

## **Stars Above a Dark Tor: Tolkien and Romanticism**

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‘The beauty of it smote his heart... and hope returned to him.’  
(LotR 957)

Imagine an English Romantic poet. What kind of picture comes to mind? Perhaps an indolent young man, quill in hand, ambling through the countryside? Or something much wilder – a visionary poet with wind-driven hair?

Out of barbaric curiosity, I tested this same question on some of my students. Their responses ranged from ‘Some wet guy with flowing hair, moping in a field writing’ to just two words: ‘Oh God!’ The latter student was not enamoured with English and its great literary heritage (and ambushing them in the lunch queue probably didn’t help).

What my students’ answers do suggest is that the Romantics are commonly misunderstood; the passing of two centuries sometimes blinds us to what is most fundamental about them.

The Romantics were radicals, thinking and writing about as far outside the contemporary box as it was possible for poets and writers in their time to go. Anti-establishmentarianism could have been their middle name. In every sphere – philosophical, ideological, political, religious and literary – these 18<sup>th</sup> century bad boys represented a threat to the establishment. These were the kind of men that sweet old ladies would shake their heads at. Worse than bad and ugly – they were considered mad and dangerous to know.

Why? The Romantic movement created a profound shift in the West’s attitudes to art and human creativity. Classical purity was formal and stiff-necked, and stifling neo-classical imitation seemed to repress the glory of the human spirit. This was not, to use a delightful English idiom, the Romantics’ ‘cup of tea’. Going entirely against the grain of contemporary literary thought, they turned inwards to unleash their innermost capacities of self-expression, exulting in the spontaneity and originality of their individual imaginations.

It was a Promethean exploit. In fact, we might take the story of Prometheus as a good symbol for what the Romantics were trying to achieve – they were wresting back the fire of the human spirit – imagination – for the use of all mankind. Unlike its classical counterpart, however, this Romantic Prometheus is released – just as he is in Shelley’s closet drama *Prometheus Unbound*.

Imagination is the presiding spirit of the Romantic movement. It was the visionary

capacity that allowed the Romantic pen to strike back to a realm of myth and legend so as to capture the transcendence of nature and sheer present-ness of human existence. More even than presiding spirit, imagination was the Romantics' very lifeblood, and it ran throughout Europe.

### **The Wild, The Improbable, The Fanciful: England's Romantics**

Asked to name the six key figures of English Romanticism, any good student of English Literature will list William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron as the guilty parties. These poets range from the truly visionary to the revolutionary and the outright tragic. They were all prolific writers - any one of them might claim Ozymandias' infamous words: 'look on my works, ye mighty, and despair'. Tigers, albatrosses, daffodils and Grecian urns had perhaps never before enjoyed such notoriety as these poets gave them. And, although they may have differed in opinion on some details, the heart of their theories of poetry was the same: everything resided in the crucial role of the imagination.

William Blake perhaps put it most clearly when he wrote: 'This world of imagination is the world of eternity' (Keynes 639). Indeed, for Coleridge, imagination was 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception... a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' (Shawcross I. 202). More personally than his co-Romantics, Keats wrote: 'I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination' (Letter to Benjamin Bailey).

This is what we might, with hindsight, call a eucatastrophic vision of literature. However it is expressed the essential sentiment is the same: there is something about imagination that transcends human experience and puts it back in touch with higher, eternal truths. The city of London, reviled by Blake as a place where 'soldiers' sighs/ Run in blood down palace walls' (Willmott 38) is mystically redeemed in its reconnection to the glories of creation when Wordsworth finds its smokeless morning sleep as much a thing of splendour as the Edenic first light on valley, rock and hill.

This is linguistically and ideologically powerful stuff. But the Romantic imagination entailed far more than lounging about on London bridges writing sonnets. This notion of imagination was all-encompassing. For the Romantics, imagination meant breaking away from the classical unities of form and structure; spurning the trappings of rationalism in favour of the feeling of individual experience; and rejecting the rapidly expanding grind of urban life so as to return to man's true setting - nature, free from the 'mind-forged manacles' of a mechanistic view of life. It was an ideal vision of the world in so far as it was rooted entirely in ideas.

Needless to say, the Romantics were not very high up on Locke and Newton's Christmas card lists. Romanticism was an 'all or nothing' affair. You could not be half-hearted in this line of literature.

Transposing these ideals of imagination from mind to paper might seem a daunting prospect. But these poets were nonplussed by the challenge. They saw themselves as inheritors of the great romances, those ‘wild, improbable... fanciful’ tales that were ‘full of wild scenery’ (Coleridge I. 352). Imagination was the key – and these writers used it to unlock new styles and types of literature.

### **Imagination: The Divine Vision**

It is by now clear that in order to grasp the Romantics we need to grapple with the idea of imagination. The OED defines it, rather dryly, as ‘the faculty or action of forming ideas or mental images’. Imagination is a concept that, from our earliest childhoods, is set in stern opposition to reality. Tolkien himself acknowledges this in *On Fairy Stories*, where he explores how fantastical literature can be condemned as escapist and juvenile. This trend goes back at least as far as Plato’s theory of forms – imagination here is considered as a step too far from the true nature of things, leading to the expulsion of poets from the Republic. Even today, imagination is seemingly divorced from any redemptive creative wellspring – its places are the nursery or the business board room. Phrases like ‘he has an over-active imagination’ or ‘you’re just imagining things’ point to a certain distrust of this human faculty.

