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***Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*:
 A Critical Reading, a Critic Reading**

About halfway through the *The Lord of the Rings*, in Book III, chapter 6, "The King of the Golden Hall", the Fellowship of the Ring arrive at Meduseld, the golden hall of Théoden son of Thengel, King of the Mark of Rohan, the horse-lords of the Rohirrim.¹ Aragorn calls the raising of the hall "a memory of song" (496), and the song he evokes is one which we would call an *ubi sunt*, asking where the past has gone. Familiar enough. And as they ride closer they are stopped by a troop of riders who accost them with aggressive demands to know who they are and what their business is. In the course of this question and answer, the guards reveal that they have been watching the Fellowship approach, and that never have they seen the like. As Gandalf identifies himself, his companions, and the horses they ride, the guards' chief becomes more polite, conveying their message to Théoden King, and the king's reply, that they must stack their weapons before entering the hall. The guard hands them over to the door wardens, and leaves with a courteous wish for their good fortune. But the same tense experience of question and answer repeats itself: for example, when the doorwarden recognizes that the newcomers have stepped straight out of old songs (the kind of metacritical gesture which so disarms reader scepticism in the course of the book), and, in a courteous gesture, allows Gandalf to enter the hall leaning on his staff, saying, "Yet in

¹ I have used the single volume HarperCollins edition first published London, 1991, and page references are to that edition, but there are so many editions of *The Lord of the Rings* that I have also given book and chapter references in brackets in the text.

doubt a man of worth will trust to his own wisdom. I believe you are friends and folk worthy of honour, who have no evil purpose. You may go in". Any reader of *Beowulf* will already have recognized words, phrases, and incidents taken straight from sections 5 and 6 of the poem. The Anglo-Saxon poet's coast-guard agrees to allow the Geats to enter Hrothgar's hall: "A sharp-witted shield-warrior who thinks well must be able to judge each of the two things, words and works. I understand this: that here is a troop friendly to the Scyldings' king. [...] It is time for me to go back. The All-Wielding Father in His grace keep you safe in your undertakings" (6).² Then the door-warden, who has not seen such a bold approach, speaks to Hrothgar (7), before asking Beowulf and his companions to stack their spears outside the hall (8).

The Lord of the Rings is inconceivable without *Beowulf*, but it is perfectly readable and *almost* completely comprehensible in ignorance of the Anglo-Saxon poem. I shall return to that "almost". The novel, or, perhaps better, romance, has carried and borne fruit, through what Tolkien called his sub-creation, his invention of a world, consistent and coherent in itself, and *Beowulf* has made a kind of armature for *The Lord of the Rings'* Middle Earth.³ Almost completely comprehensible, I've just said. For what we miss, if we have no acquaintance with *Beowulf* and the early medieval world which was Tolkien's academic concern, is the meaning of its words, many of which stem from Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, or Gothic, to give the variety of the languages Tolkien invented. So we might want to begin by looking at *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* in detail, erecting a catalogue of borrowings and re-interpretations; one might list the linguistic roots of the world of Middle Earth.⁴ Théoden King: his name means "lord" in Old English. Does it matter? Yes, of

² I have reservations about the Tuso edition of the Donaldson translation set for the Agrégation, but of course my references to *Beowulf* must be to that version, in brackets in the text.

³ See his essay "On Fairy Stories", many times reprinted.

⁴ The best account of this relationship is still Tom Shippey's fine *The Road to Middle Earth* (London and Boston, 1982, 1983). There are good essays in the collection *Scholarship and Fantasy*, ed. K. J. Batterbee (Turku, Finland, Publications of the Department of English, University of Turku, no. 12, 1993).

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course it does. Is it crucial? No, because Tolkien ensured that we would understand most of what he wanted to convey by conveying it in other ways. We might move from the word hoard to heroism, the sense of stoic heroism which is some, but not all, of what Tolkien undertook to make new for us. This, too, would be a list. More important, to my mind, is the spirit of poems like — and, of course, including — *Beowulf*, which enabled Tolkien to examine good and evil in a fabulous, that is, non-realistic, non-novelish, mode, a spirit which allowed Tolkien to think about ultimate things without pinning himself into any kind of straitjacket formed by Christian revelation.

