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Marc Chémali

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THE SACRED IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

Marc Chémali, *Université Paris Nanterre*

I have often wondered at the fact that *The Lord of the Rings*, with its gruesome battles, acts of heroism and rather rigid moral frame, should have become such a cult book among the hippy community who were, if my fond memories do not deceive me, more bent on promoting love, not war, and whose moral system could be summed up in the caption “if it feels good, do it.” Ethereal, long-haired Elves and the return to nature would not suffice to explain the phenomenon, nor would mere escapism or what Tolkien himself called “arresting strangeness”. A likelier reason for this unexpected success lies in the fact that, for Tolkien, a fervent Catholic who described himself as an anarchist, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The only ones worthy of holding power are precisely those who are prepared to renounce it. And the only being that can hold absolute power without being corrupted by it is not a creature but *the* Creator (in “On Fairy Stories”, Tolkien talks about “the right to power as distinct from its possession”¹). Thus, in addition to awakening a feeling of wonderment within the reader through this “arresting strangeness”², the narrative appears as a profane representation of transcendence and appeals to the sense of the sacred (as distinct from religious belief). This, in addition to his healthy wariness of power, may also explain the unforgivable success of his epic. Daniel Grotta-Kurska describes Middle-earth as “God’s world for any Christian travelling through it.”³ But even rabid atheists like me, for instance, cannot wholly forgo their sense of the sacred, and Tolkien does not cater only for Christian believers: what *The Lord of the Rings* offers *all* its readers is, as it were, guilt-free natural religion experienced vicariously through the characters.

I shall therefore start with a few remarks on the links between literature and the sacred. If all literature is, as Kathryn Hume contends, “a meaning-giving experience”⁴, it already appears akin to the sacred, which can be described as *the* meaning-giving experience. This applies to any type of literature but I wholly agree with Jean-Jacques Meslin’s claim that fantasy literature is the privileged fictional medium of the sacred, the one best suited to represent it. On the one hand,

¹ TOLKIEN J.R.R. *Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wootton Major, The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, London, Unwin Paperbacks, 1975, p. 31.

² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³ GROTTA-KURSKA D. *J.R.R. Tolkien, Architect of Middle-earth*, New York, Warner Books, 1976, p. 139.

⁴ HUME K. *Fantasy and Mimesis*, New York, Methuen, 1984, p. 21.

the laws of the world of fantasy differ from those of the reader's world, and on the other — and this is true of *The Lord of the Rings* — the omniscient narrator vouches for the supernatural dimension of certain events and characters. In “On Fairy Stories”, Tolkien insists on his wariness regarding both the terms “supernatural” and “fantasy”. With regard to the latter, in *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson, for lack of a better word in English borrows Todorov's classification in *Initiation à la littérature fantastique* and refers to “the marvellous” to designate the genre in which the supernatural occurrences are established beyond doubt.⁵ It so happens that the irruption of the marvellous in the narration perfectly corresponds to the irruption of the sacred in profane reality. Following his identification with certain characters, the reader of fantasy or marvellous literature is vicariously led to experience what Rudolf Otto calls “the feeling of the state of creature”. Indeed, Otto states that there exist analogical correspondences between “numinous feelings” and profane emotions. He also indicates that the emotions triggered by a narrative, i.e. by a work of fiction, stand halfway between the two. It follows that fantasy literature buffs, more than mainstream literature readers, are thrill seekers who yearn for feelings more acute than profane reality — or fiction — can awaken.⁶

This, among other reasons, is why Tolkien appears as an exceptional representative of the genre, as an author whose individual work transcends it while contributing to its definition. In *The Lord of the Rings*, he is not content with pulling the strings of the genre in order to fulfil the expectations of readers seeking intense emotions, even though he most convincingly demonstrates that this expectation on the readers' part is perfectly legitimate and modestly describes his approach to writing in the following terms:

The prime motive was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them. [He further adds] As for any inner meaning or message, it has in the intention of the author none.⁷

What differentiates Tolkien from the plethora of authors who were inspired by his work or, at least, his approach, is, of course, the mastery he displays in his use of the marvellous elements. A mastery which leads to a luxuriance of supernatural manifestations without, in my opinion, his

⁵ JACKSON R., *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, London, Routledge, 1988.

⁶ OTTO R. *Le Sacré*, Paris, Payot, 1929.

