

PARP 6089 – MYTH, IMAGINATION, AND INCARNATION

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Day 5: *Myth Reinvented* – On J.R.R. Tolkien



'I wish it need not have happened in my time,' said Frodo.

'So do I,' said Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.'

– J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I, ii, p. 50.

'I have long ceased to invent. . . : I wait till I seem to know what really happened. Or till it writes itself.'

– J.R.R. Tolkien, Letter 180, to "Mr. Thompson"

Introduction: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." When J.R.R. Tolkien wrote these words on the back of a blank exam sheet, he had no idea what a hobbit was. Yet he endeavored to find out. He soon found that the hobbits had intruded into a world that he already knew quite well: Middle-Earth, a land peopled by Elves and Edain, Valar and Orcs, and many other beings of strange and mysterious names. For more than two decades before *The Hobbit* was published, Tolkien had been recording the stories of this realm, in poetry and prosaic narrative, in sketches and paintings, and in lexicons of invented languages. Some of these tales would be published posthumously as *The Silmarillion*, but that book is but a slim volume representing a vast array of stories rewritten and retold, creating a palimpsest of mythology filled with loss, longing, and exquisite beauty. At the heart of his stories are the languages. A true philologist, Tolkien used the evolving structure of his Elvish languages to reveal the world behind the words. Yet that world remained largely inaccessible until, on that hot summer day, an unassuming hobbit—perhaps more adventurous than the usual sort—appeared unexpectedly on the page. Like in the Great Tales, sometimes it is the small and unimportant folk who change the course of history—and so it was for Tolkien, when he followed the footsteps of a few brave hobbits into the Wild and came to write *The Lord of the Rings*, a book that has now sold over 150 million copies and laid the foundations of the Fantasy genre.

Outline

- (1) Life and the imaginal experience
- (2) Across the threshold: entering the world of *The Silmarillion*
- (3) Tolkien's Rosetta Stone to Fairy-Story: the invention of languages

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*Eala Earendel engla beorhtast
ofer middangeard monnum sendeð.*
"Hail Earendel, brightest of angels
above the middle-earth sent unto men"

FROM THE LORD OF THE RINGS

'Yes, that's so,' said Sam. 'And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started. But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?'

'I wonder,' said Frodo. 'But I don't know. And that's the way of a real tale. Take any one that you're fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don't know. And you don't want them to.'

'No, sir, of course not. Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours. But that's a long tale, of course, and goes on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it – and the Silmaril went on and came to Eärendil. And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got – you've got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?'

'No, they never end as tales,' said Frodo. 'But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later – or sooner.'

'And then we can have some rest and some sleep,' said Sam. He laughed grimly. 'And I mean just that, Mr. Frodo. I mean plain ordinary rest, and sleep, and waking up to a morning's work in the garden. I'm afraid that's all I'm hoping for all the time. All the big important plans are not for my sort. Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, or course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: "Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring! " And they'll say: "Yes, that's one of my favourite stories. Frodo was very brave. wasn't he, dad?" "Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that's saying a lot."'

'It's saying a lot too much,' said Frodo, and he laughed, a long clear laugh from his heart. Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth. To Sam suddenly it seemed as if all the stones were listening and the tall rocks leaning over them. But Frodo did not heed them; he laughed again. 'Why, Sam,' he said, 'to hear you somehow makes me as merry as if the story was already written. But you've left out one of the chief characters: Samwise the stouthearted. "I want to hear more about Sam, dad. Why didn't they put in more of his talk, dad? That's what I like, it makes me laugh. And Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam, would he, dad? "'

'Now, Mr. Frodo,' said Sam, 'you shouldn't make fun. I was serious.'

'So was I,' said Frodo,

(Excerpted from The Two Towers, Book IV, Chapter 8, "The Stairs of Cirith Ungol," pp. 696-7.)

TENGWAR: THE FĒANORIAN SCRIPT

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