In this he is remarkably like the *Beowulf*-poet himself, who set his tale among non-Christian warriors in order to think about where evil comes from, about the limits of heroism, about the frailty of order in a difficult world. Less, perhaps, magic realism than realistic magic. And in this, too, he is, remarkably, surprisingly, like the *Beowulf*-poet in being un- or perhaps non-Christian, although his Catholicism — as well, one must never forget, as his experience of war — gave him ideas about what to write about.⁵ We learn a lot about Tolkien by reading *Beowulf*, but although I shall start there, I think the important matter is how reading *The Lord of the Rings* helps us to understand *Beowulf*. Because the essential incompatibility between what heroes do and what the rest of us do creates a perplexing tension at the heart of *all* the great poems of war, and, I dare say, all the great novels, too.

What I shall do is begin not quite with the word hoard, but with the challenge to replace, to re-place, that is, to make a space for an archaeology of English. Tolkien was writing against modernism in many ways, but one of the most important was his insistence that without its history English loses its layeredness, its self.⁶ The struggle to find not a way, but ways, to render that past in a possible

⁵ Tom Shippey's essay in the Turku collection is outstanding. An earlier essay by Derek Brewer is informed by Prof. Brewer's experience of a later war: in *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Story-Teller: Essays in Memoriam*, ed. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1979).

⁶ In what follows my debt to Prof. Shippey will be clear. Where he follows Northrop Frye, however, I follow Auerbach's formulations in *Mimesis*.

Present English links Tolkien to Spenser, to Milton, to the men who created the King James Bible, to the other archaizers mocked then and now. Except that he was a better philologist. While Modernists insisted upon an English as it was spoken, Tolkien invented varieties that sounded as if they might be, but never were, on the tongues of men. Or other beings. The vowels and liquid consonants than make us prefer the Elves' speech to the rasping ugliness of the Orcs is only one example. He wrote against his age, too, in his insistence, stemming, no doubt, powerfully if simply, from his experience of the trenches of the Great War, on the comradeship and heroism of men at war. He wrote in the shadow of the results of that terror in the second war, and the beginnings of the Cold War with the threat of Armageddon never far. Stripped down and simplified as his Middle Earth is, homosocial, as we would now call it, it yet stands for something that was precious to him, and, if the evidence of readership counts for anything, is still precious today. In what follows I shall explore some of these issues, always trying to satisfy the Hobbits' desire to set things out "fair and square and with no contradictions" (7).

And, in the end, what I can only gesture towards is the extraordinary belatedness, the masculine simplicity, of Frodo's world. For who, after all, are the Hobbits when *they* are at home? I can also only gesture towards the characterizations of *Beowulf* that one must meet — especially if one reads the old-fashioned criticism of so much of the Tuso edition — from mainly male, and mainly English critics in the middle of the twentieth century, so many of whom judged the poem from the standpoint of loss, not only the end of Empire, and its values, but of the heroic mission of Engeland. So I am also going to be arguing that there is a degree of sentimentality about much of what you are reading this year which *in other circumstances* would be associated with effeminate weakness.⁷ So

⁷ In this context it is always worth remembering that "shell-shock" was coined to avoid labelling men's symptoms as "hysteria". The five great parallel stories of the exchange of women and the concomitant failure of peace uphold *Beowulf*. The repressed returns, not, the first time as tragedy and the second as farce, but as parody: no tragedy without travesty. Hrothgar's wife and Grendel's mother; the sword and the ring. The authors ring changes, and they

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what I shall be arguing is that the more the war-world of men tries to simplify itself to assert the rightness of its values, the more the complexities of peace assure their presence.

I. Archaizing the Language

Archaism is not simply a matter of style: style brings *things* with it by naming them, and the way we name affects the way we think of ourselves and society; Tolkien gave his society words and things, ways and habits which belonged to more than one old literary tradition. He had fairy and folk-tale expectations on his side, but he needed more dignity than his contemporaries afforded what had been banished to the nursery. He needed the high register of rhetoric that English, unlike other romance languages, lost — even discarded — without regret. By naming, by using Biblical cadences and inverting modern English syntax, he recreated a register that acted as a medium in which to root his archaized and idealized societies. He tied *The Lord of the Rings* to an oral culture which read aloud, and made his sentences *sound* — in both senses. From *Beowulf* alone he took alliteration, for example Goldberry's "farewell, elf friend, it was a merry meeting" Goldberry — whose own name comes straight from the early medieval romance, *Havelok* (I. 8 "Fog on the Barrow Downs" p. 133); he brought in suffixes to indicate group-relation, such as Beorn and the Beornings, like our Scyldings and Scylfings; he scattered barrows on the landscape, and filled them with "wights" (one of the old words for a man) as well as with treasure; he buried Boromir in a ship, like Scyld Scefing, and like that earlier ship, one which was never seen again. In the dignity of the aristocratic society he reinvented, he included Galadriel's gifts in II.8 "Farewell to Lórien", including her golden hair, the wassail cup at parting; he brought back kings as givers of armour and mithril coats. He tells us that Isildur demanded weregild for the death of his father in II.2 "The Council of Elrond" (p. 237) and he even has a sword-blade

change rings. The torque which had been the sign and symbol of courage and victory becomes a small jewel which corrupts. The Ring-Giver cedes to Gollum, the avaricious snatcher. Grendel's Mother becomes the nightmare Shelob.