⁷ TOLKIEN J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*, London, Harper Collins, 2005, p. xxiii.

ever falling into the trap of “arresting strangeness” for its own sake. It would be interesting to proceed taxonomically and bring out a structure from this symbolic profusion. For a while, I was tempted by a reading inspired from Gilbert Durand’s theory of symbols that could result in quite a rigorous classification of the staggering proliferation of images in the work⁸. But in Tolkien’s world, the Ring that brings invisibility to its wearer — a theme as old as the ring of Gyges — the enchanted swords, the gift of healing, and so on and so forth, in addition to manifesting the structures of imagination which Durand classifies in *Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*, are carefully integrated into a complex system aiming at harmonising two diametrically opposed world visions. As I could not satisfactorily deal with both aspects in so short a time, I have chosen to follow the latter rather than apply a reading grid which, although interesting, would yield a rather stark analysis if left to stand on its own.

The coexistence of these two visions generates a tension that underlies the narration and determines all its aspects. It originates, on the one hand, in Tolkien’s resolutely Christian position. Indeed, according to his own repeated declarations, he had put his pen at the service of his faith and was not wholly undeserving of his “Oxford Christian” title. On the other hand, his writing reflects his fascination for ancient Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and Scandinavian texts which he was among the first scholars to approach from a literary standpoint rather than as mere linguistic material enabling the study of dead languages. I have borrowed from Benvéniste the opposition between the sacred and the holy that underlies Tolkien’s story telling.⁹ Benvéniste opposes *sacer* and *sanctus*, the former referring to the bipolarity of the sacred, the latter to the exclusive manifestation of the divine. The representation of transcendence in *The Lord of the Rings* operates through both categories, which leads to a redoubling of the opposition that informs the narration.

The multiplication and entanglement of oppositions makes the analysis slightly arduous but highly enthralling. Indeed, the Judeo-Christian vision appears as a backdrop to the pagan representation of the sacred. The Judeo-Christian moral values — love and respect for one’s neighbour, selflessness, truthfulness and, above all, renunciation of power — are universalised in the framework of a cosmogony traced on the biblical model. Like the God of the Scriptures,

⁸ DURAND G. *Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*, Paris, Bordas, 1969.

⁹ BENVÉNISTE É. *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Paris, Minuit, 1969.

Iluvatar creates Valar, Elves and Men in his own image and, in so doing, provides them with a model of conscience. Obviously, as he develops his own Book of Genesis, Tolkien noticeably veers away from the letter of his biblical model. He manages, however, to inscribe his narration in the biblical perspective by presenting the reader with a postlapsarian world — since the inhabitants of Middle-earth, wise or otherwise, know the difference between good and evil — but still a world that precedes the Revelation, so that this knowledge of good and evil appears to be spontaneous and, as I have just stated, universal. This is what is conveyed by Aragorn's answer to Éomer during their first meeting:

‘It is hard to be sure of anything among so many marvels. The world is all grown strange. Elf and Dwarf in company walk in our daily fields; and folk speak with the Lady of the Wood and yet live; and the Sword comes back to war that was broken in long ages ere the fathers of our fathers rode into the Mark! How shall a man judge what to do in such times?’

‘As he ever has judged,’ said Aragorn. ‘Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men. It is a man's part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house.’¹⁰

Likewise, the universalisation of Judeo-Christian values invokes Plato's equation of Beauty and Goodness. Very few examples contradict this position, in fact only two: Sauron's ring — ultimately beautiful and ultimately evil — and Saruman's voice. To Milton's Satan's “all good to me is lost; evil, be thou my good”, Tolkien adds Morgoth's and Sauron's “all beauty to me is lost; ugliness, be thou my beauty.” Such a system would seem to leave no room for the very principle of hierophany that characterises the sacred. The cosmos is holy because it manifests through its very existence that of the divine. This principle is clearly stated by Gandalf in one of his confrontations with Denethor:

But I will say this: the rule of no realm is mine, neither of Gondor nor any other great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are in my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I am also a steward. Did you not know?¹¹

This resolutely Judeo-Christian vision is contradicted by the *mise en abyme* of the notion of sub-creation that Tolkien coins to describe his activity as a writer. Indeed, if the Creation is

¹⁰ TOLKIEN J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings, op.cit.*, p. 438.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 789.

Iluvatar's doing, the actual completion of this great work is entrusted to the Valar. The latter therefore appear as reproductive and tutelary powers and provide the ancestors of Elves and Men with models of behaviour in addition to the model of conscience originating in the Creator. The Third Age, that ends with the fall of Sauron, can thus be defined as a hybrid period during which the last details of the foundation of the Cosmos — the sacred action par excellence — are left to elvish and human heroes and no longer to beings of divine essence.

