KWARTALNIK NEOFILOLOGICZNY, LXIII, 3/2016

ANDRZEJ WICHER (ŁÓDŹ)

# SOME REMARKS ON THE EPIC DIMENSION OF *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN

The aim of the present article is to assess the possibility of treating Tolkien's novel as an epic, that is a narrative that may be thought of as belonging to the tradition of great Mediterranean and ancient epic narrative poems, especially those that are focused on the archetype of the heroic quest. The article is not so much concerned with comparing individual motifs in those poems with their counterparts in *The Lord of the Rings*, but rather with comparing and contrasting the basic and archetypal narrative structures, therefore the author of the present article has chosen, in particular, three ancient epics, i.e. Homer's *Odyssey*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and Statius's *Thebaid*, as they seem to stand for three basic models of fashioning the epic narrative. The author concludes that Tolkien's work shares some features with all the three models, even though the affinities with Homer's *Odyssey* and the type of epic it represents appear predominant. The article contains also a discussion of the thesis that *The Lord of the Rings* is a romance rather than an epic.

KEYWORDS: Tolkien, epic, narrative structure, quest, worldview, romance, archetype, ancient literature

## I

Let me first try to account for Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* as a quest story, in which the motif of the journey,[1] or expedition, is of foremost importance. This motif may not be always in the centre of the epic form, but the characteristic seriousness of the epic poetry seems to be derived, at least partly, from its being an account of a quest, an urgent quest on which a lot depends. But it is usually unclear, in such cases, what the nature of the quest and its ultimate purpose are. W.H. Auden, while commenting on Tolkien's famous book, says on this subject what follows:

> 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.
>
> (Auden 1968: 40)

[1] Paul Merchant calls it "massive journey" with "host of characters, some heroic, some darker, and more monstrous" (Merchant 1977: 76).

Even in fairy tales, the hero, although he usually knows what magical object he is looking for, or whom he would like to be reunited with, does not realize the difficulties and hardships he (or she) is going to face. The word "quest" is derived from the Latin verb *quaero*, which may mean "to look for", or "to search for", but it can also mean "to seek to obtain", or "to seek to know" (Smith/ Lockwood 1976: 603). It appears then that one fundamental aspect of a quest is a conservative one – we are looking for what we have lost, and for what we feel the lack of, while the other aspect is more progressive, in the basic sense of proceeding from one place to another so that we can gain something that we have never yet possessed. Both aspects imply a certain measure of uncertainty, but it surely is greater in the latter case.

A good example of such "progressive" epic seems to be Vergil's *Aeneid*, where even the purpose of the quest is revealed to the hero only gradually and never, it seems, to the full extent:

> The great theme in the first six books of the Aeneid which form a separate poem, distinct from the last six books, is the wanderings of Aeneas in search of a land where he may found a new city and develop a nation. A well-worked-out story would give a gradual increase and definiteness of enlightenment as to this destined land Aeneas should leave his ruined city of Troy with practically no knowledge of his destination and should get his revelations gradually and by the way.
>
> (Miller 1900: 350)

At first, Aeneas apparently only wants to find some place where he, and his family, could settle, having lost his original fatherland, only much later does he realize that his new home country is going to be an empire the embryo of which he is going to implant through the very act of settling down in the place assigned to him by the gods.

A different model of the epic quest can be observed in Homer's *Odyssey*. There the hero only wants to regain the domestic peace and fulfillment he had enjoyed before he set off on the military expedition known as the War of Troy, but he has no idea about the terrible cost of this, essentially conservative, project in terms of the lives of people sharing his fate, or those he is going to kill himself, even though he himself manages, narrowly and repeatedly, to avoid death. After his long absence, Odysseus has to use all his renowned intelligence and resourcefulness, combined with that of his wife, and his son, to re-establish himself as the king of his native Ithaca.

