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TOLKIEN  
AND THE CRITICS

ESSAYS BY J. R. R. TOLKIEN  
*The Lord of the Rings*

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## FOREWORD

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## THE QUEST HERO

W. H. Auden

## I. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

TO LOOK FOR A LOST COLLAR BUTTON IS NOT A TRUE QUEST: to go in quest means to look for something of which one has, as yet, no experience; one can imagine what it will be like but whether one's picture is true or false will be known only when one has found it.

Animals, therefore, do not go on quests. They hunt for food or drink or a mate, but the object of their search is determined by what they already are and its purpose is to restore a disturbed equilibrium; they have no choice in the matter.

But man is a history-making creature for whom the future is always open; human "nature" is a nature continually in quest of itself, obliged at every moment to transcend what it was a moment before. For man the present is not real but valuable. He can neither repeat the past exactly—every moment is unique—nor leave it behind—at every moment he adds to and thereby modifies all that has previously happened to him.

Hence the impossibility of expressing his kind of existence in a single image. If one concentrates upon his ever open future, the natural image is of a road stretching ahead into unexplored country, but if one concentrates upon his unfor-

gettable past, then the natural image is of a city, which is built in every style of architecture and in which the physically dead are as active citizens as the living. The only characteristic common to both images is a sense of purpose; a road, even if its destination is invisible, runs in a certain direction; a city is built to endure and be a home.

The animals who really live in the present have neither roads nor cities and do not miss them. They are at home in the wilderness and, at most, if they are social, set up camps for a generation. But man requires both. The image of a city with no roads leading from it suggests a prison; the image of a road that starts from nowhere in particular suggests, not a true road, but an animal spoor.

A similar difficulty arises if one tries to describe simultaneously our experience of our own lives and our experience of the lives of others. Subjectively, I am a unique ego set over against a self; my body, desires, feelings, and thoughts seem distinct from the *I* that is aware of them. But I cannot know the Ego of another person directly, only his self, which is not unique but comparable with the selves of others, including my own. Thus, if I am a good observer and a good mimic, it is conceivable that I could imitate another so accurately as to deceive his best friends, but it would still be I imitating him; I can never know what it would feel like to be someone else. The social relation of my Ego to my Self is of a fundamentally different kind from all my other social relations to persons or things.

Again, I am conscious of myself as becoming, of every moment being new, whether or not I show any outward sign of change, but in others I can only perceive the passage of time when it manifests itself objectively; So-and-so looks older or fatter or behaves differently from the way he used to behave. Further, though we all know that all men must die, dying is not an experience that we can share; I can-

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not take part in the deaths of others nor they in mine.

Lastly, my subjective experience of living is one of having continually to make a choice between given alternatives, and it is this experience of doubt and temptation that seems more important and memorable to me than the actions I take when I have made my choice. But when I observe others, I cannot see them making choices; I can only see their actions; compared with myself, others seem at once less free and more stable in character, good or bad.

The Quest is one of the oldest, hardest, and most popular of all literary genres. In some instances it may be founded on historical fact—the Quest of the Golden Fleece may have its origin in the search of seafaring traders for amber—and certain themes, like the theme of the enchanted cruel Princess whose heart can be melted only by the predestined lover, may be distorted recollections of religious rites, but the persistent appeal of the Quest as a literary form is due, I believe, to its validity as a symbolic description of our subjective personal experience of existence as historical.

As a typical example of the traditional Quest, let us look at the tale in the Grimm collection called *The Waters of Life*. A King has fallen sick. Each of his three sons sets out in turn to find and bring back the water of life which will restore him to health. The motive of the two elder sons is not love of their father but the hope of reward; only the youngest really cares about his father as a person. All three encounter a dwarf who asks them where they are going. The first two rudely refuse to answer and are punished by the dwarf, who imprisons them in a ravine. The youngest answers courteously and truthfully, and the dwarf not only directs him to the castle where the Fountain of the Waters of Life is situated but also gives him a magic wand to open the castle gate and two loaves of bread to appease the lions

who guard the Fountain. Furthermore, the dwarf warns him that he must leave before the clock strikes twelve or he will find himself imprisoned. Following these instructions and using the magic gifts, the youngest brother obtains the Water of Life, meets a beautiful Princess who promises to marry him if he will return in a year, and carries away with him a magic sword which can slay whole armies and a magic loaf of bread which will never come to an end. However, he almost fails because, forgetting the dwarf's advice, he lies down on a bed and falls asleep, awakening only just in time as the clock is striking twelve; the closing door takes a piece off his heel.

