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Tolkien's Literary Utopia: Númenor

Janeiro 2004
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In the last five decades, modern fantasy literature outstripped its traditional domains. Without abandoning the main characteristics of the genre, fantasy authors re-discovered mythology and legends, and the power of symbols. Gradually, fantasy literature lost the almost inevitable and exclusive association with terror fiction, and found new connections. Expressions like "High Fantasy", "Heroic Fantasy", "Children Fantasy", "Space Fantasy" etc., are of common use nowadays, and editors no longer fear the "spectrum" of a sales failure when they venture to publish fantasy fiction, but quite de opposite. Seemingly, in the past three decades the scholar community has demonstrated a growing interest in this kind of literature, producing an ever-increasing number of studies.

Several factors may be acknowledged as decisive to the substantial change produced in the panorama of fantasy fiction. The most obvious was what came to be known as "the Tolkien phenomenon". John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's major fictional work published in the mid-fifties, *The Lord of the Rings*² had a quite unexpected popular and financial success in not only Great Britain and the United States but wherever it was published (and translated).

Tolkien's fiction, along with C. S. Lewis's fantasy books, opened the doors to a completely new mode and fantasy is now to be found, discussed and studied in world literature and the Arts.

Several scholars tried in the past three decades to define "the

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¹ A slightly different version of this essay was published as "Númenor: Tolkien's Literary Utopia", in *History of European Ideas*, (London: Pergamon Press) 1993, vol. 16, nº 4-6, pp. 633-638.
fantastic". To quote just the most notable we have Tzvetan Todorov, Luis Vax, C. N. Manlove, W. R. Irwin, Eric Rabkin, Stephen Prickett and Roger C. Schlobin. The fact that they all came up with different and yet similar definitions of "the fantastic", proves that scholars move on a particularly slippery ground when facing the task of setting bounds to an object as unpredictable as imagination itself. This leads us inevitably to Carl Gustav Jung's psychological theories that, as Roger Schlobin puts it, has been one of the fantasy's greatest advocates\(^3\). In his work *Psychological Types* Jung defines fantasy as being pre-eminently, the creative activity from which the answer to all unanswerable questions come; it is the mother of all possibilities, where, like all psychological opposites, the inner and outer worlds are joined together in living union. Fantasy it was and ever is which fashions the bridge between the irreconcilable claims of subject and object, introversion and extroversion. In fantasy alone both mechanisms are united\(^4\).

This Jungian definition allows us to understand the difficulty felt by scholars to find more than satisfactory definitions of fantasy. Inevitably, all definitions, though accurate, will make us feel that fantasy is, so to say, "more than that". Fantasy is inherent to human creativeness. That is why it can hardly be confined to a rational final definition.

Focusing our attention in Fantasy literature, we are now prepared to see it as what could never have been, cannot be and can never be within the actual social, cultural and intellectual milieu of its creation\(^5\). And this is exactly what we find in Tolkien's fantasy world - *Middle-earth*.

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John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, and came to England at the age of three. Apart from few short trips abroad, he never left England, spending most of his life in Oxford, where he graduated in English Language and Literature. In 1925, he became Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, and twenty-five years later, he was elected Merton Professor of English Language and Literature.

When in the mid-fifties George Allen & Unwin published his fantasy fiction *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien had a sound reputation in the academic milieu, but he was almost unknown to the common reader. In fact, his previous literary work had been a story for children: *The Hobbit*\(^6\). However, what came to be published in 1954/55, though intended as a sequel to the former book, was in fact partly the result of Tolkien's work on a private fantastic mythology.

For some 37 years, Tolkien imagined a fantastic world - *Middle-earth* - and created a mythology, legends and a history for it. Using all his vast erudition on western myths, legends, literature and languages, Tolkien developed a complex "believable" fantasy world with natural phenomena and intelligent beings that not only inhabited it but also had a history, legends, myths, different languages and cultures.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader finds the legends and history of Middle-earth while in *The Silmarillion*\(^7\) he is confronted with the full mythological corpus of that strange but somehow familiar world. In Tolkien's fiction several traditions such as Christian, Classical, Celtic and Nordic ones are intimately interweaved with enormous mastery and profound knowledge. This definitely contributes to the feeling one has while reading it that although strange, nothing in Middle-earth is alien to us.

Among the myths one can find in *The Silmarillion* there is the myth of

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Atlantis re-created in the episode of the "Downfall of Númenor" (*Akallabêth*)\(^8\).