These two models are really quite radically different, if we consider that Aeneas cannot return to his first wife Creusa, as she is dead, killed by his enemies, the Greeks, then he rejects the love of Dido, the Queen of Carthage, that is of an already established empire which is going to become a deadly enemy of Aeneas's new country. He finally marries Lavinia, the daughter of an insignificant Italian ruler for whom Aeneas is an utter foreigner. It is easy, however, to overemphasize

this difference, considering that Dardanus, the legendary ancestor of the Trojans, was said to have come from Italy (cf. Bednarek 2001: 80). This circumstance may be thought of as giving the *Aeneid* some semblance of a circular arrangement that can be observed in *Odyssey*, but naturally we can think of it only as a camouflage that is intended to soften the resolutely linear nature of Aeneas's quest.

There seems, however, to be another model of the ancient epic, understood as quest story, which may be connected with that meaning of the word "quest" that appears in the English phrase "questing hounds", that is hounds searching for game, i.e. for an animal that they can kill and devour. In such quest stories, the protagonist is not so much somebody that is looking for something, but rather somebody who is being looked for, by forces, animate or not, human or not, that seek to destroy him, and usually achieve this purpose. Here the element of uncertainty is surely the greatest and the most uncanny, the hero of such narratives usually thinks of himself as a doer, an organizer, a seeker, while in fact he turns out to be a plaything in the hands of the forces far superior to himself. Naturally, this model of a quest is not very different from the tragic mode.

An example of it may be provided by Statius's *Thebaid*, a poem based on Greek myths concerning the so called war of the Seven against Thebes, which is an ill-starred expedition undertaken to support Polynices in his attempt to regain the throne of Thebes usurped by his brother Eteocles. The attempt eventually ends in a disaster, Polynices and Eteocles kill each other, the invading forces (called Argives because their base is the city of Argos) are defeated, the seven champions die violent deaths except one, Adrastus, who is the king Argos, and who simply returns to his country. The whole war resembles to some extent the expedition of the kings Agamemnon and Menelaus, and their various supporters against the city of Troy described in Homer's *Iliad*, but it is remarkably more futile. The Achaeans at least conquer Troy, and Menelaus's wife Helen, whose escape to Troy spurred the Achaeans to action, is returned to her husband, even though the heroes of the Trojan war either, like Achilles, die before the city is captured, or, like Agamemnon, meet a tragic end on their return home. The Seven, however, achieve no success, apart from that of killing their enemy, who is succeeded by a much worse man, the cruel king Creon, eventually ousted by Theseus, the king of Athens.

What contributes to their downfall is the maleficent influence of a magical object, called Harmonia's necklace, which, beautiful as it is, brings death or misfortune to its owner, or to those who are associated with him, or rather with her, because the necklace, in keeping with the traditional stereotype of femininity, is usually worn by women. The necklace is coveted by women not openly because of its aesthetic, or material, value; it also has the power of arresting time, so that its owner never grows old, and of "conferring irresistible beauty to its wearer" (Graves I, 1990: 198). It has the shape of two serpents twisted together, and its owner can actually turn into a serpent, which was what happened to its original owners Harmonia and her husband Cadmus. Queen Jocasta was wearing it, and it made her look young

and beautiful in spite of the passage of the years, but this was her hidden doom because she married, unwittingly, her own son Oedipus, which eventually led to her suicidal death. " Polynices then inherited the Necklace. He gave it to Eriphyle, so that she might use it to persuade her husband, Amphiaraus, to undertake the expedition agaist Thebes. This led to the death of Eriphyle, Actaeon, Phegeus, and the latter's sons" (Wikipedia). Alcmaeon was Eriphyle's son, but, at the same time, her murderer. He killed his mother to avenge his father Amphiaraus, whom Eriphyle had urged, at Polynices's instigation, to join the expedition of the Seven, even though she knew that he would perish in this venture. Alcmaeon would have probably killed Polynices, too, had Polynices not been killed beforehand by his brother Eteocles. It has to be added that Harmonia's necklace was originally forged by Hephaestus, the blacksmith god, lame and not very good looking, who wanted, in this way, to take vengeance on his wife, the goddess of love, Aphrodite, and her human progeny, for having repeatedly betrayed him. Harmonia, according to most versions, was the fruit of the illicit union of Aphrodite with Ares, the god of war.