On his way home he meets the dwarf again and learns what has happened to his brothers; at his entreaty the dwarf reluctantly releases them, warning him that they have evil hearts.

The three brothers continue their homeward journey and, thanks to the sword and the loaf, the youngest is able to deliver three kingdoms from war and famine. The last stretch is by sea. While the hero is asleep, his older brothers steal the Water of Life from his bottle and substitute sea water. When they arrive home, their sick father tries the water offered by the youngest and, naturally, is made worse; then the elder brothers offer him the water they have stolen and cure him.

In consequence the King believes their allegation that the youngest was trying to poison him and orders his huntsman to take the hero into the forest and shoot him in secret. When it comes to the point, however, the huntsman cannot bring himself to do this, and the hero remains in hiding in the forest.

Presently wagons of gold and jewels begin arriving at the palace for the hero, gifts from the grateful kings whose lands he had delivered from war and famine, and his father be-

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comes convinced of his innocence. Meanwhile the Princess, in preparation for her wedding, has built a golden road to her castle and given orders that only he who comes riding straight along it shall be admitted.

Again the two elder brothers attempt to cheat the hero by going to woo her themselves, but, when they come to the golden road, they are afraid of spoiling it; one rides to the left of it, one to the right, and both are refused admission to the castle. When the hero comes to the road he is so pre-occupied with thinking about the Princess that he does not notice that it is made of gold and rides straight up it. He is admitted, weds the Princess, returns home with her, and is reconciled to his father. The two wicked brothers put to sea, never to be heard of again, and all ends happily.

The essential elements in this typical Quest story are six.

1) A precious Object and/or Person to be found and possessed or married.

2) A long journey to find it, for its whereabouts are not originally known to the seekers.

3) A hero. The precious Object cannot be found by anybody, but only by the one person who possesses the right qualities of breeding or character.

4) A Test or series of Tests by which the unworthy are screened out, and the hero revealed.

5) The Guardians of the Object who must be overcome before it can be won. They may be simply a further test of the hero's *arete*, or they may be malignant in themselves.

6) The Helpers who with their knowledge and magical powers assist the hero and but for whom he would never succeed. They may appear in human or in animal form.

Does not each of these elements correspond to an aspect of our subjective experience of life?

1) Many of my actions are purposive; the *telos* toward which they are directed may be a short-term one, like trying to write a sentence which shall express my present thoughts accurately, or a lifelong one, the search to find true happiness or authenticity of being, to become what I wish or God intends me to become. What more natural image for such a *telos* than a beautiful Princess or the Waters of Life?

2) I am conscious of time as a continuous irreversible process of change. Translated into spatial terms, this process becomes, naturally enough, a journey.

3) I am conscious of myself as unique—my goal is for me only—and as confronting an unknown future—I cannot be certain in advance whether I shall succeed or fail in achieving my goal. The sense of uniqueness produces the image of the unique hero; the sense of uncertainty, the images of the unsuccessful rivals.

4) I am conscious of contradictory forces in myself, some of which I judge to be good and others evil, which are continually trying to sway my will this way or that. The existence of these forces is given. I can choose to yield to a desire or to resist it, but I cannot by choice desire or not desire.

Any image of this experience must be dualistic, a contest between two sides, friends and enemies.

On the other hand, the Quest provides no image of our objective experience of social life. If I exclude my own feelings and try to look at the world as if I were the lens of a camera, I observe that the vast majority of people have to earn their living in a fixed place, and that journeys are confined to people on holiday or with independent means. I observe that, though there may be some wars which can be called just, there are none in which one side is absolutely good and the other absolutely evil, though it is all too common for both sides to persuade themselves that this is so.

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As for struggles between man and the forces of nature or wild beasts, I can see that nature is unaware of being destructive and that, though there are animals which attack men out of hunger or fear, no animal does so out of malice.

In many versions of the Quest, both ancient and modern, the winning or recovery of the Precious Object is for the common good of the society to which the hero belongs. Even when the goal of his quest is marriage, it is not any girl he is after but a Princess. Their personal happiness is incidental to the happiness of the City; now the Kingdom will be well governed, and there will soon be an heir.

