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Lecture Archive

Lecture Title: "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases": Tolkien, Wagner, Nationalism, and Modernity"

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When the Swedish translation of *The Lord of the Rings* appeared in 1961, its author was appalled. Fluent in Swedish, J.R.R. Tolkien found no problems with the translation. Indeed, Tolkien often considered the various Scandinavian languages as better mediums for his Middle-earth stories than English, as the medieval Norse and Icelandic myths had strongly influenced them. His disgust, instead, came from the presumption found within the introduction to the Swedish edition. The crime: translator Åke Ohlmark had compared Tolkien's ring to Wagner's ring. "The Ring is in a certain way 'der Niebelungen Ring,'" Ohlmark had written. Indignant, Tolkien complained to his publisher: "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases." The translator's commentary was simply "rubbish," according to Tolkien.

Ohlmark was not the only critic to make the comparison. A Canadian English professor, William Blissett, reviewing *The Lord of the Rings* for the prestigious *South Atlantic Quarterly*, found several parallels between the two legends but was unwilling to preclude "any direct Wagnerian influence." By the early 1960s, the comparison was becoming common. In his last interview before his death, Tolkien's closest friend C.S. Lewis claimed to have wanted to write a new prose version of Wagner's Ring Opera. Lewis feared, though, that "at the mention of the word Ring a lot of people might think it was something to do with Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings.'" Since the first comparisons in the 1950s, many critics have used Wagner's Ring against Tolkien. One famous English poet referred to *The Lord of the Rings* as "A combination of Wagner and Winnie-the-Pooh. "

The comparison to Wagner grated on Tolkien. In their own personal lives, the two had little in common. Wagner was a nineteenth-century German socialist, a believer in the apotheosis of man. Tolkien was a twentieth-century English unconstitutional monarchist, a devout Roman Catholic, and a strong believer in the limitations placed upon humans by Adam's original sin. According to his official biographer and family friend, Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien "held in contempt" Wagner's interpretation of the Norse and German versions of the Niebelungen Saga. Still, he studied or listened to Wagner and his music frequently. One student of Lewis's, Derek Brewer claimed rumors circulated that Lewis and Tolkien annually attended the full ring opera in London. Tolkien's daughter Priscilla remembers one such visit to the opera where her father and Lewis had failed to wear formal evening attire—the only two in the entire audience who had

forgotten to do so.

Additionally, Tolkien and Lewis studied Wagner's myths as a part of their exploration in their short-lived but deeply influential Kólbitar Club. Creating the academic club in 1926, Tolkien hoped to interest several Oxford dons in the significance of Norse mythology. Meaning "Coal Biters," Kólbitar was a derisive term for Norse men who refused to join in the hunt or fight, preferring instead the warmth of the fire. Tolkien's Kólbitars read several of the Norse myths, including the entire *Volsunga Saga* and the *Elder Edda* in the original Icelandic. It was in this club that Tolkien and Lewis realized how much they had in common and began their thirty-four year friendship. "One week I was up till 2.30 on Monday (talking to the Anglo Saxon professor Tolkien," Lewis wrote to his friend Arthur Greeves in 1929, "who came back with me to College from a society and sat discoursing on the gods & giants & Asgard for three hours." Tolkien must have especially regarded the late-night discussion as important, for he lent to Lewis parts of *The Silmarillion*, a work he regarded as vital but intensely personal and private. Only his family and a research assistant knew anything about it. To what must have proved an immense sense of relief for Tolkien, Lewis responded enthusiastically to his colleague's private world. "I sat up late last night and have read the Geste as far as to where Beren and his gnomish allies defeat the patrol of orcs above the sources of the Narog and disguise themselves," Lewis wrote to Tolkien. "I can quite honestly say that it is ages since I have had an evening of such delight." According to a friend, Lewis "was aghast. This was the sort of writing which he would not have dared to believe could exist."

