Running Widdershins Round Middle Earth: Why Teaching Tolkien Matters

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Tolkien, in his 1936 address to the British Academy entitled "*Beowulf*: the Monster and the Critics," offered the following allegory:

> *A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: This tower is most interesting." But they also said (after pushing it over): What a muddle it is in! And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion: But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea (Beowulf, pp. 6-7).*

Tolkien's reference to sea is one key to understanding the significance of his mythmaking. In *The Two Towers,* Gandalf explains to Pippin that the first of the Numenorean men to return to Middle Earth brought with him the seven *palantiri,* seeing stones that allowed him to communicate with and observe distant places; he placed one of them so that it commanded a constant view of the sea (Beowulf, p. 203). Earlier in the same book, Gandalf brings word from Galadriel to Legolas, the elf member of the Fellowship:

> *Legolas Greenleaf long under tree*
> *In joy thou hast lived. Beware of the Sea!*
> *If thou hearest the cry of gull on the shore,*
> *Thy heart shall then rest in the forest no more. (Beowulf, p. 106)*

In his mythology, Tolkien tells us that the elves crossed the sea in rebellion, and even those who linger yet in Middle Earth do not forget and yearn for a return to their land of origin. For elves, the sea is a mixed blessing. In rebellion, many of them crossed it to their sorrow, and those who still linger in Middle Earth live with the divided allegiance of their love of forest and the call of the sea, urging them to return to the land of their creation. Tolkien lives with a similarly divided symbolic imagination. Trees and the sea are keys to his imagination and through both he offers us an opportunity to envision a world different from the one we live in and responds to the demands of the material (or practical) with a vision that is instead, mythic.

Returning to Tolkien's allegory, it is clear that he suggests that his fellow medievalists have taken a work of great imaginative and artistic power, and instead of using it to "see the sea", they have mined it for words and phrases, and pulled it apart, looking for bits and pieces from other ancient works, and even reworked it after their own notions of how it "ought" to be built. In his essay, Tolkien recognizes the tension between two ap-

proaches to the old poem. The "practical" approach, that treats it as a source book for other sorts of studies, is important and fundamental to any attempt to make sense of the text and is something that Tolkien himself had mastered young. At the same time, Tolkien argues that, as essential as that sort of intellectual activity is, it offers only a limited understanding of the potential of the poem. The tension Tolkien has identified in his own discipline reflects an ongoing tension common to many disciplines between pursuits that yield practical and material results and pursuits that, often drawing on those material results, go beyond them to recognize larger and more abstract qualities. Tolkien concludes:

> *It is just because the main foes in Beowulf are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than this imaginary poem of a great king's fall. It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts; it stands amid but above the petty wars of princes, and surpasses the dates and limits of historical periods, however important....we look down as if from a visionary height upon the house of man in the valley of the world ... A light starts...and there is a sound of music; but the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease (Beowulf, p. 35).*

The description Tolkien provides of the overall importance and effect of *Beowulf* could be, with equal accuracy, applied to his own mythology. There, Tolkien provides a modern-day instance of an epic tale that gives us glimpses of the lives of human beings and their fate. Like *Beowulf*, his epic gives us, to return to his opening allegory, a tower from which we may see the sea.

Familiarity with Tolkien's epic generally begins with *Lord of the Rings*, and that what is commonly understand of his mythology comes as partly understood echoes in the poems and stories his characters share. For Tolkien, epic, myth, language, culture, and verisimilitude were inextricably linked, and they provide the opportunity to climb his "non-sensical tower" rather than mining for coal at its base and treating myth and epic as simple archaeology, or perhaps tomb raiding.

Tolkien's visual art demonstrates the linkage Tolkien establishes among myth, epic and verisimilitude. In their book on his visual art, Hammond and Scull[1] point out that his paintings "The Halls of Manwe", (#52 in their book), the "Misty Mountains from *The Hobbit* "(#110) and an untitled mountain landscape (#53), perhaps from his trip to Switzerland as a young man, are all depictions of the same mountain from varying perspectives. Likewise, Tolkien depicts Nargothrond, the underground home of the elves in the First Age of Middle Earth (#57) and the Third Age Elven King's Gate from *The Hobbit* (#117 and #120) as physically very similar places.

Hammond and Scull explain the overlaps by suggesting that Tolkien was a "frugal artist" who "often reused elements of his pictures that he thought came out well." (J. R. R Tolkien, p. 54) Frugality seems an unlikely explanation for Tolkien's reuse of images. He may well have been frugal with his use of paper, frequently making use of scraps and back sides of copy books, especially during the war years when most materials were in short supply, but his sense of frugality never extended to his mythmaking. A more convincing argument suggests that, in his imagination, these places were somehow the same, that the later mountains and forests in his mythology resembled or reflected the "original" mountains of his earlier matter.