Thus is the sacred reintroduced in a Cosmos initially defined as holy. Evil is brought into the world by Morgoth, a fallen Vala, who will establish himself as anti-model in order to thwart the work of the other Valar who then represent the positive polarity of the sacred. In both cases, model and anti-model manifest themselves in the world in the form of hierophanies. In such a context, it was inevitable that profane and holy should occasionally merge as they both come into opposition with the sacred. The latter concept itself embraces an irreducible opposition between the two poles that constitute it, namely *hieros* and *bagios*, *fas* and *nefas*. By contrast, the irruption of the sacred evacuates the holy dimension to underline the undifferentiated and chaotic nature of the profane universe. The sacred is therefore opposed to the profane, which alternately appears to the reader either as holy or as a pale reflection of a transcendental model.

It is the complexity of this cosmogonic and, let's not deny it, theological system that counterbalances the seemingly Manichean dimension of the conflict opposing those who try to serve the divine design to those who claim to serve a new design, independent from the former; in other words, the conflict between the goodies and the baddies. These tension-generating oppositions culminate in *The Lord of the Rings*, which tells the story of the sacrificial crisis marking the passing from one Age to another. A Girardian reading of this absolute conflict, mythic in its cyclical repetition, reveals the staging of a highly pagan violence leading to the establishment of a Cosmos deserted by sub-, super- or para-human creatures, inhabited solely by men and subjected to divine laws that, from the point of view of the Christian reader, will be the object of a further revelation; in other words, a Cosmos in which the cyclical dimension of mythic time gives way to the linearity of History, more specifically, Holy History.

This leads me to the narrative categories of the sacred, namely time, space and language. My analysis of the first two draws heavily on the work of Mircea Eliade, who actually coined the term hierophany. As regards the representation of time, I would say that the “History” of Middle-earth repeats itself a little too often for the historian not to become a mythologist. If we take *The Silmarillion* into consideration, it appears that the successive conflicts that have ravaged Middle-earth and that foreshadow the War of the Rings are described by Gandalf and other “loremasters” as the same fight, eternally recurring, between the two poles of the sacred. Gandalf puts it in a nutshell at the outset of the narrative telling Frodo: “Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again”¹², uncannily echoing Paul Ricoeur who declares:

The sacred universe is the universe that emerges from chaos and that may return to it at any moment. Heaven is only order and life is only a blessing because the underlying chaos must ceaselessly be vanquished. The sacred is dramatic. [my translation]¹³

However much these conflicts may order themselves within a historical frame and feature different protagonists every time, they still remain reactualisations of the primordial conflict between the Valar *ab initio*. Moreover, the protagonists themselves, despite their historical dimension and their individuated nature, clearly appear as avatars of founding ancestors that have preceded them. This dual status is nowhere more obvious than in the case of the couple constituted by Aragorn and Arwen, for example. They appear both as avatars and historical descendants of a mythical founding couple uniting Elves and Men, namely Beren, a man, and Luthien Tinuviel, an elvish princess. The description of their encounter is, indeed, highly revealing in this regard:

For Aragorn had been singing a part of the Lay of Luthien which tells of the meeting of Luthien and Beren in the forest of Nildoreth. And behold! There Luthien walked before his eyes in Rivendell.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 51

¹³ RICOEUR P. “Manifestation et proclamation”, in *Le Sacré, études et recherches*, Paris, Aubier Montaigne, 1974, p. 61.

For a moment Aragorn gazed in silence, but fearing that she would pass away and never be seen again, he called to her crying, *Tinnuviel, Tinnuviel!* Even as Beren had done in the Elder days long ago.¹⁴ [p. 1058]

Once the mistaken identity problem has been solved, it appears hardly to have been a mistake. When Aragorn tells her that she is the perfect likeness of her ancestor Arwen replies: “So many have said [...]. Yet her name is not mine. Though maybe my doom will not be unlike hers.”¹⁵ Needless to say, her doom turns out to be identical to her ancestor’s. Lastly, the time framework of *The Lord of the Rings* is itself most ambiguous in this regard: it is presented as the outcome of a historical development but, at the same time, it is the founding moment of a new Age and as such, pertains to myth.