The three models sketched above seem to form a certain logical whole, even though many other models may be proposed. We would have then an epic of expansion, an epic of return, and an epic of self-destruction. The attitudes, or worldviews, behind them may be labeled: imperialistic, conservative, and anarchistic. As Paul Innes has put it: "Epic offers a worldview" (Innes 2013: 154). Indeed, it seems that any poem that aspires to the epic status should be an embodiment of a specific worldview, and a tool of propagating it. A good example of the third model would be John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It is a poem in which, assuming that the protagonist of it is really Satan, we find two plots dominated by the motif of self-destruction, first the story of Satan's rebellion against God resulting in his, and other rebel angels, being sent from heaven to hell, that is to a *locus horridus*; while the second, roughly parallel story, involves Satan attempting to gain control over man, which ends, in spite of some appearances of success, in Satan's even deeper humiliation because he is for the second time banished from a pleasant place, a *locus amoenus*, but this time not as a rebellious angel, but as a mere snake.

On the other hand, the Polish national epic, *Pan Tadeusz*, seems to be based on a distinctly expansionist story, it ends on a triumphal and imperial note, a new Polish-Lithuanian state rises from the ashes and is founded as an eastern outpost of a vast French European empire. The main hero – Jacek Soplica, the emperor's agent and emissary, dies a tragic and heroic death, but his earlier sins are forgiven and his son is going to bring about a reunion of feuding families. Goethe's *Faust* can serve as an example of an essentially conservative epic, the hero of which returns, albeit only after death, to God and conventional morality, and also to his beloved Gretchen, in spite of his extensive dealings with the Devil.

Of the epic poems that were closer to Tolkien's heart, we may mention *Beowulf*, which clearly is an expansionist epic, the hero of which goes from strength to

strength and, even though he dies eventually a tragic death, his posthumous fame is going to grow. Another epic poem, preferred by Tolkien, is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the motif of return seems to be of foremost importance. Its main protagonist, unlike Beowulf, does not seem to be interested in rising to fame, and he never becomes a king. His chief ambition is to stave off the threat that looms over the society he belongs to, that is, the elitist society of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. This threat is represented by the formidable figure of the Green Knight, who cannot be disposed of, like the monstrous Grendel in *Beowulf*, but who turns out to be amenable to negotiation and is impressed by the hero's moral integrity.

## II

Returning now to *The Lord of the Rings*, we may notice that it shows some elements of all the three models discussed above. The elements of the conservative model, the model based on the motif of return, are, predictably enough, the easiest to detect, given the conservative views of the author himself, and the whole tradition of seeing *The Lord of the Rings* as a Christian epic, even though some critics, for rather obscure reasons, call it "pseudo-Christian" (cf. Innes 2013: 154). This dimension of the work in question can be seen, if we look at the story told there as that of a reconquest. The ostensible purpose of a reconquest is a return to the so called *status quo ante*, the state of affairs previously existing. The trouble is, however, that such a return is difficult to achieve in the so called primary reality, and even in the world invented by Tolkien.

Sauron, the evil spirit, and a clearly Satanic figure, has managed to subdue and overrun a number of lands and peoples who formerly used to belong to what may be called the free world. One of his principal fortresses is called Minas Morgul – "the Tower of Black Sorcery" is a very dismal place, which became the headquarters of the Nazgûl, the terrible spectres of the Ring, but before it fell into Sauron's hands it was called Minas Ithil "the Tower of the Rising Moon" and was a place of remarkable beauty. It was inhabited by the same race of Men, who originally lived in the semi-paradisiac island of Numenor, and who founded the empire of Gondor, which provides the main power base for the enemies of Sauron. Eventually, Minas Morgul, after Sauron's final defeat, is destroyed, but there is some hope, though no certainty, that it will become Minas Ithil again. In the words of Aragorn, the king of Gondor:

> Minas Ithil in Morgul Vale shall be utterly destroyed. and though it may in time to come be made clean, no man may dwell there for many long years.
>
> (Tolkien III 1976: 218)

A vision of regeneration is contained in the following lines from an eagle's song:

> And the Tree that was withered shall be renewed,
> and he shall plant it in the high places,
> and the City shall be blessed.
>
> (Tolkien III: 213)