To further understand Tolkien's mythic imagination, turning to Lothlorien, a place in his narrative where the matter of the First Age and the matter of the Third Age come together is instructive. Tolkien describes the Fellowship's arrival outside Caras Galadon, the chief city of the elves in Lothlorien:

> *"Welcome to Caras Galadon," [Haldir] said. "Here is the city of the Galadrim where dwell the Lord Celeborn and Galadriel, Lady of Lorien. But we cannot enter here, for the gates do not look northward. We must go round to the southern side, and the way is not short, for the city is great."*
>
> *There was a road paved with white stone running on the outer brink of the fosse. Along this they went westward, with the city ever climbing up like a green cloud uipon their left; and as the night deepened more lights sprang forth, until all the hill seemed afire with stars (Fellowship, p. 368).*

In this short, seemingly unimportant passage, Tolkien gives us an important clue to the principles of his mythmaking. To enter Caras Galadon, the party must travel *widdershins*—that is counterclockwise—and so enter it as one would traditionally enter *faery*. To travel, or to imagine, *widdershins*, is to risk entering the world of myth, a world where time and narrative do not follow linear patterns, and a world from which one may not emerge, "unchanged," or, to borrow Boromir's suspicious description, "unscathed" (Fellowship, p. 352).

Tolkien has described Frodo's first impression of Lothlorien:

> *Frodo stood awhile still lost in wonder. It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured forever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful (Fellowship, p. 365).*

Sam's reaction is equally telling: "I thought that Elves were all for moon and stars: but this is more elvish than anything I ever heard tell of. I feel as if I was *inside* a song, if you take my meaning" (Fellowship, p. 365). Frodo and Sam both recognize the unusual, dream-like intensity of Lothlorien. It is timeless, or rather time flows around it. Haldir remarks that it is unfortunate that they have only seen Lothlorien's mallorn trees in winter, alive, asleep, and "arrayed in pale gold." Even Aragorn stands still and silent as a tree…He was wrapped in some fair memory; and as Frodo looked at him he knew that he beheld things as they once had been in this same place. For the grim years were removed from the face of Aragorn, and he seemed clothed in white a young lord tall and fair (Fellowship, p. 366).

They are inside song; it feels as if they look on a "vanished world" (Fellowship, p. 366). It is hushed, quiet, waiting, winter-time in Lothlorien. The only apparent sign of time moving is in the trees. The silver trees have lost their leaves for the winter, but the mallorn trees are still leaved in pale gold, colors reminiscent of the original Two Trees. Frodo listens to the wind "sigh" among the branches and hears "far off great seas upon beaches that had long ago been washed away, and sea-birds crying whose race had perished from the earth" (Fellowship, p. 366). Here, Tolkien hints what that vanished world looked like, and through the trees themselves, offers us clues that help us to understand myth, and understanding myth, revision, retelling, and recycling of mythic tales.

Trees are key to understanding Tolkien. We know they were important to Tolkien. Treebeard alone, or Bilbo's party tree, should be sufficient evidence, but there is other evidence. In a letter to his son Michael in 1967 or 1968, he discusses his discomfort with the changes of Vatican II using a tree as his metaphor. He complains of the "protestant" attempts to search backwards through church history to reclaim a simpler, presumably more accurate worship from the early church. Such attempts must fail, he says, …because "my church" was not intended …to be static or remain in perpetual childhood; but to be a living organism (likened to a plant) which develops and changes in externals by the interaction of its …circumstances. There is no resemblance between the "mustard-seed" and the full-grown tree. For those living in the days of its branching growth the Tree is the thing, for the history of a living thing is part of its life and the history of a divine thing is sacred. The wise may know that it began with a seed, but it is vain to try and dig it up, for it no longer exists, and virtue and powers that it had now reside in the tree. Very good: but in husbandry …the keepers of the Tree …will certainly do harm, if they are obsessed with the desire of going back to the seed or even to the first youth of the plant when it was (as they imagine) pretty and unafflicted by evils" (The Letters of J. R. R Tolkien, p. 394).

How do these passages reveal Tolkien's myth-making? Trees are a good place to start, both because they were so fundamentally important to him and because they are central to both the dream of Lothlorien—notice that Caras Galadon is literally built in the trees—and the metaphor for the church in his letter to Michael. His vision

is rooted in both his mythic and his non-mythic worlds, and trees unite both. Trees grow slowly and live for a long time. They bear within them the history of their existence—patterns of rain or drought for example—but their history can only be inferred from the outside of a living tree. The only way to examine a tree's rings is to damage the tree itself, and as Gandalf observes, "he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom" (Fellowship, p. 272).