entirely consumed by blood V.6 "The Battle of Pelennor Fields" (p. 826). His characters use sayings, sometimes gnomic, often about "fate or fortune", as when a courageous man's doom is not yet — straight from *Beowulf* (II.1 "Many Meetings" p. 216); or Gildor's reflection that "Others dwelt here before hobbits were; and others will dwell here again when hobbits are no more. The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot forever fence it out" (I.3 "Three is company", p. 82). Here let it be said, not entirely parenthetically, that unlike many other more dangerous nostalgic reinventors of tradition, Tolkien managed, among other paradoxes, to move between aristocratic ideas of inherited leadership and merit, and politically much more acceptable views about consent. That is, his world is a romantic — in the belated sense — evocation of a world with social classes. Sam Gamgee, like many another Other Ranks hero, earns the equivalent of the Military Medal and not a Military Cross, which was for officers only.

Once Tolkien has his world going he can fill it with different peoples, not only different tribes, but different species, as different as Ents from Hobbits, some of whom are part of our literary inheritance. Like the world of River Bank, this is a thinly disguised imaginary of racial and social difference. But it is not always negative, any more than his great unacknowledged model, Kipling, was negative. The feud between Elves and Dwarves, for example, is also a reminder that friendship supersedes racial prejudice; the Orcs or their cognates, the Uruk-hai, philologically speaking, are Anglo-Saxon monsters, just as Trolls belong to the frozen Norse. The Balrog is his own, but Sauron's name belongs to what it sounds like, T-rex and all. Shelob, who is quite like a spider, is also quite like Grendel's Mother. I shall come back to the question about the moral status of the monsters. *The Lord of the Rings* is much longer than the Anglo-Saxon poem, long as it is, and some of Tolkien's best effects he repeats more than once: the question and answer incident with which I began and the possibility of riddles which it raises he used several times, e.g. elves, notorious for the ambiguity of their answers (I.3 p. 79); Sauron (II.1 p. 235); the parting (II.3, p. 274); as well as the first run-in with the Rohirrim (III.2 p. 422).

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But two things Tolkien did which react to what he knew in *Beowulf*: first, the kings of old days are great ring-givers. The desire for gold and articles for display creates emulation and heroism in the world of *Beowulf*. It is central to the essential reversal in Tolkien's book that Frodo's heroic task is to destroy a ring; that no good character who understands wants to be given it. Second, Tolkien brought in repeated questions about chance, fate, purpose, or something more, which allows those good characters scope that cannot exist in *Beowulf*, which never asks the questions in the same way in part because the *scop* of the poem is so different from Tolkien's narrator. One cannot imagine the *scop* distinguishing the monster without from monsters within.

II. Heroism

It is hard to speak of heroism; we have become too ironic. It depends, after all, upon the idea that what we do matters, matters terribly. The world of *The Lord of the Rings* is a man's world, a stripped-down masculine world of war, before mechanization, a simpler pre-Industrial England of horses, of bows and arrows, with women round the hearth and servants and social hierarchies and the different species knowing their places, geographical as well as deferential. One concerned with the genealogy of fellowship, and the stories which intertwine in those genealogies. And one in which it was a positive sensual pleasure to smoke. Two world wars on, Tolkien made it quite clear that Middle Earth had to unite to face a real and present danger, which removes the difficulty of pacifism, because the justification of fighting need no longer grapple with feud or counting coup; it is self-defence. It is true that Gimli the Dwarf and Legolas the Elf boast of the numbers they have killed in an emulative competition; that might have come from the heroic world of the middle ages, but it strikes me as a degree of funk that Tolkien ascribed the elation of battle-killing to the non-human characters, as if there were things even he shrank from saying. But one idea he does retain in common with Homer and with the *scops* is the idea that we do great deeds in order to be remembered, to make a song (III.2 "The Riders of Rohan" p. 424). And, of course, even if there

is no one to survive, heroes fight on. That is why even in Present English we speak of "unsung heroes". That much is easy, and even Boromir redeems his seduction by dying well, and trying to protect Merry and Pippin.