By the early 1930s, the Kólbitars had dissipated, and the remaining members, Tolkien and Lewis, continued the club under a different name, "The Inklings." The translations of Norse and Germanic legends continued though. By 1934, Warnie Lewis reported in his diary, that he, his brother, and Tolkien were translating the text of Wagner's second Ring Opera, the Valkyries, from the original German. "Arising out of the complexities of Wotan," Warnie recorded, "we had a long and interesting discussion on religion which lasted until about half past eleven when the car called for us." Agreeing with or disagreeing with Wagner's interpretations, it provided much food for thought.

Of the two major Inklings, Lewis was far more taken with Wagner than was Tolkien. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis wrote that when he first encountered Wagner in 1911, at the age of 13, "pure 'northernness' engulfed" him. Five years later, Lewis attended his first performance of Wagner's Ring and was disturbed by members of the audience who were so taken with the opera that they yelled directions to the conductor or stood up spontaneously, unable to control their excitement. The young Lewis even pulled one overly enthusiastic opera fan back into his seat. For Lewis, the Ring Opera proved to him that "all Italian opera is merely a passtime [sic] compared with the great music-drama of Wagner." Italian opera, he concluded, was mere "screaming and contortions." For the atheist and rationalist Lewis, northern paganism had served as a form of substitute Christianity. Wagner, he wrote after attending another Ring performance in 1924, gave him a meaningful glimpse into divinity, "of seeing the very most ultimate things hammering it out." When feeling depressed, Lewis called upon his "small stock of Wagner" to lift his spirit. After his conversion to Christianity, Lewis admitted to loving "Balder before he loved Christ." To a group of Oxford students, Lewis stated: "If Christianity is only a mythology, then I find that the mythology I believe in is not the mythology I like best. I like Greek mythology much better; Irish better still: Norse best of all." Lewis even wrote the climax of the second volume of his famous space trilogy, *Perelandra*, paralleling Wagner's Ring.

Though Tolkien never held Wagner in the same regard as did Lewis, one cannot completely dismiss the

comparison between Tolkien and Wagner. At a superficial level, the two ring stories share several things in common: dragons (with vulnerable spots) guarding treasures; important rings that cause evil, directly or indirectly; the broken sword remade; a wandering, grey deity, inspiring men; and the moral and physical stretching of the ring's original possessor. Perhaps most important, Wagner and Tolkien both greatly admired northern courage. "It is the strength of the northern mythological imagination that it faced this problem, put the monsters in the centre, gave them victory but no honour, and found a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage," Tolkien wrote in his justly famous essay on *Beowulf*. The "northern has power, as it were, to revive its spirit even in our own times."

Even the comparisons, though, should not lead one to conclude that Tolkien borrowed from Wagner. Rather, Tolkien and Wagner each drew from the same sources. Namely, Wagner used the basic stories from the Austrian *Nibelungenlied*, the Icelandic *Elder Edda* and *Völuspá*, and the Norse *Volsunga Saga*. Tolkien, too, took from these sources. But, the Finnish *Kalevala*, various Anglo-Saxon poetry, George MacDonald, and G.K. Chesterton also served as influences on Tolkien, directly or indirectly. There were other important influences on him, not so immediately obvious. "Imagine that! You know, he used to have the most extraordinary interest in the people here in Kentucky," Allen Barnett, a Kentuckian and former classmate at Oxford said. "He could never get enough of my tales of Kentucky folk. He used to make me repeat family names like Barefoot and Boffin and Baggins and good country names like that."

The manner in which Tolkien used the sources differed greatly from that of Wagner. For Wagner, the pagan northern myths served several purposes in his operas. First, they gave the German people a nationalist identity. It should be regarded as no accident that Wagner wrote and completed the Ring Opera as Germany and Bismarck struggled to unify and find a common voice. Second, Wagner promoted socialism, in what would in the twentieth century be seen in two varieties, national socialism and international socialism. Finally, Wagner desired to show that man could attain his own godhood. Wagner, English philosopher Roger Scruton explains, "proposed man as his own redeemer and art as the transfiguring rite of passage to a higher world." Certainly, the death of Siegfried leading to the fiery consumption of Valhalla suggests that.

