J. R. R. Tolkien – A Literary Philosopher

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Abstract
In several of his writings, J. R. R. Tolkien has openly talked about the sorrow he felt due to the fact that his homeland had no mythology of its own. Through his Middle-Earth imagery, he was able to create a cosmogony and dwell on the eternal fight between Good and Evil. However, it's not in the mainstream texts on Middle-Earth that this intersection between literature and Philosophy is extensively explored. A definite answer will be found concerning the author's main queries on how the land can be healed through the reader's encounter with an elf and a human philosopher and consequent engagement in their debate: Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth (The Dialogue Between Finrod and Andreth). *Through their ideas, fears, doubts and queries, we will understand that the healing of the marred earth has to come from within*.

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Introduction

Our present time has witnessed the decline of some myths, the debunking of others. Still a few new ones were created, responding to the urge of societies to structure their experience in "clusters of knowledge", which provide often comforting, readymade solutions or explanations.

A century ago, J. R. R. Tolkien lived in a world that was going to shatter some of its most strongly held beliefs as well. But the eminent scholar chose to muse on the fact that the country he so cherished as motherland could not provide a complete, structured mythology that could compare to others he studied devotedly such as the Norse and oriental ones.

A great part of his creative efforts were for a long time seen as random creations of great magnitude. The editorial effort of the last decades has allowed us to understand his great ambition of creating not only fantastic poetical fiction, but that this should enable the creation of a mythology for England.

In his effort to produce a unified mythopoeia, Tolkien used as conceptual tools a great array of Nature cults and old religions which he structured within the frame of his Christian belief in the existence of one Creator that comes to live

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among men. The text that we propose, *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth,* explores the points where a convergence of Christian belief or mythology can be found in the work of Tolkien.

One of the recurrent thoughts in Tolkien's writings and, in our view, one of the main driving forces for his works is the sorrow he felt due to the fact that his homeland had not crafted a mythology of its own. For Tolkien, writing is a mission, a gift that was given to men as 'Sub-creators', as he stated in the main theoretical text he wrote on fantasy: *On Faery-Stories* and also in his long poem about Sub-creation: *Mythopoeia*:

> The heart of man is not compound of lies,
> but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
> and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
> man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
> Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
> and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
> his world-dominion by creative act:
> not his to worship the great Artefact,
> man, sub-creator, the refracted light
> through whom is splintered from a single White
> to many hues, and endlessly combined
> in living shapes that move from mind to mind (Tolkien 1988: 98).

This feeling that something was missing in England is one of the main reasons we have received Middle-earth as readers, as we can see in a letter dated 1951, which Tolkien wrote to Milton Waldman, and is quoted by Cristina Scull and Wayne Hammond:

> … one of the reasons he wrote The Silmarillion was that he "was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff. Of course there was, and is, all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not English; and it does not replace what I felt to be missing. For one thing its 'faerie' is too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive. For another and more important thing: it is involved in, and explicitly contains Christian religion (Scull & Hammond, 2006: 56).

Another important idea in this letter is the fact that Tolkien was seeking a mythology for England that could not be directly linked to Christianity or any other religion.

In our opinion, Tolkien sought to show deep values that belong to Christianity (we cannot forget he was a Roman Catholic) and not any external signs that could point to this or to any other religion.

This is what happens in *The Silmarillion*, where we witness the Creation through music and beauty and the subsequent Fall of Men and Arda (the world) because of the enemy's (Melkor) envy; In *The Hobbit*, we are introduced to the concept of fellowship that abolishes differences and binds diverse peoples into the same goal; and in *The Lord of the Rings*, this concept is taken further, mixed with self-sacrifice, friendship, inter-racial love and, above all, the urgent need to end all evil for good.

However, when *The Lord of the Rings* ends, the reader is left with the feeling that something is incomplete, imperfect. Frodo finishes his mission but cannot remain in the Shire; he is too wounded for that: "I am wounded,' (…) 'wounded; it will never really heal'" (Tolkien 2001: 1002) and " '…I have been too deeply hurt, Sam…'." (Tolkien 2001: 1006).

As Frodo, the land - Middle-earth, Arda - has been left wounded and a definitive solution is still needed.

Our aim will be to show that Tolkien wrote a text in which he explores how the wounds of the land can be healed from within. It is a dialogue called *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth,* which takes place between an Elf - Finrod - and a wise woman – Andreth.

The text is dated 1959 but was only published in 1993, in the 10th volume of *The History of Middle-earth - Morgoth's Ring*. Tolkien's wish was to add this text as an appendix to *The Silmarillion*, as it completes and ends the cycle of the History of Middle-earth in a prophetic way, but this never came to be.

In this dialogue, Tolkien united his fantasy work of Middle-earth to Christianity. However, we do not get this information from the author himself, in some form of theory or lecture. It will be via the queries of these two characters, expressed in their philosophical debate.