The life pattern of a deciduous tree, in its growth and loss of leaves, implies both stasis and change. The leaves that it loses will be replaced the following spring, but the replacement will be a new leaf, not a reincarnation of the old leaf. Tolkien's cycle of myth is both stasis and change. The pattern is a cycle, or more accurately, a spiral, into what Tolkien characterizes as "the long defeat" and he lives and writes with one foot in mythic time and one in "secular" time.

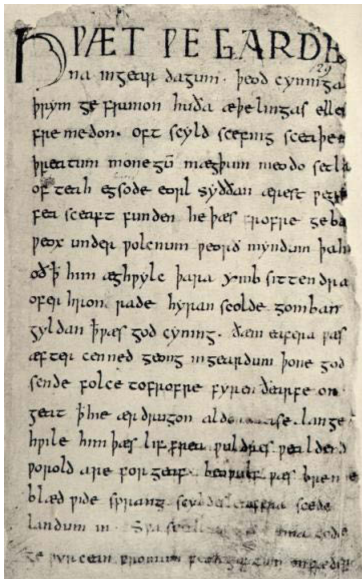
In his written work, the cyclical pattern is easy to trace. Arwen is the Evenstar of her people as Luthien was the Morning Star, and both are lost to the elves. Frodo and Gollum and their long struggle over the ring parallels the confrontation between Isildur and Sauron, and Frodo's ultimate fate is gentler than Isildur's only due to the mercy of the elves. The Rohirrim arrive with the sunrise to help their allies in Minas Tirith, just as their ancestors had arrived at sunrise at the beginning of their alliance with the men of Gondor.

The pattern in his visual art works in much the same way, but it is rarely linked to his mythological structure. I have already noted the marked similarities in "The Halls of Manwe" and the "Misty Mountains of *The Hobbit*". Hammond and Scull note other places he reuses images. For example, Tolkien variously titled his picture of the haunted forest of Taur-Na-Fuin (#54) as "Mirkwood," "Fangorn," and "Entwood", and he published the picture for all three to illustrate all three of those places (J. R. R. Tolkien, p. 58). Seen mythically, these pictures are representations of the same types of places, just as Arwen is a type of Luthien, or for that matter, as Sauron and Saruman, are "types" of Morgoth.

Tolkien used his art to support the verisimilitude of his narrative. Tolkien explained many times that one of the early inspirations for a critical part of his myth, the story of Earendil the Mariner, was a line from the Old English poem *Crist*, "*Eala Earendil, engla beorhtost*!"[2] (The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien, p. 385). The linkage between Tolkien's mythic character Earendil the Mariner and the manuscript phrase establishes a connection between the world of his myth and the ancient manuscripts of our world. He repeats the pattern in *Lord of the Rings*, this time echoing a *topos* common to medieval documents. His story, he tells us, derives from a document called "The Red Book of Westmarch" which he translated from the original Elvish (Return, p. 411). The book records, he says, the history of Middle Earth, as it is known among hobbits and recorded by Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, Sam Gamgee, and later Elanor Gamgee (Return, p. 411). In the same way, Tolkien's visual art functions at times to establish a credibility claim outside his myth.

For example, a comparison of the eagle Tolkien painted to represent the one that had rescued Bilbo from the goblins (#113) shows that it was modeled accurately after one by Thorburn (#112) in a book from his children's bookshelf.

More intriguingly, Tolkien used his skill as a calligrapher to produce manuscript "evidence" of correspondence between Aragorn and Sam Gamgee. In "Dangweth Pengolth" (#198) and "King's Letter"(#199), manuscripts he developed for inclusion in a rejected epilogue to *Lord of the Rings*[3], Tolkien mimics medieval European manuscripts such as the fifteenth century Ellesmere Chaucer, or the circa 9th century *Beowulf*, with great skill. By doing this, Tolkien offers an invitation to imagine a link beyond the objective, material world, here represented by manuscripts he knew, loved, and translated.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Beowulf manuscript

Ellesmere Chaucer

The end result for Tolkien's mythology is similar to the interlace patterns found in Celtic and medieval visual art. John Leyerle, in 1967, argued that an interlace pattern explained the narrative structure of *Beowulf.* In *Beowulf,* Leyerle argues, the narrative is constructed of three interlaced strands, each of them of equal social and cultural importance to the poet who wrote down the story. Tolkien's mythology exhibits a similar set of interlaced strands. One strand is the primary narrative, the second is his mythology, and the third strand is the world into which Tolkien, as sub-creator, introduces his story. The pattern is apparent in his narrative art, and it is equally apparent in his visual art.