The "he" mentioned above is Aragorn, called sometimes simply "the King", as the one who is about to make Gondor great and glorious again, after the years when it was ruled by a mere steward, though in reality a sovereign ruler, called Denethor, who, however, became, at some point, half-mad and who, in practice, acted as an agent of the forces of Darkness. Denethor is resolutely opposed to the succession of Aragorn, but it has to remembered that Gondor was truly great only before the extinction of his ancient dynasty, i.e. the House of Anarion, and the onset of the stewards' rule. Aragorn is not, in the strict sense of the word, a member of the House of Anarion, he belongs rather to the House of Isildur, but Isildur was the elder brother of Anarion, and Aragorn is additionally related to Anarion's line on the distaff side.

The title of the third volume of *The Lord of the Rings* i.e. "The Return of the King" clearly refers to Aragorn's rise to power, and his becoming the king of Gondor, even though Aragorn's "return" is very different from that of Odysseus. Odysseus's return is, so to speak, painfully real, he has to convince everybody around, including his wife, that he is indeed the person he pretends to be, whereas Aragorn returns only in a metaphorical sense of the word, as somebody who is, of necessity, only distantly related to Gondor's ancient kings the last of whom ruled around a thousand years ago. In fact, he is a new king and a new ruler who does not have to insist too hard on his hereditary rights because he is filling a political vacuum after the suicidal death of Denethor. It is possible then to think of Aragorn as an Aeneas figure, rather than an Odysseus, that is someone who, after long and strenuous wandering, having tasted to the full the bitterness of an exile's life, comes finally into his own, in a land that is by right his, but, at the same time, new and foreign. There is, however, some potential strength in it, Aragorn represents "a new broom that sweeps clean", his being an outsider contains in itself a promise of a radical renewal, which goes beyond the conservative gesture of a mere restoration of the old order. Like Aeneas, and unlike Odysseus, Aragorn marries his wife Arwen, who would be an equivalent of Lavinia, only after he reaches his destination, and becomes a king.[2] His father-in-law, the elven king Elrond (because Arwen is in fact an elf) will not consent to his daughter's marriage with Aragorn before the latter becomes the king of not only Gondor, but also Arnor, another great kingdom that used to belong to Gondor but had been long lost. The imperial and aristocratic thinking is

[2] In Virgil's *Aeneid* the protagonist fails to take a throne, but he clearly is on his way to become a king, and the poem is recognised as unfinished. Even if, according to some legends, Aeneas never became a king, his sons Ascanius and Silvus are said to have been the first kings of Alba Longa from whose line also the kings of Rome later stemmed.

here rather plain to see. We can see then that the return promised in the title "The Return of the King" is a somewhat paradoxical one. On the one hand, it is possible that certain wounds inflicted by Sauron and his servants are beyond healing, i.e. a full return, understood as restoration, cannot be achieved, on the other hand, the reconquest carried out by Gandalf and Aragorn, and their helpers, seems to lead to a foundation of a new empire that grows, or may grow, much more powerful than the old empire of Gondor was at the time when Sauron appeared in the Middle Earth

The third model of the epic poem, based on the motif of self-destruction, is clearly very important in *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is intimately connected with the matter of the One Ring, which plays a similar role in Tolkien's epic novel as the necklace of Harmonia in Statius's *Thebaid*, or indeed other bewitched objects in the European epic tradition, such as the Golden Fleece of the Argonauts, or the Nibelung treasure in the Germanic legends, that bring misfortune to their owners. It is true, however, the none of those bewitched objects was so dangerous and ominous as the One Ring. If, as has been said at the beginning of the present article, uncertainty is an important ingredient of the epic quest, in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is the One Ring that is the main carrier of that uncertainty. Its nature, powers, and the potential for doing evil are not fully realized even by the wisest characters, and they remain mysterious till the very end. It has to be stressed that, in Tolkien's represented world, coveting the Ring is even worse than the actual possession of it. Saruman, the evil wizard, never gets the Ring, but it is almost always on his mind. As a result, he is constantly diminished and degraded to eventually become a kind of petty criminal. Gollum, originally a hobbit, undergoes a much more thoroughgoing, namely also physical, degradation, and this seems to happen mostly when he is devoid of the Ring. Boromir, the chivalric elder son of Denethor, the Steward of Gondor, becomes very quickly corrupt by merely contemplating the advantages of possessing the Ring, and this in fact leads to his untimely, tragic, though also heroic and compensatory, death.