But there are other versions in which success is of importance only to the individual who achieves it. The Holy Grail, for example, will never again become visible to all men; only the exceptionally noble and chaste can be allowed to see it.

Again, there are two types of Quest Hero. One resembles the hero of Epic; his superior *arete* is manifest to all. Jason, for example, is instantly recognizable as the kind of man who can win the Golden Fleece if anybody can. The other type, so common in fairy tales, is the hero whose *arete* is concealed. The youngest son, the weakest, the least clever, the one whom everybody would judge as least likely to succeed, turns out to be the hero when his manifest betters have failed. He owes his success, not to his own powers, but to the fairies, magicians, and animals who help him, and he is able to enlist their help because, unlike his betters, he is humble enough to take advice, and kind enough to give assistance to strangers who, like himself, appear to be nobody in particular.

Though the subject of this essay is the Quest in its traditional form, it is worth while, perhaps, to mention, very briefly, some variants.

### A. THE DETECTIVE STORY

Here the goal is not an object or a person but the answer to a question—Who committed the murder? Consequently, not only is there no journey, but also the more closed the society, the more restricted the locale, the better. There are two sides, but one side has only one member, the murderer, for the division is not between the Evil and the Good but between the Guilty and the Innocent. The hero, the Detective, is a third party who belongs to neither side.

### B. THE ADVENTURE STORY

Here the journey and the goal are identical, for the Quest is for more and more adventures. A classic example is Poe's *Gordon Pym*. More sophisticated and subtler examples are Goethe's *Faust* and the *Don Juan* legend.

The condition laid down in his pact with Mephisto is that Faust shall never ask that the flow of time be arrested at an ideal moment, that he shall never say, "Now, I have reached the goal of my quest." Don Juan's Quest can never come to an end because there will always remain girls whom he has not yet seduced. His is also one of the rare cases of an Evil Quest which ought not to be undertaken and in which, therefore, the hero is the villain.

### C. MOBY DICK

Here the Precious Object and the Malevolent Guardian are combined and the object of the Quest is not possession but destruction. Another example of a Quest which should not have been undertaken, but it is tragic rather than evil. Captain Ahab belongs in the company of Othello, not of Iago.

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### D. THE KAFKA NOVELS

In these the hero fails to achieve his goal, in *The Trial* either to prove himself innocent or learn of what he is guilty, in *The Castle* to obtain official recognition as a land surveyor; and he fails, not because he is unworthy, but because success is humanly impossible. The Guardians are too strong and, though Kafka avoids saying so I think one can add, too malevolent. What makes K a hero is that, despite the evidence that Evil is more powerful than Good in the world, he never gives up the struggle to worship the Prince of this world. By all the rules he ought to despair; yet he does not.

Any literary mimesis of the subjective experience of becoming is confronted by problems of form and limitations of subject matter. Like a man's life which has a beginning, birth, and an end, death, the Quest story has two fixed points, the starting out and the final achievement, but the number of adventures in the interval cannot but be arbitrary; for, since the flow of time is continuous, it can be infinitely divided and subdivided into moments. One solution is the imposition of a numerical pattern, analogous to the use of meter in poetry. Thus, in *The Waters of Life* there are three brothers, three kingdoms to be delivered from war and famine, and three ways of approaching the Princess' castle. There are two tests, the dwarf and the golden road, but the right and wrong behavior are symmetrically opposed; it is right to take notice of the dwarf but wrong to take notice of the road.

The hero twice nearly comes to disaster by falling asleep, on the first occasion in direct disobedience of the dwarf's instructions, on the second in neglect of the warning that his brothers are evil men.

To take a man on a journey is to cut him off from his everyday social relations to women, neighbors, and fellow-workers. The only sustained relation which the Quest Hero can enjoy is with those who accompany him on his journey, that is to say, either the democratic relation between equal comrades-in-arms, or the feudal relation between Knight and Squire. Aside from these, his social life is limited to chance and brief encounters. Even when his motive for understanding the Quest is erotic, the lady has to remain in wait for him either at the start or the end of the road. Partly for this reason and partly because it deals with adventures, that is, situations of crisis in which a man behaves either well or badly, the Quest tale is ill adapted to subtle portrayals of character; its personages are almost bound to be archetypes rather than idiosyncratic individuals.