Why is this important? In my view, teaching students to climb the tower and see the sea is a critical part of their education. Tolkien, while he would likely never have considered teaching either his mythology or his epic to his Oxford linguistics and Old English students, nevertheless understood the role of myth and story to be crucial. In a 1951 letter to publisher Milton Waldman, he wrote

> *. . . an equally basic passion of mine . . . was for myth . . ..and for fairy-story, and above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history, of which there is far too little in the world . . I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had not stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found. . . in legends of other lands (Letters of J. R. R Tolkien, p. 144).*

In this letter, Tolkien explains that his "stuff" is mainly concerned with "Fall, Mortality, and the Machine" (Letters, p. 145). He saw the mythic and epic analysis of "Fall" and "Mortality" as a sobering and critical antidote to the effect of the Machine as he had seen it used on the battlefields of World War I, and as he was daily learning of its deadly use in World War II. In his fiction, and in his painting, the Machine is controlled by those who, like Saruman, have, as Gandalf says, "left the path of wisdom" and "would break a thing to find out what it is" (Fellowship, p. 272). To Tolkien, "the Machine" signifies the abuse of power over nature and over one's fellow human beings.

Tolkien rarely articulated his concerns about these issues directly, but his close friend during these years, C. S. Lewis, was much more explicit. In Lewis' terminology, the problem has to do with what he called "the materialist menace," and he and Tolkien saw, in very stark terms, what they thought to be its consequences. Materialism, in their view, was at the root of atrocities such as the excesses of Stalinism, the fanatical racism of Nazi Germany, and the growth of an intrusive authoritarianism on the part of their own government. Writing in 1952, in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C. S. Lewis introduces Eustace Clarence Scrubb, cousin to the Pevensie

children and a product (or in Lewis' view, perhaps a victim) of a materialist education. Eustace likes "animals, especially beetles, if they were dead and pinned on a card. He liked books if they were books of information and had pictures of grain elevators or of fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools" (Voyage, p. 9). Eustace, while he had read a lot of "books about exports and imports and governments and drains" did not know enough to recognize a dragon when he saw one or to anticipate any risk of falling asleep on a dragon's hoard while thinking "dragonish" thoughts. He awoke to discover he had turned into a dragon while he slept (Voyage, p. 83). Eustace is eventually restored to his human shape by Aslan, but several adventures later, he still betrays the limitations of his materialist education. He meets Ramandu, a retired star. In discussing the geography of the last sea, Eustace concludes that Ramandu must have been flying above it. The only kind of flying that Eustace has learned to imagine is in an airplane. In fact, the star tells him, he was a long way above the air. "In our world," Eustace observes, "a star is a huge ball of flaming gas." Ramandu replies "Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is but only what it is made of" (Voyage, p. 189). Eustace's understanding is accurate, but it is insufficient to comprehend the nature of the star or of the world around him. Lewis' allegory suggests that an education that focuses solely on what things are made of, that is a materialist education, one that focuses on the archaeology of a poem, to return to Tolkien's allegory, provides an accurate understanding of what the old land-holder's property is made of, but not what it is.

Tolkien, unlike Lewis, despised allegory and rarely used it. He saw it as a form of tyranny of the writer over the reader. Instead, he explained that his myths offered what he called "applicability." They might, he hoped, offer some view of the possibilities of life that extended beyond the daily, tangible observation. Tolkien's myth matters, like other myth, because it offers an alternative to the dragonish thoughts of a purely materialistic education, and it offers an opportunity to explore what can be seen from the tower. One hopes for a distant glimpse of the sea.

Our last glimpse of Frodo shows him on shore, taking ship with Gandalf, Bilbo, and most of the elves remaining in Middle Earth:

> *. ..and the sails were drawn up, and wind blew, and slowly the ship slipped away down the long grey firth; and light of the glass of Galadriel that Frodo bore glimmered and was lost. And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him. . . the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise (Return, p. 310).*

Endnotes

1. Because the Tolkien estate has not given permission to publish Tolkien's pictures with this article, all references to Tolkien's artwork are accompanied by reference numbers to their location in Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Artist and Illustrator,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985. The author of this article apologizes for the obvious inconvenience to readers.

2. Translation: Hail Earendil, brightest of angels

3. The epilogue was finally published in *Sauron Defeated: The History of The Lord of the Rings, Part Four (The History of Middle-Earth, Vol. 9)*. Christopher Tolkien, ed. Houghton-Mifflin, 1992.

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