The result of Tolkien's "re-creation", though only some 30 pages long, is quite impressive. He creates a utopia that bears close references to Plato's Atlantis, but the ultimate result is a modern utopia that echoes the myth of the Golden Age and that of the Lost Paradise. In other words in this episode we find a unique compromise between Antiquity and Modernity.

Tolkien's utopia is an extremely synthetic one. Many of the traditional schemes used in classical utopias are either ignored or reduced to their minimum functional aim. For instance, there is no narrator arriving at an unknown island. The fact that the episode is integrated on a larger impersonal narrative that frames it makes such a subterfuge impossible.

The episode sets forth with the creation of the island by the gods (secondary deities subordinated to Eru Ilúvatar, "The Creator"). The island is then offered to a particular human race as a reward for its decisive involvement in the wars fought by elves and gods against Melkor ("Fallen Angel") and the forces of evil.

Númenor is *ab initio* a land of election, isolated, a place with no past, but definitely with a present and a future to accomplish. This island created by the gods from the depth of the sea (symbol of life and death, *alpha* and *omega* of all creation) has the shape of a five-pointed star. Three gods were directly involved in creating, shaping and making it inhabitable. They were: Ossë, the lord of the waters (an equivalent to the Greek god Poseidon) who made the island arise from the sea; Aulë, the smith god, shaped it; and Yavanna, the goddess of vegetation made the land fertile and the weather mild.

The island had a large central plain protected from the northern wind by

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a complex mountain chain. In the middle of the plain stood Meneltarma "Heaven-pillar", the highest mountain in the island. Its plane peak was like an opened temple created by the gods for the ritual celebrations to Ilúvatar. To get to the top of the mountain one had to climb a winding road that began at the southern side of the mountain and ended at the northern side of the peak. On a short hill at the foot of Meneltarma stood the city of Armenelos, "Royal-Heaven fortress", where the kings held their courts. A main road led from Armenelos to Rómenna, the main harbour.

Tolkien's description of the creation of Númenor, its geography and the existence of rituals to honour the supreme god allow us to establish several connections to Plato's Atlantis as it is described in Timaeus and Critias. Both islands have a divine origin and both have a geometric centred form - Atlantis had a circular form and Númenor a decagonal one. They both had a main central mountain where the inhabitants celebrated their gods - Poseidon and Ilúvatar.

There is still another resemblance, though a less direct one: the chosen inhabitants. In Atlantis they were originally Poseidon and Clito's five pairs of twins. In Númenor, the chosen ones were the descendants of the three human races that fought alongside with the elves and the gods against Melkor. Though they had no godlike origins, Eönwë (Manwë's emissary) came to them and gave them three gifts: power, wisdom and a larger life span, thrice any other mortal man.

Númenor's shape, similar to a five-pointed star, symbolically associates the island with a place of perfection. This symbolism is re-enforced by the existence of a central mountain with the kings' city at its foot. Being an ideal place for the theophanies, the mountain is the place where heaven and earth meet, and also the final goal of man's ascent. The rituals held thrice a year at the top of the mountain and the Númenóreans' behaviour was in accordance with this symbolism of perfection. At the vernal equinox, the summer solstice
and at the autumnal equinox, the king established his dialogue with god. The procession began at the mountain foot, the king at its head. All the participants in these rituals clad in white (the neophytes' colour) and walked in silence (every initiation is mainly an inner process). Besides, silence was the main feature of the place for both men and nature stood always perfectly soundless on the mountain peak.

The fact that the rituals took place thrice a year is another symbol of the intended perenniality of this island. In other words while the cycles of life are divided in four phases (a year has four seasons, life has four periods, etc.), divine order lacks the fourth moment: death/decay.

The geographic situation of the island, west of Middle-earth (where the other mortal races live) and east of Valinor, the "Undying Lands" (where the gods had their domains) shows the intention present in all utopias to preserve the ideal place from the dangerous contacts that may lead it astray.

While classical utopias are based on city-states (symbols of rationalization), in Tolkien's utopia the main concern is the search for a balanced relationship between man and his environment or, in other words, between conscience and unconscious. Therefore the philosopher-legislator is replaced here by the king, symbol of the union of Ilúvatar's sons (of men and elves), that is to say, symbol of a Coincidentia Oppositorum.