So much for general observations. I shall devote the rest of this essay to an examination of a single work, J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*.

## II. THE SETTING

Many Quest tales are set in a dreamland, that is to say, in no definite place or time. This has the advantage of allowing the use of all the wealth of dream imagery, monsters, magical transformations and translations, which are absent from our waking life, but at the cost of aggravating the tendency of the genre to divorce itself from social and historical reality. A dream is at most capable of allegorical interpretation, but such interpretations are apt to be mechanical and shallow. There are other Quest tales, a thriller like *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, for example, which are set in places which we can find in the atlas and in times we can read of in history books. This gives the Quest a social significance, but the

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moral ambiguities of real history clash with the presupposition which is essential to the genre, that one side is good and the other bad.

Even in wartime, the sensitive reader cannot quite believe this of the two sides which the writer of thrillers takes from real life. He cannot help knowing that, at the same time that John Buchan is making the heroes English and American and the enemies German, some German author may be writing an equally convincing thriller in which the roles are reversed.

Tolkien sets his story neither in a dream world nor in the actual world but in an imaginary world. An imaginary world can be so constructed as to make credible any landscape, inhabitants, and events which its maker wishes to introduce, and since he himself has invented its history, there can be only one correct interpretation of events, his own. What takes place and why is, necessarily, what he says it is.

But the construction of a convincing imaginary world makes formidable demands upon the imagination of its creator. There must be no question which, according to our interests, we ask about the real world to which he cannot give a convincing answer, and any writer who, like Tolkien, sets out to create an imaginary world in the twentieth century has to meet a higher standard of concreteness than, say, his medieval predecessor, for he has to reckon with readers who have been exposed to the realistic novel and scientific historical research.

A dream world may be full of inexplicable gaps and logical inconsistencies; an imaginary world may not, for it is a world of law, not of wish. Its laws may be different from those which govern our own, but they must be as intelligible and inviolable. Its history may be unusual but it must not contradict our notion of what history is, an interplay of Fate, Choice, and Chance. Lastly, it must not violate our

moral experience. If, as the Quest generally requires, Good and Evil are to be incarnated in individuals and societies, we must be convinced that the Evil side is what every sane man, irrespective of his nationality or culture, would acknowledge as evil. The triumph of Good over Evil which the successful achievement of the Quest implies must appear historically possible, not a daydream. Physical and, to a considerable extent, intellectual power must be shown as what we know them to be, morally neutral and effectively real: battles are won by the stronger side, be it good or evil.

To indicate the magnitude of the task Tolkien set himself, let me give a few figures. The area of his world measures some thirteen hundred miles from east (the Gulf of Lune) to west (the Iron Hills) and twelve hundred miles from north (the Bay of Forochel) to south (the mouth of the River Anduin). In our world there is only one species, man, who is capable of speech and has a real history; in Tolkien's there are at least seven. The actual events of the story cover the last twenty years of the Third Historical Epoch of this world. The First Age is treated as legendary so that its duration is unknown, and its history is only vaguely recalled, but for the 3441 years of the Second Age and the 3021 years of the Third, he has to provide a continuous and credible history.

The first task of the maker of an imaginary world is the same as that of Adam in Eden: he has to find names for everyone and everything in it and if, as in Tolkien's world, there is more than one language, he has to invent as many series of names as there are tongues.

In the nominative gift, Tolkien surpasses any writer, living or dead, whom I have ever read; to find the "right" names is hard enough in a comic world; in a serious one success seems almost magical. Moreover, he shows himself capable of inventing not only names but whole languages

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which reflect the nature of those who speak them. The Ents, for example, are trees which have acquired movement, consciousness, and speech, but continue to live at the tempo of trees. In consequence their language is "slow, sonorous, agglomerated, repetitive, indeed long-winded." Here is only a part of the Entish word for *hill*:

a-lalla-lalla-rumba-kamanda-lind-or-burúmë.

The extremes of good and evil in the story are represented by the Elves and Sauron, respectively. Here is a verse from a poem in Elvish:

A Elbereth Gilthoniel,  
silivren penna míriel  
o menel alglar elenath!  
Na-chaered palan díriel.  
o galadhremmin ennorath,  
Fanuilos, le linnathon  
nef aer, sí nef acaron.