1. Tolkien vs. nationalism

It would be difficult to find some one who held views more different from Wagner than Tolkien. First, Tolkien viewed a sanctified northern, pagan myth as a means to return the modernist, heretical West to Christendom. "The greatness I meant was that of a great instrument in God's hands—a mover, a doer, even an achiever of great things, a beginner at the very least of large things," Tolkien wrote from the trenches in France in 1916. The 24-year old hoped, he continued "to rekindle an old light in the world," to carry on the Old Truths in the ravaged, post-war world.

For Tolkien, *Beowulf* best exemplified the merging of pagan traditions and Christian thought. The anonymous author of *Beowulf* lived as England was in the slow process of converting to Christianity. A Christian, the *Beowulf* author used the poem to demonstrate that not all pagan things should be dismissed by the new culture. Instead, the Christian should embrace and sanctify the most noble virtue to come out of the northern pagan mind: courage.

Tolkien's argument reflects St. Augustine's thinking as well. In his "On Christian Duty," St. Augustine wrote: if philosophers "have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it." Clement of Alexandria, living in the late second and early third centuries, presaged Augustine's argument. Pre-Christian

faiths, he argued in *Miscellanies*, served as a "preparatory teaching for those who will later embrace the faith." God had given the Greeks philosophy as a gift awaiting the arrival of Christianity. Philosophy, Clement concluded, "acted as a schoolmaster to the Greeks, preparing them for Christ, as the laws of the Jews prepared them for Christ." Plato and Aristotle served as much as a preparation for Christianity, as did Abraham and Moses. History and legend, as Tolkien would say, fused with the incarnation of Christ, the True Myth.

The anonymous author of *Beowulf* had followed Clement's and Augustine's advice, appropriating the best of pagan culture and sanctifying it as Christian. For truth, the argument runs, belongs to God, whether codified in scripture or nature. With the creation of the world, the natural law reveals as much as direct revelation. And, by being the author of all society and the plethora of cults/cultures, God placed a part of His Truth in each. As each non-Christian culture encounters Christianity, it has some piece of the truth, allowing it to accept the full Truth. Lewis put it more succinctly than Tolkien: "Paganism does not merely survive but first really becomes itself in the [very] heart of Christianity." By writing his extensive, life-long mythology, Tolkien followed the same practice, appropriating northern myth and baptizing it, making it relevant to the heresies of the modern world.

Indeed, Tolkien often noted that Middle-earth represented Europe. The term, after all, was merely Anglo-Saxon for the land between the oceans, the land between Heaven and hell, the land between the spirit and the material: Christian Europe. "Rhun is the Elvish word for 'east.' Asia, China, Japan, and all the things which people in the west regard as far away," Tolkien noted in an interview in 1966. "And south of Harad is Africa, the hot countries." England, by such logic, would be the Shire. Tolkien admitted as much. Most specifically, the Hobbits represented the best of the English. Much of his feelings stemmed from his childhood move from South Africa to England. Tolkien's earliest memories are of Africa, but it was alien to me, and when I came home, therefore, I had for the countryside of England both the native feeling and the personal wonder of somebody who comes to it. I came to the English countryside when I was about 3 ½ or 4—it seemed to me wonderful. If you really want to know what Middle-earth is based on, it's my wonder and delight in the earth as it is, particularly with the natural earth.