But Tolkien knows other kinds of courage, and not just Sam Gamgee's devotion, or the insistence that one does one's duty. Not so easy for Eowyn, though Arwen chooses mortality in exchange for her love, rather too much like the Little Mermaid for my taste. Aragorn has to lead, which means making choices, hard choices that may commit other beings to death. Théoden has to admit publicly that he was wrong, passing his kingdom to his sister's son, Eomer, whose name, of course, comes straight out of *Beowulf*, as also part of the history of Anglo-Saxon Britain. The sister's son relation is one that remained central throughout medieval literature, even to the destruction of the Arthurian kingdom when Arthur obeys his obligation to support Gawain in his feud with Lancelot. One of the characteristics of *Beowulf*'s world is the insistence that we are attached to other stories (i.e. Strider's tale of Beren, I.11, p. 189, or the elves' mother's torment in the hall of the Orcs, I.12, p. 221). Tolkien wrote about this in the Foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*: "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers". Historical romance is his matrix. He writes "as if" these things could have been, and these characters needed to learn, develop, and change. But there are limits; Tolkien was, after all, English by upbringing (if South African by the *jus soli* of birth), a Catholic, a gentleman and a scholar.

Frodo learns to kill in the course of *The Lord of the Rings*, and when he returns to the Shire that knowledge enables him to face more hard choices. But none of the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* are ever entirely in control, and things go wrong, or at least not entirely right. The question of mercy, of pity, is with the heroes from the start, and is essential to the book's two narrative ends, not only the end of the Ring, but the otherwise loose end of Saruman

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himself. Frodo is a long way from *Beowulf* the hero and the poem. This is most telling, even grating, at the end, when he tries to restrain the Hobbits from killing, on the grounds that revenge never solves anything. If this is not Tolkien's rejection of the world he so loved, I cannot think what else it is — and how painful for him it must have been, as he sank into the sentimentality of his ending. Of course, Tolkien has it both ways by using Wormtongue and nameless archers to do what needs to be done, but perhaps that failure was only to be expected, as he turns his protagonist into an English gentleman of the Shire. After all, Frodo also does not speak about himself, even when his old wound troubles him, except to announce, as he leaves for the Havens (shades of the hero who does not die but goes to Avalon to be healed), that some must sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. For the sake of Sam Gamgee and his multitudinous descendants, as it turns out. What could be more distant from *Beowulf*, if not from the bad habits of Christian allegorists whose criticism so distorts the hero's last battle?⁸

And, in the end, not only will they all die, but the world of Middle Earth will fade away and be superseded by something else, a something else which promises to be very like us. I'm afraid I think the end of *The Lord of the Rings* sentimental to the point of failure, but perhaps that is the modernist in me talking. It is very hard to kill off characters one loves. *Beowulf* was a poem of sterner stuff.

III. Fortune, Fate, or something else?

The poet of *Beowulf* does not handle what we now call the problem of evil head on. In fact, and despite what earlier critics have written, it is not clear that he handles the problem as a problem at all. Monsters come, and nobody would want to say much in their favour, but the poet is able to see things from their points of view.

⁸ One might go so far here as to claim that the Arthurian/Christological suffering sacrifice of the wounded Frodo at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* is itself a redemptive rejection of the pagan *Beowulf*'s end. The idea that *Beowulf* sacrificed himself for his people is one of those distorting critical ideas which too long held sway over Christian readers of the poem.

Grendel displays characteristics familiar to any of us who have read or seen *Richard III*: he is envious and spiteful — and if that is not evil I do not know what is; his mother wants what the human characters want, *revenge*; so does the dragon. Is revenge evil? Human misbehaviour, which eventuates in wrongful killing, is characterized by disloyalty, oath-breaking (those two faults of which Beowulf himself was always free), and ambition; but killing also stems from revenge, and it is not explicit that revenge *per se* is wrong. God, after all, indulged in it, against Cain and against the giants who are so important in the contradictory second creation story in *Genesis*. Nonetheless, we can distinguish between the terrors that come from outside, such as Grendel and his mother, who are worse than cannibals because they swallow their victims bones and all; and terrors which come from within. Heroes keep their word. Villains do not. But this does not cover revenge.