And here is an evil spell in the Black Speech invented by Sauron:

Ash nazg durbatulûk, ash nazg gimbatul, ash nazg thrakatalûk,  
agh burzum-ishi-krimpatul.

An imaginary world must be as real to the senses of the reader as the actual world. For him to find an imaginary journey convincing, he must feel that he is seeing the landscape through which it passes as, given his mode of locomotion and the circumstances of his errand, the fictional traveler himself saw it. Fortunately, Mr. Tolkien's gift for topographical description is equal to his gift for naming and his fertility in inventing incidents. His hero, Frodo Baggins,

is on the road, excluding rests, for eighty days and covers over 1800 miles, much of it on foot, and with his senses kept perpetually sharp by fear, watching every inch of the way for signs of his pursuers, yet Tolkien succeeds in convincing us that there is nothing Frodo noticed which he has forgotten to describe.

Technologically, his world is preindustrial. The arts of mining, metallurgy, architecture, road and bridge building, are highly developed, but there are no firearms and no mechanical means of transport. It is, however, a world that has seen better days. Lands that were once cultivated and fertile have gone back to the wilderness, roads have become impassable, once famous cities are now ruins. (There is one puzzling discrepancy. Both Sauron and Saruman seem to have installed heavy machinery in their fortresses. Why, in that case, are they limited to waging untechnological warfare?) Though without machines, some people in this world possess powers which our civilization would call magical because it lacks them; telepathic communication and vision are possible, verbal spells are effective, weather can be controlled, rings confer invisibility, etc.

Politically, the commonest form of society is a benevolent monarchy, but the Shire of the hobbits is a kind of small-town democracy and Sauron's kingdom of Mordor is, of course, a totalitarian and slave-owning dictatorship.

Though the unstated presuppositions of the whole work are Christian, we are not told that any of the inhabitants practice a religious cult.

The Elves, the Wizards, and Sauron, certainly, and perhaps some others, believe in the existence of the One and the Valar, to whom He has entrusted the guardianship of Middle-earth, and a Land in the Uttermost West which I take to be an image of Paradise.

### III. THE QUEST HERO

In our subjective experience, of which the Quest is, I have suggested, a literary mimesis, what we ought to become is usually dependent upon what we are; it is idle and cowardly of me if I fail to make the fullest use of any talent with which I have been endowed, but it is presumptuous of me to attempt a task for which I lack the talent it requires. That is why, in the traditional Quest story, the hero desires to undertake the quest and, even when to others he appears lacking in power, he is confident of success. This problem of vocation is specifically dealt with in one Quest tale, *The Magic Flute*. Prince Tamino is the typical hero, who must dare the trials by Fire and Water to attain wisdom and win the hand of the Princess Pamina.

But beside him stands Papageno, who is, in his own way, a hero too. He is asked whether he is prepared to endure the trials like his master and he answers, no, such dangers are not for the likes of him. "But," says the priest, "if you don't, you will never win a girl." "In that case," he replies, "I'll remain single." This answer reveals his humility, and he is rewarded with his mirror image, Papagena. In contrast to him stands the villain Monostatos. Like Papageno, he is incapable of enduring the trials but, unlike him, he lacks the humility to forego the rewards of heroism; he is even unwilling to accept an equivalent of Papagena and demands nothing less than the Princess.

But there is another kind of vocation which may be called religious. Not everybody experiences it, and even for those who do, it may concern only moments of their life. What characterizes the religious vocation is that it comes from outside the self and, generally to the self's terror and dismay, as when God calls Abraham out of the land of Ur, or when a man, by nature physically timid, is called to enter a burn-

ing building to rescue a child because there is no one else around to do it.

Some of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf and Aragorn, for instance, are expressions of the natural vocation of talent. It is for Gandalf to plan the strategy of the War against Sauron because he is a very wise man; it is for Aragorn to lead the armies of Gondor because he is a great warrior and the rightful heir to the throne. Whatever they may have to risk and suffer, they are, in a sense, doing what they want to do. But the situation of the real hero, Frodo Baggins, is quite different. When the decision has been taken to send the Ring to the Fire, his *feelings* are those of Papageno: "such dangerous exploits are not for a little hobbit like me. I would much rather stay at home than risk my life on the very slight chance of winning glory." But his conscience tells him: "You may be nobody in particular in your self, yet, for some inexplicable reasons, through no choice of your own, the Ring has come into your keeping, so that it is on you and not on Gandalf or Aragorn that the task falls of destroying it."