Tolkien himself described what happens in the dialogue in one of the many notes that accompany the text:

> The *Athrabeth* is a conversation, in which many assumptions and steps of thought have to be supplied by the reader. Actually, though it deals with such things as death and the relations of Elves and Men to Time and Arda, and to one another, its real purpose is dramatic: to exhibit the generosity of Finrod's mind, his love and pity for Andreth, and the tragic situations that must arise in the meeting of Elves and Men (in the ages of the youth of the Elves). For as eventually becomes plain,

> Andreth had in youth fallen in love with Aegnor, Finrod's brother; and though she knew that he returned her love (or could have done so if he had deigned to), he had not declared it, but had left her – and she believed that she was rejected as too lowly for an Elf (Tolkien 1993: 335).

Besides the love theme that permeates the text, its main theme is, undoubtedly, death, human mortality and the reason men are mortal and elves are not. This generates some form of tension between the two characters, as it becomes evident throughout the points of their arguments.

Starting a Debate

The introduction to the dialogue places the reader in a very specific time in the History of Middle-earth: we are in the First Age, in The Long Peace, in spring, when both Finrod and Andreth are mourning her grandfather, Boron. Finrod starts the conversation on the main theme of the text - human mortality: " 'Sad to me, Andreth,' he said, 'is the swift passing of your people. For now Boron your father's father is gone; and though he was old, you say, as age goes among Men, yet I had known him too briefly'." (Tolkien 1993: 307).

In Arda, Elves are immortal (in the sense that they will not die a natural death, they can only cease to exist by means of violence or grief) and Humans are not. Elves are linked to the existence of Arda so, as long as it exists, so do the Elves. Humans are destined to die and we will understand the reason for this throughout this dialogue.

In the time when the dialogue takes place, Humans and Elves had only met a century ago, so they are still not very familiarised with each other. This is why Andreth's reply becomes a mystery to Finrod: "Our passing was swifter before we found this land." (307)

So it seems mankind had a previous state, before they came to Beleriand. It seems they were deceived by the Enemy and have lost that state. This sends the reader to another text, that Tolkien added to this dialogue as an appendix, called *The Tale of Adanel*, which explains how Melkor deceived mankind into serving him, forgetting the Creator's voice. The punishment was hard: mortality and the everlasting presence and dread of the Enemy. But in this same text redemption is promised. We hear the voice speaking one last time:

> The first Voice we never heard again, save once. In the stillness of the night It spoke saying: 'Ye have abjured Me, but ye remain Mine. I gave you life. Now it shall be shortened, and each of you in a little while shall come to Me, to learn who is your Lord: the one ye worship, or I who made him (347).

A discussion follows about the nature of death - is it good or evil? Finrod believes it is linked to human nature and Andreth explains it has come as a punishment, although she cannot explain very well. She only knows they were not mortal at the beginning:

> 'We may have been mortal when first we met the Elves far away, or maybe we were not: our lore does not say, or at least none that I have learned. But already we had our lore, and needed none from the Elves: we knew that in our beginning we had been born never to die. And by that, my lord, we meant: born to life everlasting, without any shadow of any end.' (314).

A new topic is brought into the dialogue as Finrod queries the nature of Men's souls. He knows the souls of the Elves are linked to Arda as they were created to perfect it. However, if mankind's soul (*fëa*) and body (*hröa*) can be separated, then perhaps the human soul is not connected to the world and has a fate that surpasses it. Maybe this is why Humans are called "Children of Eru". He also mentions that, when Arda is healed, maybe the bodies and the souls might be reunited again and rejoice forever.

And this introduces the next theme which is the possibility of healing the earth.

Healed

Finrod guesses, from Andreth's explanation about the first state of humanity, that perhaps their part in the healing of the wounds that the Enemy left on earth is great. This is why Melkor had to wound mankind in its nature, filling it with fear and dread of death so that they step away from the voice of Eru, the Creator.

> 'Therefore I say that if this can be believed, then mighty indeed under Eru were Men made in their beginning; and dreadful beyond all other calamities was the change in their state.' (318).

The healing will be the climax of the Creator's work of art:

> 'As may a master in the telling of tales keep hidden the greatest moment until it comes in due course. It may be guessed at indeed, in some measure, by those of us who have listened with full heart and mind; but so the teller would wish. In no wise is the surprise and wonder of his art thus diminished, for thus we share, as it were, in his authorship. But not so, if all were told us in a preface before we entered in!' (319).

This thought takes Andreth away from her sadness and she even asks Finrod when these events will take place. He does not know but he seems to be sure Men will have an important role in those events to come:

> 'And then suddenly I beheld as a vision Arda Remade; and there the Eldar completed but not ended could abide in the present forever, and there walk, maybe, with the Children of Men, their deliverers, and sing to them such song as, even in the Bliss beyond bliss, should make the green valleys ring and the everlasting mountain-tops to throb like harps.' (Ibid.).