Tolkien originally hoped that his legendarium would serve as a mythology for England, a land devoid of all but the Arthurian myth. Even *Beowulf*, written in Anglo-Saxon, dealt with the history of the Danes and the Geats as opposed to the Anglo-Saxons. But, from its original inception as a myth for England, the legendarium grew much larger in scope and significance. The story, especially *The Lord of the Rings*, became much more than a myth for any one people or nation. It, instead, became a myth for the restoration of Christendom. With the return of the king, Aragorn, to his rightful throne, Tolkien argued, the "progress of the tales ends in what is far more like the re-establishment of an effective Holy Roman Empire with its seat in Rome." Considering the intense religiosity of Tolkien and his belief that God led him to and through the mythology, it would be difficult for the devout Roman Catholic to conclude otherwise. His myth, he hoped, would help impede the rise of nationalism. Witnessing unification in the United States, Germany, and Italy, Whig historian Lord Acton stressed that the rise of nationalism would quickly mean the end of Christendom and western ideals regarding the sovereign person created in the image of God. "Christianity rejoices at the mixture of races," he wrote in his famed essay "Nationalism." Paganism, however, "identifies itself with their differences, because truth is universal, errors various and particular." Though writing in 1862, Acton seemingly understood that a Nietzsche would soon arise. "By making the State and the nation commensurate with each other in theory," Acton continued, those deemed inferior will be "exterminated, or reduced to

servitude, or outlawed, or put in a condition of dependence."

2. Tolkien vs. socialism

Second, unlike Wagner, Tolkien hated socialism in any form, national or international. Tolkien wrote that the saints living in the modern world were those "who have for all their imperfections never finally bowed head and will to the world or the evil spirit (in modern but not universal terms: mechanism, 'scientific' materialism, Socialism in either of its factions now at war)." For Tolkien, an attack on man also meant an attack on nature.

As with many conservative Roman Catholics of the 1930s and 1940s, Tolkien believed that communism represented an even more dangerous form of tyranny than did fascism. If he hated fascism, he really hated communism. Many of the so-called fascists, such as Franco in Spain, protected the Roman Catholic Church, whereas the communists had always assaulted any form of theism, substituting their own ideology for Christian beliefs. Tolkien was especially taken with the bullfighting ally of Franco, poet and Roman Catholic convert, Roy Campbell. Meeting with Tolkien and Lewis in October 1944, Campbell spoke of atrocities against Roman Catholics committed by the communists and socialists in Spain. By the end of the evening, Campbell had convinced Tolkien of the rightness of Franco's side in the Spanish Civil War, and Tolkien concluded that Campbell was a modern-day Aragorn, ranging the world and struggling against the powers that be, defending God's glory.

Tolkien also feared communism because of its potential to do evil after the end of the second world war. "And what of the red Chrysanthemum in the East?" Tolkien asked. "And when [World War II] is over, will ordinary people have any freedom left (or right) or will they have to fight for it, or will they be too tired to resist?" Tolkien feared the loss of any part of the West to the Soviets, which he viewed as a truly foreign and eastern power, totally alien to the West. He labeled the Teheran conference, at which the "Big Three" compromised their principles and sought to define the postwar world, a "ballyhoo." Tolkien sickened at the thought of "that old bloodthirsty murderer Josef Stalin inviting all nations to join a happy family of folks devoted to the abolition of tyranny and intolerance." The worst scenario Tolkien could imagine was a world divided by the aggressive, bloodthirsty Soviets and the commercially-aggressive Americans. The world, Tolkien predicted, would become one homogenous, cosmopolitan entity, with England as a mere suburb. "May the curse of Babel strike all their tongues till they can only say 'baa baa,'" Tolkien wrote to Christopher. "I think I shall have to refuse to speak anything but Old Mercian."

Catholics had a special dislike of communism because of two important events in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1884, Pope Leo XIII had a vision in which he saw devils roaming the twentieth-century earth, laying much of it to waste. To help combat this possible future, he composed the "Prayer to St. Michael," asking God to unleash St. Michael to fight with the demons and the devil, driving them back to hell. He instituted this as the concluding prayer at all masses. Most devout twentieth-century Catholics viewed communism as the satanic eruption Pope Leo had predicted. Certainly Tolkien gave Manwë a prominent role in the affairs of Middle-earth, naming him the Vice-regent. Manwë represents St. Michael the Archangel.