Those who carry the Ring, mainly the hobbits – Bilbo and his nephew Frodo, do undergo a disquieting evolution; they become somewhat vague, listless, and melancholy, but they keep their basic moral integrity because they are men of solid moral grounding and accept the Ring with no malicious or egoistic intentions. Still, they become dependent on it and dangerously attached to it. And yet the One Ring, unlike those other bewitched objects, brings no death or bad luck: on the contrary, it guarantees long life, good health, and, relative, safety. It also grants infinite power to those who are willing to, and capable of using it for this purpose, but, like money, it does not give happiness. Thus, instead of physical self-destruction, the Ring brings about moral corruption which also destroys the self, albeit in much more subtle ways.

An interesting case of the relationship between a character and the Ring is represented by Denethor's surviving son Faramir. He is severely wounded by the servants of the Enemy, and left unconscious, when his father dies, but if he were

not, it would not have made much difference as he does not try to assert his quite legitimate claim to the rule of Gondor, being Aragorn's staunch ally and supporter. One might be tempted to conclude that Faramir is a mere cipher, a noble figure, but rather simple minded, and of little consequence, who eventually is satisfied with an inferior position received from his new overlord. And yet it is into his mouth that Tolkien puts an important statement that sheds some light on the author's way of thinking. The statement concerns exactly the Ring of Power, an object of most characters' fervent, though often hidden, desire:

> But fear no more! I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway. Not were Minas Tirith falling in ruin and I alone could save her, so, using the weapon of the Dark Lord for her good and my glory. No, I do not wish for such triumphs, Frodo son of Drogo.
>
> (Tolkien II: 256)

Unlike his brother, Boromir, for whom the Ring is a wonder weapon that would simplify and made easier so many things, Faramir thinks of it, first of all, with disgust, as something that is contaminated through its connection with the Dark Lord, and it is this disgust[3] that keeps Faramir impervious to the temptation of the Ring, the temptation acutely felt even by such supreme and heroic characters as the great wizard Gandalf, and his female equivalent, the great sorceress Galadriel.[4] Indeed there is something deeply disgusting about the monomaniac, and monotonous, obsessions which the victims of the Ring, including the rather ironically called Lord of the Rings, suffer from.

It should be added that Sauron, the Dark Lord, the Lord of the Rings, unlike Milton's Satan, is not an attractive or heroic figure, it is perhaps possible to claim that he is shown as a power hungry monomaniac, but in reality he is hardly shown at all, as there is not, apparently, much to show. Sauron has no body, and not much of a mind, apart from his famous eye which somehow summarizes his nature, and seems to have a magnetic influence. Frodo, who, much more than Aragorn, deserves to be called the protagonist of the book, has a vision of it when he looks into the magical mirror of Galadriel:

> So terrible was it that Frodo stood rooted, unable to cry out or to withdraw his gaze. The Eye was rimmed with fire, but was itself glazed, yellow as a cat's, watchful and intent, and the black slit of its pupil opened on a pit, a window into nothing.
>
> (Tolkien I: 345)

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[3] This may remind one of the famous poem by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert *Potęga smaku* (*The Power of Taste*), in which disgust is also invoked as a correct reaction towards the totalitarian enemy.

[4] Another character who is free from this temptation is the very mysterious figure called Tom Bombadil, but he seems to be so at one with Nature, almost a spirit of Nature, that his indifference to the Ring is perhaps no more remarkable than the indifference of an animal, excluding of course a magpie, to that or other precious objects.