Because the decision has nothing to do with his talents, nobody else can or should try to help him make up his mind. When he stands up at the Council of Elrond and says: "I will take the Ring though I know not the Way," Elrond replies: "It is a heavy burden. So heavy that none could lay it on another. I do not lay it on you. But if you take it freely, I will say that your choice is right" (I, 284).

Once he has chosen, Frodo is absolutely committed; the others who set out with him are not.

'The Ring-bearer is setting out on the Quest of Mount Doom: on him alone is any charge laid—neither to cast away the Ring nor to deliver it to any servant of the Enemy, nor indeed to let any handle it, save members of the Company and the Council, and only then in gravest need. The others go

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with him as free companions to help him on his way. You may tarry, or come back, or turn aside to other paths as chance allows. The further you go, the less easy it will be to withdraw; yet no oath or bond is laid upon you to go further than you will. For you do not yet know the strength of your hearts and you cannot foresee what each may meet on the road.'

'Faithless is he who says farewell when the road darkens,' said Gimli.

'Maybe,' said Elrond, 'but let him not vow to walk in the dark who has not seen the nightfall.'

'Yet sworn vow may strengthen quaking heart,' said Gimli.

'Or break it,' said Elrond. 'Look not too far ahead. But go now with good hearts.' (I, 294)

### IV. THE CONFLICT OF GOOD AND EVIL

If it is a defect in the usual Quest tale that Good triumphs over Evil simply because Good is more powerful, this is not a defect that can be avoided by giving Good no power at all. Quite rightly, Tolkien makes the elves, dwarfs, wizards, and men who are Sauron's opponents a formidable lot indeed, but in sheer strength, Sauron is, even without his Ring, the stronger. Yet their power has its part to play, as Gandalf points out.

'Victory cannot be achieved by arms. . . . I still hope for victory but not by arms. For into the midst of all these policies comes the Ring of Power, the foundation of Barad-dûr and the hope of Sauron. . . . If he regains it, your valour is vain, and his victory will be swift and complete; so complete that none can foresee the end of it while this world lasts. If it is destroyed, then he will fall; and his fall will be so low that none can foresee his arising ever again. . . . This, then, is my counsel. We have not the Ring. In wisdom or great folly, it has been sent away to be destroyed lest it destroy us. Without

it we cannot by force defeat his force. But we must at all costs keep his Eye from his true peril. We cannot achieve victory by arms, but by arms we can give the Ring-bearer his only chance, frail though it be.' (III, 154-156)

The Quest is successful and Sauron is overthrown. One of Tolkien's most impressive achievements is that he convinces the reader that the mistakes which Sauron makes to his undoing are the kind of mistakes which Evil, however powerful, cannot help making just because it is Evil. His primary weakness is a lack of imagination, for, while Good can imagine what it would be like to be Evil, Evil cannot imagine what it would be like to be Good. Elrond, Gandalf, Galadriel, Aragorn are able to imagine themselves as Sauron and therefore can resist the temptation to use the Ring themselves, but Sauron cannot imagine that anyone who knows what the Ring can accomplish, his own destruction among other things, will not use it, let alone try to destroy it. Had he been capable of imagining this, he had only to sit waiting and watching in Mordor for the Ring-bearer to arrive, and he was bound to catch him and recover the Ring. Instead, he assumes that the Ring has been taken to Gondor where the strongest of his enemies are gathered, which is what he would have done had he been in their place, and launches an attack on that city, neglecting the watch on his own borders.

Secondly, the kind of Evil which Sauron embodies, the lust for domination, will always be irrationally cruel since it is not satisfied if another does what it wants; he must be made to do it against his will. When Pippin looked into the Palantír of Orthanc and so revealed himself to Sauron, the latter had only to question him in order to learn who had the Ring and what he intended to do with it. But, as Gandalf says: " 'He was too eager. He did not want information

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only: he wanted *you*, quickly, so that he could deal with you in the Dark Tower, slowly' " (II, 199).

Thirdly, all alliances of Evil with Evil are necessarily unstable and untrustworthy since, by definition, Evil loves only itself and its alliances are based on fear or hope of profit, not on affection. Sauron's greatest triumph has been his seduction of the great wizard Saruman but, though he has succeeded in making him a traitor to the cause of Good, he has not yet completely enslaved him, so that Saruman tries to seize the Ring for himself.