Second, in 1917, in Fatima, Portugal, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to a number of children, giving them several secrets regarding the twentieth century. One of the earliest revealed, however, was that communism would become the greatest worldly enemy of the church in the twentieth century. The Bolshevik Revolution in late 1917, only months after the appearance at Fatima, gave significant credence to

the Virgin Mary's warnings. The church approved this apparition relatively quickly. This, coupled with Tolkien's strong devotion to Mary, suggests strongly that Tolkien would have greatly feared communism as the enemy of the church in the twentieth century. Throughout the century, devout Roman Catholics offered their saying of the rosary for the fall of communism and the conversion of the Russians to Christianity.

Not all modern evils appear as obvious as those of Stalin and Hitler, or as blatant as that of the mechanized and inhumane fighting of the first world war. Tyranny and modernity arrive in many packages, some of them brightly colored. Understanding this, Tolkien despised the impersonal machine-driven capitalism of the twentieth century and especially its handmaiden, the oppressive democratic bureaucracies of the western world, almost as much as he hated fascism and communism. All forms of twentieth-century government—whether blatantly socialist such as fascism or communism, or just mildly socialist, such as bureaucratic democracies—involved planning, that is, putting men into categories and using them as means to various ends. As much as Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* and *That Hideous Strength*, Tolkien feared the democratic conditioners and the "men without chests" who planned for the sake of planning, draining life of its vast richness. When Merlin reappears after fifteen centuries of sleeping in Lewis's novel, *That Hideous Strength*, he asks where they might find allies. Ransom responds:

The poison was brewed in these West lands but it has spat itself everywhere by now. However far you went you would find the machines, the crowded cities, the empty thrones, the false writings, the barren books: men maddened with false promises and soured with true miseries, worshiping the iron works of their own hands, cut off from Earth their mother and from the Father in Heaven. You might go East so far that East became West and you returned to Britain across the great ocean, but even so you would not have come out anywhere into the light. The shadow of one dark wing is over all.

The adulterated West, and the rest of the world following the West's lead, attempted to mechanize man, denying him his God-given humanity. As noted above, Tolkien and Lewis both loathed machines in any form, but especially the idea of a mechanized man.

Democracy, itself the newly-fashionable word in England during the war, was nothing but a sham, according to Tolkien. In ancient Greece, democracy served as a fancy name for mob rule. Any Greek city-state worth remembering, Tolkien wrote, is worth remembering precisely because of its centralized ability to mobilize and tackle another power. Even worse, Tolkien argued, democracy naturally ends in slavery. "I am not a 'democrat' only because 'humility' and equality are spiritual principles corrupted by the attempt to mechanize and formalize them, with the result that we get not universal smallness and humility, but universal greatness and pride, till some Orc gets hold of a ring of power—and then we get and are getting slavery," Tolkien claimed, echoing a number of critics of democracy from Plato in the *Republic* to Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*.

As Tolkien viewed it, democracy necessitated planning, with man, again, becoming nothing more than a cog in the machine. Planning, though, because it is the necessary product of finite minds, wreaks nothing but havoc upon the complex, multifaceted world. Man is too complex to narrow him into precise categories. "I personally find most people incalculable in any particular situation or emergency," Tolkien wrote. Categorizing man only leads to bloodshed, as three-dimensional beings are not made for two-dimensional ideologies.

Tolkien also believed that no individual could ably rule over another. This proved especially true of those

who sought power. Sauron started out in such a way, seeking to do good, to reorder the world, as he saw it, for the better.

He had gone the way of all tyrants: beginning well, at least on the level that while desiring to order all things according to his own wisdom he still at first considered the (economic) well-being of other inhabitants of the Earth. But he went further than human tyrants in pride and the lust for domination, being in origin an immortal (angelic) spirit.

Tolkien never labeled himself a member of one party or another in England, though he seems to have favored the conservatives more than labour. He did, however, reveal his own politics rather forcefully. "My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs)-or to 'unconstitutional' Monarchy," Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher. "I would arrest anybody who uses the word State (in any sense other than the inanimate realm of England and its inhabitants, a thing that has neither power, rights nor mind); and after a chance of recantation, execute them if they remained obstinate!"