To this double time prism there corresponds a representation of space that is heterogeneous in more than one sense. In this semi-mythical context, the Ptolemaic and Copernican conceptions of the universe are superimposed: setting off for Valinor, the Elves, inheritors of the old order, sail upon a flat sea and arrive at their destination by following what Tolkien calls the “Straight Road”. When Men travel westwards, on the contrary, they can only come back full circle to where they started from, for as far as they are concerned the earth is round. But even in Middle-earth where the action takes place, the various types of breaks in space lead to a highly complex representation of the latter. Indeed, space is organised in networks where we find an opposition between infernal and Edenic spaces, both these types of space being sacred, that is to say separate, forbidden: Mordor and Mirkwood, on the one hand, and Rivendell and Lothlorien on the other. The characters who do not belong to them and enter them are respectively sullied by them or, on the contrary sully them. In all cases, they die for it or escape death very narrowly. These spaces are distinct from the consecrated places inhabited by Men that are licit and are yet regarded as special, if not altogether separate: in other words, as holy. It is the case of Hobbiton, for example, the celestial Jerusalem, in a way, protected by a hedge but totally vulnerable, and of Minas Tirith, the earthly Jerusalem, protected by battlements and yet hardly less vulnerable, after all. Finally, these spaces, whether sacred or holy are opposed to chaotic, unfounded, perfectly profane spaces systematically designated by the term “wilderness” and systematically described as dangerous and hostile: very close, in fact, to those sacred spaces belonging to the negative polarity of the sacred.

¹⁴ TOLKIEN J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings, op. cit.*, p. 1058.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1058.

In addition to these breaks in space and time that constitute the foundation of Tolkien's world, we find linguistic breaks that contribute to the process of marking the text with the seal of the sacred and manifesting the principle of spirit/matter permeability. Both the narrator and the protagonists almost systematically underline the irruption of the sacred in the world by adopting archaic and, sometimes, unfortunately slightly bombastic language (but then Tolkien was quite aware of that and did convincingly justify his frequent use of the "high style"). Likewise, in certain cases where a character is confronted with a hierophanic manifestation: speech gives way to song or silence, prose gives way to verse:

'Fair Lady Golberry!' [Frodo] said again. 'Now the joy that was hidden in the songs we heard is made plain to me.

*O slender as a willow-wand! O clearer than clear water!
O reed by the living pool! Fair River daughter!
O spring time, and spring again after!
O wind on the waterfall, and the leaves' laughter!*

Suddenly he stopped and stammered, overcome with surprise to hear himself saying such things.¹⁶

This leads to the hierophanic dimension of language itself. The invention of Elvish languages was, according to the author, the real starting point of his literary adventure. These languages, notably Quenya, appear as liturgical, a paradoxical status in a context where no reference is ever made to any cult whatsoever, barring the sort of grace Faramir performs in the presence of Sam and Frodo. But as I have just stated, Quenya presents a magico-religious dimension that makes it not only the privileged medium for the expression of the sacred, but also a hierophany in its own right. On several occasions, characters who do not know this language experience a sort of Pentecostal revelation and, uttering incantations, or simply names, in the aforementioned language, gain the upper hand over supernatural forces that are far beyond them. This, for example, happens twice to Sam on the edge of Mordor, and is all the more striking as the character is of humble extraction and quite unlearned.

But the hierophanic dimension of language is not limited to Elvish languages. The common language itself may at any moment become infused with power and act upon the world.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123/124.

Thus the name of Sauron is often replaced by periphrases for fear that its very utterance should bring about disaster or at least sully its user: “He whom we do not name”, “the nameless one”, “the Enemy”, etc. Likewise there are things it is not permitted to mention. This is a theme Ernst Cassirer develops in *Language and Myth*, where he declares:

That the name and the being should be intrinsically and necessarily related, that the name should not only designate the being, but that it should itself be the being and that the force of the being should be within it, such are a few of the fundamental presuppositions of the mythical intuition itself. [My translation]¹⁷

The most spectacular manifestation of this sacred power of language can be found in the confrontation between Gandalf and Saruman during which the former breaks the latter’s staff simply by declaring: “Saruman, your staff is broken.”¹⁸ A situation where reality radically changes to fit speech. As Caillois contends, power is first and foremost the power of speech.¹⁹