Healing the Sorrow from within

Next, Andreth sadly reminds Finrod that Men cannot see anything beyond the shadow. Finrod asks her if she has no hope and explains what he means by this:

> 'Have ye then no hope?' said Finrod.
> 'What is hope?' she said. 'An expectation of good, which though uncertain has some foundation in what is known? Then we have none.'
> 'That is one thing that Men call "hope",' said Finrod. '*Amdir* we call it, "looking up". But there is another which is founded deeper. *Estel* we call it, that is "trust'". It is not defeated by the ways of the world, for it does not come from experience, but from our nature and first being. If we are indeed the *Eruhin*, the Children of the One, then He will not suffer Himself to be deprived of His own, not by any Enemy, not even by ourselves. This is the last foundation of *Estel*, which we keep even when we contemplate the End: of all His designs the issue must be for His Children's joy. *Amdir* you have not, you say. Does no *Estel* at all abide?' (320)

At this stage both characters agree. They now understand the worst scourge the Enemy brought to mankind and Arda was a wound in *Estel*, in Trust. And, for this, there is only one solution: the healing must come from within. Andreth speaks of an old prophecy, spoken of by "those of the «Old Hope» ":

> 'They say,' answered Andreth: 'they say that the One will himself enter into Arda, and heal Men and all the Marring from the beginning to the end. This they say also, or they feign, is a rumour that has come down through years uncounted, even from the days of our undoing.' (321).

But this raises the question of how can Eru can enter Arda:

> 'How could Eru enter into the thing that He has made, and that which He is beyond measure greater? Can the singer enter into his tale or the designer into his picture?'
> 'He is already in it, as well as outside,' said Finrod. 'But indeed the "in-dwelling" and the "out-living" are not in the same mode.'

> 'Truly,' said Andreth. 'So may Eru in that mode be present in Eä that proceeded from Him. But they speak of Eru Himself *entering into Arda*, and that is a thing wholly different. How could He the greater do this? Would it not shatter Arda, or indeed all Eä [the planet]?' (322)

Finrod has an answer for this question:

> 'Ask me not,' said Finrod. 'These things are beyond the compass of the wisdom of the Eldar, or of the Valar maybe. But I doubt that our words may mislead us, and that when you say "greater" you think of the dimensions of Arda, in which the greater vessel may not be contained in the less.
> 'But such words may not be used of the Measureless. If Eru wished to do this, I do not doubt that He would find a way, though I cannot foresee it. For, as it seems to me, even if He in Himself were to enter in, He must still remain also as He is: the Author without. And yet, Andreth, to speak with humility, I cannot conceive how else this healing could be achieved. Since Eru will surely not suffer Melkor to turn the world to his own will and to triumph in the end. Yet there is no power conceivable greater than Melkor save Eru only. Therefore Eru, if He will not relinquish His work to Melkor, who must else proceed to mastery, then Eru must come in to conquer him. (322).

The dialogue continues with a different theme: the possibility of inter-racial love, since Andreth was in love with Finrod's brother, who aptly dies in a battle against the enemy. The matter shall be the subject of a further study.

In this text presented as a prophecy, both Finrod and Andreth announce the coming of Eru himself, the Creator, into the world, to heal the wounds from within, to finish with the Enemy's reign forever.

Tolkien united his fantasy work to what he believed to be the highest peak of mankind's History: the Incarnation. He has bound Middle-earth to his faith, to the coming of Christ, as a hope to heal the world from within.

Ending the Cycle

In Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, human societies organise themselves using symbolic acts, which help them to make sense of the world. While looking at mythology, it is essential to "…apprehend the subject of the cultural process, the human spirit (…)" (Cassirer, 1955: 13) which is the only one able to devise mythological narratives within a specific culture, space and time. In a way, Tolkien's exercise is a *post hoc* attempt to create such a cluster of knowledge that would provide English society with those «facts of culture» that he finds lacking in the legends and folk tale tradition of Great Britain.

In this dialogue, which in our opinion is fundamental to understand how the cycle of Middle-earth would finish, Tolkien united his fantasy works to the History of the world so that a mythology for England might be created. Like the

medieval chroniclers, bounding his works to Christianity, he has also inscribed them in a larger scale, searching for the validation of a link to the higher myth or cluster of knowledge, that of the manifest living God, consolidating his initial goal of crafting a mythology for England. He has united his desire to create a mythology to what was spiritually more important to him. He devised his writing not only as fictional work but also as a form of mission. He created a mythology for his homeland but not a narrative that would be void of spiritual sense. He has linked it permanently to his beliefs, hence the necessity to unite it to Christianity.

Tolkien (1999: xii) also left it still to be completed and finished by other talented and artistic hands, as he declared: "I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd."

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