Sauron is then, in a sense, attractive, but his attractiveness seems to have ultimately no substance at all. Still, those who follow his lead imagine themselves to be constructing a new order. The wizard Saruman, Gandalf's antagonist, has a vision of such an order, vague as it is, and it is by means of that vision that he tries to make na ally of Gandalf:

> A new Power is rising. … We may join with that Power. … Its victory is at hand; and there will be rich reward for those that aided it. As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; … Why not? The Ruling Ring? If we could command that, then the Power would pass to *us*.
>
> (Tolkien I: 249)

Saruman, no doubt the most intelligent among the servants of the Ring, dreams then of some kind of empire based on the Platonic principle of the rule of philosophers, but he reverts, as it were, the history of the Roman Empire, for example, in that he suggests that it could have developed from one man's rule into some kind of oligarchy with the apparent autocrat only obeying the will of "the Wise". The emptiness of his rhetoric is exposed by Gandalf in the sentence: "Saruman, … only one hand at a time can wield the One, and you know that well, so do not trouble to say *we*!" (Tolkien I: 249) It is in this way then, by laying bare the falsehood of Saruman's pseudo-collectivist thinking, and reducing it to a thinly disguised ego trip, that Tolkien demolishes, or at least tries to demolish, the lure of a utopian empire that lies behind the expansionist model of the epic. Significantly enough, Saruman, having failed as rhetorician, resorts immediately to naked violence and imprisons Gandalf intending to subject him to torture. On the other hand, Gandalf's retort is somewhat disappointing because it is based on a rather shaky moral ground. Gandalf seems to reject Saruman's offer not because it is immoral – and it clearly is immoral, Saruman invokes, for example, the cynical principle of the end justifying the means – but only because Gandalf does not see a place for himself in Saruman's ambitious project.

It is then perhaps not so surprising that Gandalf, having shown himself so competent in exposing the lies of Saruman, is still sensitive to the temptation of the Ring when he finally finds it. When Frodo offers Gandalf the Ring, which happens to be in his possession, Gandalf reacts with anger, and there is clearly an element of weakness in that anger:

> With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly....Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me.
>
> (Tolkien I: 67)

It is only Faramir who is intelligent enough to realize the potential of the Ring, but, at the same time, endowed with what might be called a moral intuition that goes further than Gandalf's wisdom and allows him to reject the Ring out of hand. And yet Faramir becomes a close associate of Aragorn, who, as we could see, embarks on a mission to renew the glory of the empire of Gondor.

It appears that the interplay of the three models, or embodiments, of epicness, or the epic spirit, which we can observe in *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the possible keys to our understanding of its enormous success. There is little doubt that the mode of return is in the forefront, even though, contrary to the title of the last volume "The Return of the King", the real carrier of this mode is not so much the king Aragorn, or Elassar, as he is officially called in his capacity of the king, but Sam, Frodo's servant, a hobbit who, even though he has some contact with the Ring, is completely unaffected by it. He is the one whose return to his wife Rose – a Penelope figure as the woman who patiently waits – closes the book with the memorable, though rather trivial, statement: "Well, I'm back" (Tolkien III: 275). Sam's return, unlike Odysseus's, is unproblematic, he and his wife simply take up the threads of their ordinary life, as if nothing had happened, and no time had passed. Frodo, Sam's master, although apparently unscathed, in reality has been completely transformed by his great adventure with the Ring, he has become much wiser, as even his enemy, Saruman, admits (cf. Tolkien III: 264), but his life energy has gone. And this seems to concern, though perhaps not in the same degree, not only him but a number of other characters, all of them representing the so called elder races, such as wizards, elves, dwarves, and hobbits, who have to disappear and yield to the ascending race of men.

This motif of the fading (or rather "dwindling") of older species of intelligent beings is probably one of the most original aspects of Tolkien's grand vision, even though it is possible to point to its legendary or folkloristic antecedents[5], and it is outlined in the often quoted words of Galadriel addressed to Frodo:

> For if you fail, then 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.'
>
> (Tolkien I: 346)

This would be then, to some extent, the reverse of the expansionist epic, symbolised by *Aeneid* – instead of a promise of an empire, we rather get a vision of decline and fall, even though it has to be stressed that this decline and fall is fragmentary rather than absolute.