Another aspect in which Númenor swerves from traditional utopias is in the absence of a precise definition of social, economical and political structures. The reader infers that númenórean society is in some way a medieval one. The king, head of the system, is simultaneously legislator, judge and priest (as the Kings of Atlantis). Underneath him in the social hierarchy are the nobles or the king's counsellors, and at the bottom of the hierarchy stood the farmers, the artisans and the sailors. This structure will be kept later with slight adjustments in human societies in Middle-earth.

The gods did not simply offer men the island. They also set the rules its
inhabitants should abide by. For instance, they allowed and even encouraged the contacts between the elves of Valinor and the Númenóreans so that these should learn with the former not only the language but also the crafts and culture of a more advanced society. However, the gods also set a ban: men were to sail and land wherever they could and wanted to, but they were never to enter the Undying Lands. These were forever interdict to mortal men. Therefore all contacts with western elves were, so to say, unilateral. The gods wanted men to seek perfection within the limits of their mortal condition.

For many centuries, Númenóreans prospered and became experts in several crafts and as sailors. They sailed to Middle-earth and there taught those men who still lived barbarously. Later they set colonies and created a mighty eastern empire. In the beginning, as happened with the Atlantes, their power, wisdom and wealth did not make them ambitious, but they rather sought virtue and righteousness. However, from generation on their life span diminished and the way they faced existence got out of focus.

Traditional utopias end with the vision of the islanders’ spiritual and material wealth. But Tolkien's fantasy utopia does not end like that. If it did, modern readers would simply dismiss the story as an impossible one and the "magic" of Tolkien's "secondary world" would vanish.

We all know that closed, perfect, static societies are impossible to accept today. Our western culture is characterized by diversity. The political, moral, social and economical values of western civilization are constantly changing. Man no longer believes in his ability to control his own creations without losing part of his individuality in the process. That is why, to quote Robert Elliott, usually one man's utopia is another man's nightmare.

A less careful interpretation might lead us to conclude that fantasy literature does not have to face the same problems as "realistic" literature, and

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that fantasy worlds would be freed from the problems of a "real" one. But crafty fantasy literature does not have escapism as its goal. It keeps very precise relations with real life. As any literary genre, fantasy literature is rooted in the social and cultural values of its milieu of creation.

That is why, in last century mid-fifties, Tolkien had inevitably to create a utopia with an opened structure, for this seems to be one of the few possibilities left to utopian literature by the evolution of western civilization. The perpetuation of a state of perfection is something man will dream about *ad infinitum*.

Modern utopias, in order to retain some credibility, have to conceive evolution as a one-way route through shadow and light and so forth. In other words, every utopia must be able to find in itself its own anti-utopia. Static situations are no longer plausible, that is why we can no longer find them in fictional worlds. Literature is rooted in the unconscious as well as the conscious. Therefore, modern literary utopias are only possible if, to quote Northrop Frye, they *pay some attention to the lawless and violent lusts of the dreamer, for their foundations will still be in dreamland* ¹⁰.

In Tolkien's utopia, we can clearly find in the creation of the island the elements that will cause the unbalance and consequent destruction of the utopian state. Gods placed the island between "heaven and earth", and allowed the contacts between the two races: the mortal men and the immortal elves. But they also set a ban limiting men's actions. This ban will be as the small crack in the initially balanced creation.

Every interdiction tends to be broken. When the Númenóreans attained outmost power and wealth, when natural limits could no longer stop them, their fall became inevitable. The psychological balance was lost by the inflation of the conscious. Then men started to doubt the validity of the ban and the pact between men and gods was broken.

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When the gods allowed men to develop faster then they naturally would (through the contacts with the elves) they also condemned them to destruction. This took place when a númenórean fleet left the harbour to conquer the immortality they thought was kept in Valinor. The island sank under a huge wave and Ilúvatar altered the shape of the world. The world became a globe condemning men to its surface, and the Undying Lands were removed from earth.

Tolkien's description of the drowning of Númenor undoubtedly echoes that of Atlantis as it is told in Timaeus. Númenor became a memory for those who were saved. These will be exiled ones, inevitably unhappy with their fate, dreaming with the lost “paradise”.

Through the ages, the memory of Númenor is kept and altered until it becomes a myth for men in Middle-earth. Númenor will then stand for that short moment in time when men lived in harmony with the gods, before the fall. However, it will become also a stimulus for men to try to build new states, new utopias. Within man lies the ability to endlessly hope and aspire for perfection.

This is the message we find at the end of The Lord of the Rings when after facing a deadly battle with evil, man regains his lost dignity and restores the lineage of the Kings of Númenor at the beginning of the fourth age. The new age of the world holds the promise of a utopian, perfect (?) future.