What these multiple fractures convey is that everything in the universe of *homo religiosus* is susceptible of acquiring the status of hierophany. Nevertheless, if the reorganisation of the elements of the referential universe that characterises fantasy literature makes the latter more apt to express the sacred than mainstream literature, some of these elements lend themselves more than others to hierophanisation. This leaves us with the representation of the sacred-oriented mentality and the status of power to examine. Once more, we see the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* at work. Insofar as the sacred is clearly an experience of limits, it is hardly surprising to note that the sacred nature of an object or a being is characterised by its excessive dimension. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the representation of the sacred invokes the categories of the extreme, regrouped in antithetical pairs: the huge and the tiny, the ancient and the newly-appeared, the hideous and the wonderful, etc. If the sacred nature of some of the elements in Tolkien’s world seems obvious to the characters who are confronted with them, and through those characters, to the readers, the necessity of interpreting such signs entails a division of the characters into two groups: lore masters and uninitiated characters. Insofar as knowledge of good and evil is presented as an immediate, spontaneous given of conscience, most of the teaching dispensed by the lore masters consists in a rehabilitation of myth and/or legend. At this point we may talk

¹⁷ CASSIRER E. *Langage et mythe*, Paris, Minuit, 1973.

¹⁸ TOLKIEN J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*, *op. cit.*, p. 583.

¹⁹ CAILLOIS R. *L’Homme et le sacré*, Paris, Gallimard, 1938.

about metamyth. Indeed, the sacrificial crisis partly results from the oblivion into which the founding stories have fallen. Historical — or Mythical — truth only survives in degraded, truncated form. The sceptics of Middle-earth call such surviving narrations myths in the pejorative sense of superstitious beliefs held only by the gullible. The role of the wise of Middle-earth is therefore to give back to those myths their original meaning of essential truth. Witness Aragorn's reaction to the incredulity manifested by a Rohirrim regarding the existence of Hobbits:

‘Halflings!’ laughed the Rider that stood beside Éomer. ‘Halflings! But they are only a little people in old songs and children’s tales out of the North. Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?’

‘A man may do both,’ said Aragorn. ‘For not we but those who come after will make the legends of our time. The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day!’²⁰

Through this *mise en abyme*, Tolkien rehabilitates fantasy literature as a whole. For those characters who have the reader's trust tirelessly reaffirm the truth of these myths within the myth and, of course, the events themselves continually prove them right.

This is where we find ourselves faced with the theme of power to which I have alluded. For in Middle-earth as elsewhere, knowledge and power are indissolubly linked. Saruman's Faustian fate and the participation of the Elves in the making of the Rings are obvious examples of this. Admittedly, Tolkien somehow manages to establish a distinction between two sorts of power, one whose aim is to dominate, the other whose aim is to protect: what he respectively calls in his “Essay on Fairy Stories” *goetia* and *magia*. Nevertheless, what *The Lord of the Rings* brilliantly demonstrates is that the teleological justification of power is necessarily limited owing to the very nature of the latter. Indeed the very logic of power itself inevitably leads to the appropriation and negation of the other. In most emphatic tones do both Gandalf and Galadriel refuse to take the Ring that Frodo willingly offers them. Thus it is that the true aim of the Quest is the renunciation of absolute power, the power that has its source in the spirit/matter permeability: that power can only be legitimately exercised by the Creator. The reader therefore witnesses a sort of magico-religious crescendo that culminates with the destruction of the Ring. In turn, this destruction of the ultimate form of power in Middle-earth entails the disappearance

²⁰ TOLKIEN J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings, op. cit.*, p. 434.

of this spirit/matter permeability from a world forsaken by all non-human creatures endowed with reason. Once more, at the end of the narration, Myth caves in upon itself to make way for History.

The Lord of the Rings is a hybrid narration, a work founded on a paradox, where the narrative codes of romance harmoniously cohabit with modern novel techniques, for example. But the supreme paradox lies in Tolkien's project itself. This project consists in trying to regenerate reality and resemanticise it by dipping it, as it were, in fantasy, that is, in the genre furthest removed from it. As far as Tolkien, who, as I said at the beginning, had not usurped his "Oxford Christian" title, was concerned, the very essence of reality was to be found in the Catholic creed. I have tried to show how he managed to express what he considered to be the Truth through a story involving creatures and natural laws that contradict both reality and the text which, he believed, contained its essence, namely the Scriptures. C.S. Lewis had written a letter to him in which he described mythopoetic activity as "breathing lies through silver". Tolkien's answer in writing *The Lord of the Rings* could be summed up as "breathing the Truth through silver lies".