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[5] The most obvious analogy seems to be the process through which the Tuatha Dé Danann, "the tribe of gods" of the ancient Irish mythology, were eventurally reduced to rather diminutive fairies inhabiting the fairy mounds."

On the other hand, this theme of fading or dwindling is clearly rooted in the tradition of what might be called epic nostalgia for the golden age of heroism and magic beauty. *The Lord of the Rings* offers us glimpses of that age, and there is certainly a tendency there to idealize it, but never to the point of showing it as unproblematic and devoid of its characteristic limitations. Tolkien's originality, in the context of the epic tradition, consists also in the fact that he attempts to show the process through which the heroic and magical age had to "dwindle" and the way it happened. It should also be noticed that the process of dwindling is not something that appears only in the last chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, the elves of the Third Age, in which the action of the novel takes place, graceful and dignified as they may be, are only a far cry from the mighty elves of the First and Second Age.

## III

It is time now to consider the soundness of the idea that Tolkien's work is an epic at all. The epic nature and status of Tolkien's novel can be questioned, it seems, in two basic ways. Firstly, it may be claimed that it is simply something else, and particularly, that it is a romance rather than an epic, or that its epic qualities are overshadowed by the romantic, or romance-like, ones. Secondly, it may be alleged that we have to do here with an inauthentic, or second-rate epic, a work that vainly seeks to achieve the position of a genuine epic, but this matter, as too polemical should perhaps be, for a while, left unaddressed.[6]

Let us deal then with the former charge. To some extent, it has already been very competently dealt with in T.A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien. Author of the Century*, where the critic places Tolkien's work in the context of Northrop Frye's theory of literary genres included in his *An Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Frye, somewhat surprisingly, places the romance above the epic, or rather the "high mimesis" claiming that, in the high mimetic genres, which include tragedy and epic, the heroes and heroines are "superior in degree to other men but not to their natural environment", while, in the romances, those heroes are superior in degree to other men, and also to their environment (Shippey 2001: 221). The whole spectrum of genres, or modes, extends from the highest, i.e. treating of the characters that are the most elevated above the common level of men, to the lowest, i.e. concerning

[6] I mean, in particular, the well known charge of Michael Moorcock, that Tolkien's works, just as well as the fantastic narratives of C.S. Lewis, qualify as "epic Pooh" (Wikipedia), meaning that they are somewhat childish, escapist, naïve, and reactionary, while pretending to be something much grander than this. To this criticism I can basically only answer that the positive aspect of such a statement is that it draws our attention to the, perhaps sometimes unjustly neglected, noble and quietly heroic principles on which A.A. Milne's book *Winnie the Pooh* is based.

people that are below that level, and includes five levels, in descending order: myth, romance, high mimesis (tragedy), low mimesis (novel), and irony, or satire. Shippey, rightly I think, concludes that *The Lord of the Rings* can be placed "at all five levels" (Shippey 2001: 222). Rose A. Zimbardo, however, tried to be more precise in this respect and she insists, in the essay "Moral Vision in *The Lord of the Rings*", that Tolkien's work is not a tragedy, presumably neither is it an epic, but definitely a romance. Her chief argument is that:

> Evil in the romance vision is not an aspect of human nature, but rather the perversion of human will. It results when a being directs his will inward to the service of the self rather than outward to the service of the All. The effects of such inversion is the perversion of nature, both man's nature and the greater nature of which it is a part.
>
> (Zimbardo 1968: 101)

It would follow then that in the tragedy, which "insists upon the impossibility of man's identification with the other" (Zimbardo 1968: 100), we would have to do with a less moral conception of human nature, one that openly suggests that too much cannot be demanded from an individual, while in the romance, which "insists upon the absolute necessity of his identification with the All" (Zimbardo 1968: 100), we have a moral vision par excellence in which the selfish inclinations of an individual are duly condemned and shown as leading to disastrous consequences. Zimbardo, just like Frye, though for somewhat different reasons, would put then the romance above the epic, but she interprets this superiority not in ontological terms, like Frye, but rather in openly moral, and perhaps also Christian, ones. Indeed, selfishness is strongly condemned in *The Lord of the Rings*, but, at the same time, the book has nothing against, or even advocates such innocent enjoyments like good, though simple, eating and drinking, or even smoking. Tolkien's world is clearly not puritanical, and neither is it radically collectivistic because the society of hobbits is shown as that of proprietors, petty ones no doubt, but strongly attached to their possessions, sometimes, indeed, too much, like the thieving, or kleptomaniac, Lobelia Sackville–Baggins, who, nevertheless, shows her much better, even heroic, side at the crucial moment of the confrontation between the Shire hobbits and the tyrannous Saruman, alias Sharkey. Generally, as Tolkien would insist, *abusus non tollit usum*, or the existence of abuse does not invalidate proper usage (Hedley 2008: 183).