Lastly, unforeseeable by either side, is the role played by Sméagol-Gollum. When Frodo first hears about him from Gandalf, he exclaims:

'What a pity Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had the chance!

'Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity. . . .'

'I cannot understand you. Do you mean to say that you, and the Elves, have let him live on after all those horrible deeds? . . . He deserves death.'

'Deserves it? I daresay he does. [But] do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least.' (I, 68-69)

Gollum picks up Frodo's trail in the Mines of Moria and follows him. When Frodo manages to catch him, he remembers Gandalf's words and spares his life. This turns out to

his immediate advantage for, without Gollum's help, Frodo and Sam would never have found their way through the Dead Marshes or to the pass of Cirith Ungol. Gollum's motives in guiding them are not wholly evil; one part of him, of course, is waiting for an opportunity to steal the Ring, but another part feels gratitude and genuine affection for Frodo.

Gandalf was right, however, in fearing that there was little hope of his being cured; in the end his evil side triumphs. He leads Frodo and Sam into Shelob's lair and, after their escape, pursues them to Mount Doom and attacks them. Once again they spare his life. And then the unexpected happens.

. . . there on the brink of the chasm, at the very Crack of Doom, stood Frodo, black against the glare, tense, erect, but still as if he had been turned to stone.

'Master!' cried Sam.

Then Frodo stirred and spoke with a clear voice . . . it rose above the throb and turmoil of Mount Doom, ringing in the roofs and walls.

'I have come,' he said. 'But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!' And suddenly, as he set it on his finger, he vanished from Sam's sight. . . . Something struck Sam violently in the back, his legs were knocked from under him and he was flung aside, striking his head against the stony floor, as a dark shape sprang over him. . . .

Sam got up. He was dazed, and blood streaming from his head dripped in his eyes. He groped forward, and then he saw a strange and terrible thing. Gollum on the edge of the abyss was fighting like a mad thing with an unseen foe. . . . The fires below awoke in anger, the red light blazed, and all the cavern was filled with a great glare and heat. Suddenly Sam saw Gollum's long hands draw upwards to his mouth; his white fangs gleamed, and then snapped as they bit. Frodo

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gave a cry, and there he was, fallen upon his knees at the chasm's edge. But Gollum, dancing like a mad thing, held aloft the Ring, a finger still thrust within its circle. . . .

'Precious, precious, precious!' Gollum cried. 'My Precious! O my Precious!' And with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat on his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. . . .

'Well, this is the end, Sam Gamgee,' said a voice by his side. And there was Frodo, pale and worn, and yet himself again; and in his eyes there was peace now, neither strain of will, nor madness, nor any fear. His burden was taken away. . . .

'Yes,' said Frodo. 'Do you remember Gandalf's words: *Even Gollum may have something yet to do?* But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end.' (III, 223-225)

### V. THE FRUITS OF VICTORY

"And so they lived happily ever after" is a conventional formula for concluding a fairy tale. Alas, it is false and we know it, for it suggests that, once Good has triumphed over Evil, man is translated out of his historical existence into eternity. Tolkien is much too honest to end with such a pious fiction. Good has triumphed over Evil so far as the Third Age of Middle-earth is concerned, but there is no certainty that this triumph is final. There was Morgoth before Sauron and, before the Fourth Age ends, who can be sure that no successor to Sauron will appear? Victory does not mean the restoration of the Earthly Paradise or the advent of the New Jerusalem. In our historical existence even the best solution involves loss as well as gain. With the destruction of the Ruling Ring, the three Elven Rings lose their power, as Galadriel foresaw.

'Do you not see now wherefore your coming is to us as the footsteps of Doom? For if you fail, we are laid bare to the Enemy. Yet if you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten.' (I, 380)

Even Frodo, the Quest Hero, has to pay for his success.

'But,' said Sam, and tears started from his eyes, 'I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire . . . for years and years, after all you have done.'

'So I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.' (III, 309)

If there is any Quest Tale which, while primarily concerned with the subjective life of the individual person as all such stories must be, manages to do more justice to our experience of social-historical realities than *The Lord of the Rings*, I should be glad to hear of it.