The Shire serves as Tolkien's best representation of an ideal agrarian republic. The Shire is, itself, a pre-modern society, and the Hobbits often seem innocent and childlike because they are. They live in a pre-cynical age. They simply live the good life, as farmers, shopkeepers, men, women, and children. The Hobbits are, simply put, normal. They eat, they drink, they smoke, they argue, they gossip, they collect too many gifts ("mathom"), they garden, and they love. "Hobbits are unobtrusive but very ancient people, more numerous formerly than they are today; for they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-armed countryside was their favourite haunt," Tolkien wrote in the Prologue to the *Fellowship of the Ring*. "They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skilful [sic] with tools." Politically, the Shire is, as C.S. Lewis described it, "almost anarchical." Tolkien called it a "half republic half aristocracy," essentially an isolationist Jeffersonian society based on a natural aristocracy.

3. Tolkien vs. Apotheosis

Third, Tolkien understood Wagner's apotheosis in the "Twilight of the Gods" as merely a repeat of man's first sin in the Garden of Eden. Instead, Tolkien viewed the proper relation between man and God as sub-creator and Creator. Tolkien defined a sub-Creator as an artist made and making in the image of the ultimate Creator, God. God, of course, is the Author of all. We, as fallen humans, act in a Christian fashion when we too create, in His Image, and for His Glory. As opposed to the progressive who attempts to remake man in man's image, the true and Godly sub-Creator creates to glorify and reveal the beauty of God's creation. God's gift of sub-creation is both a duty and a right. As Tolkien stated in his poem, "Mythopoeia": "'twas our right (used or misused). The right has not decayed. We make still by the law in which we're made."

Yet, because we are fallen, Tolkien argued, even well-intentioned, Godly men can easily pervert the highest calling of sub-creation. As such, fallen man turns art into power, the willingness to control others or a selfish desire to control what is not ours. He uses his gifts not for Creation and the glory of the Creator, but for possessiveness or for man's own exultation. The Elves exemplify this in *The Silmarillion*. The greatest of all them, Fëanor, endowed by Ilúvatar with the "Spirit of Fire," creates the three Silmarils, unequaled gems capturing the light of the Two Trees, Telperion and Laurelin. When Morgoth destroys the trees, the angelic powers, the Valar, are left without light. Fëanor's Silmarils, though, may hold the key, as they contain the holy light. Possessive of his sub-creation, Fëanor leaves the Blessed Realm, taking with him the Silmarils,

containing a light beyond his ability to create.

With such religious implications and significance in its artistry, Tolkien concluded, the best fairy story and sub-creation provides the reader what Tolkien labeled the *euchatastrophe*, the happy ending. In it, one gains a "fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world." Such evangelium rarely happens in our fallen world. When it does, one must be content with it, for it will most likely not occur again in one's lifetime. The ultimate fairy story, or true myth, then, is the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. "The Christian joy, the Gloria, is of the same kind; but it is pre-eminently (infinitely, if our capacity were not finite) high and joyous," Tolkien wrote. With the incarnation of Christ, "art has been verified," Tolkien claimed. "God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused" with the arrival of God in Time.

Conclusion

Tolkien's myth provides persons with a means to escape the drabness, conformity, and mechanization of Wagner's nationalist, socialist, apothetic modernity. Tolkien warned that this is not the same thing as escaping from reality. We still deal with life and death. We merely escape progressivism and the progressive dream, which reduces all of complex reality to a mere shadow of Creation's true wonders. Tolkien wrote in "Mythopoeia," echoing the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme
of things not found within recorded time.
It is not they that have forgot the Night,
or bid us flee to organized delight,
in lotus-isles of economic bliss
forswearing souls to gain a Circe-kiss
(and counterfeit at that, machine-produced,
bogus seduction of the twice-seduced)

In frustration, C.S. Lewis once asked Tolkien "What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?" Tolkien answered: "jailers." Certainly Wagner saw nationalism, socialism, and apotheosis as liberating. In reality, as the killing fields of the twentieth century have proven, such false schemes and deceptions—that "ye too shall be as gods"—have resulted not in liberation, but in incarceration-of the flesh and the spirit.