Shippey concludes that "…*The Lord of the Rings* is a romance, but one which is continuous negotiation with, and which follows many conventions of, the traditional bourgeois novel" (Shippey 2001: 223), but I understand that the choice of the word "romance" rather than that of "high mimesis" or "epic" is here rather arbitrary. I can still understand why, in the context of Frye's theory, the term "romance" might appear more appropriate. The characters in Tolkien's world may indeed appear "superior to their environment", like the characters in Frye's romantic

mode, because they are "supernatural" in the way Tolkien understood the word "supernatural":

> For it is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural (and often of diminutive stature); whereas they are natural, far more natural than he. Such is their doom.
>
> (On Fairy-Stories, 110)

In other words, and if I understand the meaning of this rather paradoxical passage well, man is, in relation to fairies, "infranatural", i.e. below the, somewhat idealised, level of nature, but, considering that the world of *The Lord of The Rings* is being increasingly dominated by men, it may, I think, safely be said of Tolkien's fairies, or rather the elves, there, and not only they, are "superior to their environment".

Let us, however, take into consideration Paul Cobley's definition of the epic:

> Large scale narrative, often associated with the theme of national or cultural identity whose main archetypes in Europe have been the narratives of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. … epic … mixes mimesis and the poet's voice to relate stories of (usually mythical) heroism.
>
> (Cobley 2006: 230-231)

and also the brief but succinct definition provided by Paul Merchant:

> [Epic] is a chronicle, a 'book of the tribe', a vital record of customs and tradition, and at the same time a story-book for entertainment.
>
> (Merchant 1977: 1)

Here it becomes, I hope, obvious enough that *The Lord of the Rings* is written in a broadly conceived epic mode, even if the heroism depicted often consists in giving up heroic postures and accepting a much more humble, though no less arduous, way, as can be observed in the crucial choices made by some of Tolkien's characters, and particularly by Frodo. The phrases "theme of national or cultural identity" and "book of the tribe" may easily be connected with Tolkien's programmatic slogan "mythology for England".[7] Does *The Lord of the Rings* provide such a mythology for England, or perhaps not only for England, or rather not only for that particular tribe? If there is anything like a mythology for England there it certainly is very different from the mythology for Rome provided by Virgil's *Aeneid*, even though both Rome and England are strongly associated with the notion of the empire. This question goes beyond the scope of the present essay, but the mythopoeic dimension Tolkien's achievement is beyond question. This mythopoeia may be

[7] There is a sub-chapter on Tolkien's mythology for England in Shippey's book *The Road to Middle-Earth*, cf. Shippey 2003: 303-308, but Shippey, understandably enough, does not address the political potential of this matter, which, in my opinion, boils down to the relatively simple, in fact simplistically allegorical, question: does Gondor (or Rohan) stand for England, or is it rather the Shire? Or perhaps they all do? Tolkien, with his dislike of simple allegory, probably would not like to discuss this matter in such terms.

primarily rooted in the Nordic tradition, but the links and analogues with archetypal European epics are certainly important and worth exploring. I certainly agree with the statement that:

> It is undeniable that Tolkien's primary influences were Northern rather than classical, drawing extensively on Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic traditions to create an entirely new mythology. The contents of what Tolkien referred to as the "soup" of the story (Tolkien 1997: 120) are however far more varied than this, and *The Lord of the Rings* can be read as a celebration of classical epic just as it is a celebration of folk tale, fairy story and heroic myth.
>
> (Parry 2012: 77)

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