bk I, Ch. II, The Shadow of the Past ; and see *The Two Towers*, Bk IV, Ch. I, The Taming of Smeagol.

has a purpose, even the evil will of the sinner as Augustine said when he taught that God would not allow evil to be in His works were He not good and omnipotent so as to able to bring forth good even from evil.<sup>10</sup> The passage appeals, moreover, to the truth encapsulated in the rhetorical question of Christ Our Lord : “What can a man give in exchange for his life ?” Aristotle had expressed the same truth implicitly 350 years before when he taught, “For living things, to live is the same as to be.”

The critic sees Tolkein’s use of evil characters to achieve some good as evidence of application of the Renaissance view “that it was the humanistic, naturalistic pagan works of ancient times that led man out of the trouble in which he had found himself in the [thirteenth] century”. Yet each of the instances he cites can be explained, consistent with principle, as reflecting how the evil in our earthly inheritance may yet play its part in one’s salvation. The comment of the master in Christ’s parable of the darnel is to the point : the two are to flourish together till the harvest.

The critic sees Tolkein’s device of having Frodo lack the strength of will to resist the lure of the Ring in the crisis before its destruction as reprehensible. Yet the overbearing of the will in diabolical infestation (obsession) permitted by God and involving little or no fault on the part of the sufferer is known to theologians, and there are not a few who suffer it as they progress in the spiritual life. St John of the Cross deals with the issue in Book I of *The Dark Night of the Soul*.<sup>11</sup> In having Gollum intervene in the moment Frodo’s will is overborne by the Ring’s evil force Tolkein’s story reflects the workings of Providence in the real order.

The critic asserts that Tolkein’s tales have produced no converts to Christianity. The obvious response to this claim is that they were never intended to. But consider this in the last book of *The Lord of the Rings* where Frodo explains why he must leave Middle Earth—

“It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger ; someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them...”<sup>12</sup>

Here is a most profound truth that a man of good will might embrace as a principle for altering the course of his behaviour. It might do more : it might persuade a Catholic to embrace the religious life for the love of God and his fellow man.

It is worthy of note that while he quotes with approval G K Chesterton’s comment on the Renaissance (that it was not a birth but a death) nowhere does the critic refer to Chesterton’s comprehensive endorsement of good fantasy—

“My first and last philosophy, that which I believe in with unbroken certainty, I learnt in the nursery... The things I believed most then, the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the utterly reasonable things... Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense... There is the chivalrous lesson of *Jack the Giant Killer* ; that giants should be killed because they are gigantic... There is the lesson of *Cinderella*, which is the same as that of the Magnificat... There is the great lesson of *Beauty and the Beast* ; that a thing must be loved before it is lovable. There is the terrible allegory of the *Sleeping Beauty*, which

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<sup>10</sup> *Enchiridion* xi

<sup>11</sup> Cf. also A. Tanqueray, *The Spiritual Life* (2<sup>nd</sup>. edn., Tournai, 1951), nn. 1426 et seq. and 1532 et seq.

<sup>12</sup> *The Return of the King*, Bk. V, Ch. IX, The Grey Havens, Ch. IX, towards the end

tells how the human creature was blessed with all birthday gifts, yet cursed with death ; and how death may perhaps be softened to a sleep..."<sup>13</sup>

Yet Chesterton was one of the greatest defenders of the Catholic faith of the twentieth century.

The critic insists that the times are dangerous, and offers as illustrations any number of instances of error masquerading as right, falsity masquerading as truth. The times *are* dangerous, both morally and religiously. There is no doubt of it. But we must have the discernment to weigh the good and the evil and their interplay ; to be as wise as serpents yet as harmless as doves. While the critic makes good points and raises important issues, then, these are often, to quote Hilaire Belloc, "strong blows, but on the void".

All of which having been said, there is, perhaps, one valuable insight in the critic's analysis, his questioning of the worth of the various interpretations, whether by their author or by others, of Tolkein's invented world and characters which would have them reflect the working out of God's Salvific Will. The present commentator tends to agree with him. Such interpretations can safely be ignored. What Tolkein may have intended by his fairy stories simply does not matter. The tales stand on their own feet.

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5<sup>th</sup> March 2014—*Ash Wednesday*

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<sup>13</sup> G K Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, London (The Bodley Head), 1908, Ch. IV, 'The Ethics of Elfland'.