The traditional division is between what comes from outside and what arises from within. But the idea of revenge immediately tells us that there are problems with how we categorize motives, actions, and reactions. Revenge is a highly motivated answer to an external event, both outside and in, and not obviously — at least in heroic literature — evil. Nor obviously expunged either by the Old Testament's insistence that "Revenge is mine; I will repay" or by the New Testament's preposterous idea that we should all turn the other cheek. Even the Catholic Tolkien didn't believe *that*.

But he did worry about where evil comes from, as well one might. And he was burdened by church views that struggle to avoid any taint of Manichean equality between good and evil. So he writes around the issues. He is explicit in the Council of Elrond chapter (II.2), where Elrond himself emphasizes how far evil is the result of a kind of seduction: if you study evil arts they will take you over, but "nothing was evil in the beginning" (251). Elrond sees life as cyclical, and in Saruman's fall — and we should remember that *Saru + mon* is a cunning man — comments that "Such falls and betrayals have happened before" (258). Shades of Milton's Satan, who fell because of his overweening pride. The church has always wrestled with the need to say that evil is always a negative, a counterfeit, that

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it cannot create, and Tolkien says that, too. Actually, in best literary fashion, he rather asks than tells, and he puts words into the mouths of characters who have varying authority. We may believe them or not. In III.4 (Treebeard) the great Ent says "But Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves" (474); as Frodo agrees, in "The Tower of Cirith Ungol" (VI.1) when he says of the Orcs that "The Shadow (capital S Shadow) that bred them can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I don't think it gave life to the orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them...." (893). Not only is there a contradiction there, but Frodo is well on his way to the central contradiction of the end of the book.

Tolkien wants deity, and he wants assertions of basic goodness. Like other critics, above all, once more, Tom Shippey, I have spoken of him as a writer against Modernism, both in its assertions about the English language and the English ideal of life. And these two "againsts", which, no doubt, we can trace back to Edwardian nostalgia for pre-industrial England, gave him his great "fors", his love of community, the landscape, and the language. These positive loves are what he pitted against the appeasers, the liars, the propagandists and destroyers. *The Lord of the Rings* begins with reminders that pity and mercy matter, they matter terribly. Another pair recur in the book: chance and purpose, and Tolkien reifies morality when Gandalf explains to Frodo that there was something else at work in the vicissitudes of the Ring, some other power, some goodness (I.2 "The Shadow of the Past", pp. 54-5). Gollum is spared because he may have a part to play which he has not foreseen (II.1, p. 249). What Tolkien is appealing to is a belief that a benevolent deity turns ill to good, and makes the efforts of the Enemy turn against him. One of the most portentous sayings in the book is Aragorn's reflection, "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" (III.2, p. 428). And in the silent recognition of something unspoken, in the references to

Elbereth Gilthoniel which punctuate the text (e.g. II.1, pp. 231-2), Tolkien *has* Deity. He just doesn't call it that.

The Lord of the Rings is, in its way, a romance and a comedy. After all, good wins. It is hard to remember that Frodo actually fails, and betrays himself and his comrades and all of Middle Earth at the last moment, to be saved only by Sméagol, Gollum, whose name is cognate with Smaug, the monster of *The Hobbit*. Tolkien may have chosen a gentler, a more explicitly Christian ending than the unknown creator of *Beowulf*, but we can recognize in that launch for the Havens something at least as old as Scyld Scefing's disappearance onto the sea. Without *Beowulf* we would not have *The Lord of the Rings*; reading *The Lord of the Rings* makes us better readers of *Beowulf*. We can say in conclusion, I think, that Tolkien would not have been unhappy with our efforts, especially if his work made his readers curious, and pious, about their own past. But he would have had reservations. We know, because he said so. I should like to leave the last word to Tolkien, from his so-much-quoted British Academy lecture of 1934, because I think his warning on the enterprise which has brought us to the study of his book as part of our study of *Beowulf* is well worth remembering:

But this is an age of potted criticism and pre-digested literary opinion; and in the making of these cheap substitutes for food translations unfortunately are too often used. To use a prose translation for this purpose is, more or less, an abuse. *Beowulf* is not merely in verse, it is a great poem; and the plain fact [is] that no attempt can be made to represent its metre.... (49).

A vous de jouer.⁹

⁹ I am, as ever, indebted to my readers, Dr. Stefan Collini and Prof. Terence McCarthy; in addition, I am grateful to Dr. Andy Orchard for advice and the loan of precious material on *Beowulf* and on Old English poetry, as well as to Prof. Kathy O'Brien O'Keefe and Prof. David Dumville for support and scepticism.