For Blake, imagination was ‘the divine vision’, one that enabled you to see ‘a world in a grain of sand’ (Keynes 118). Tolkien would go on to make this same connection, both in *Mythopoeia* (where he writes to C. S. Lewis that ‘we make still by the law in which we’re made’) and *On Fairy Stories*. For Tolkien, as for the Romantics, the process of subcreation – a divinely ordained imagining of other worlds – is not only innately but vitally human, connecting us to creation itself in a way that few other processes are capable of doing.

In many ways, we can view Tolkien’s minor work *Leaf by Niggle* as a deeply personal and thinly-veiled allegorical dialectic exploring this very issue. Niggle spends as much of his life as he can working on his painting of a tree, but it is only after he leaves the purgatorial Workhouse and goes on to Niggle’s Country that the truer nature of his painting is revealed:

A great green shadow came between him and the sun. Niggle looked up and fell off his bicycle.

Before him stood *the Tree*, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly lifted his arms and opened them wide.

‘It’s a gift!’ he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally. (LN 136, emphasis mine)

Tolkien clearly aligns himself here with what we might call a Romantic mode of imagination. If we take Niggle’s tree as an allegorical expression of the role of

imagination in art, then it is a gift, to be used wisely (as the rest of Niggle's tale clearly shows). But the tree is only truly finished once its mimetic quality – the way in which its artistry mirrors something definitive and eternal – is revealed. The art brings us a step closer to the high, eternal form. In this way, Tolkien's view of imagination assimilates and inverts Plato's theory of forms:

'Niggle's Picture!' said Parish in astonishment. 'Did you think of all this, Niggle? I never knew you were so clever. Why didn't you tell me?'  
'He tried to tell you, long ago,' said the man, 'but you would not look. He had only got canvas and paint in those days, and you wanted to mend your roof with them. This is what you and your wife used to call Niggle's Nonsense...'  
'But it did not look like this then, not real,' said Parish.  
'No, it was only a glimpse then,' said the man; 'but you might have caught the glimpse, if you had ever thought it worth while to try.' (LN 141)

As for the Romantics, imagination is a gift, a divine vision, a subcreative act that can reconnect man to the divine. Rather than removing us from the true nature of things Tolkien argues that it can offer us a heart-shattering glimpse of them. It was an idea that would find academic crystallisation in his concept of eucatastrophe. Pursuing the creative impulse grants us a glimpse of eternity – in Niggle's case, 'an introduction to the Mountains'. C. S. Lewis called the same 'glimpsing' experience 'Joy'. Blake, with his accustomed visionary vigour, likens that moment of transcendent clarity to 'Hold[ing] infinity in the palm of your hand / and eternity in an hour' (Keynes 118).

### **Painting Niggle's Tree: Imagination in Action**

Imagination is the envisioning of something beyond reality, something which perhaps offers a glimpse of eternity. So far so good – but how do you get a transcendent experience neatly down onto an obliging bit of paper?

The Romantics almost invariably turned to poetry. The choice is an obvious one – it could be argued that few other literary forms offer the writer such an intense vehicle of expression, replete as it is with the subtleties of rhythm, diction and imagery. Poetry is an ancient and aural art, one that forces the listener or reader to open their own imagination to the writer's vocalised vision. Take, for example, the hypnotic power of William Blake's *The Tiger* – a poem which is itself concerned with subcreation:

Tiger, Tiger, burning bright  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? [...]

When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered Heaven with their tears,

Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the lamb make thee? [...] (Wilmott 34)

The tight rhymes and relentless rhythm of Blake's poem convey a sense of awe and urgency in a way that perhaps no prose can. This visionary lyric assaults the senses, forcing an imaginative response in its arresting language and questioning of the reader – we cannot evade it. Blake's choice of poetic form and structure are exact.

Of course, Tolkien's works are not renowned for their poetry – although one can (and I would!) argue for the astonishing, eucatastrophic power of Sam's song in Cirith Ungol or the almost unbearable poignancy of *Bilbo's Last Song*. But that is not to say that we must bar Tolkien from his Romantic heritage on account of his choice of form; we often have a special reverence for poetry, tending to view it as the highest form of literary expression. At times that is well deserved. But we should not forget that our word poetry derives, after all, from the Greek verb *poiein*, to create – and if Tolkien does anything, he creates. The power of poetry perhaps lies in the way that it can linguistically and musically spark the imagination. If that is the case, then Tolkien's prose is at times as poetic as the most startling or breath-taking passages of the Romantic canon:

And in that very moment, away behind in some courtyard of the City, a cock crowed. Shrill and clear he crowed, recking nothing of wizardry or war, welcoming only the morning that in the sky far above the shadows of death was coming with the dawn.

And as if in answer there came from far away another note. Horns, horns, horns. In dark Mindolluin's sides they dimly echoed. Great horns of the North wildly blowing. Rohan had come at last. (LotR 861)

Tolkien's choice and use of language here is every bit as deliberate as that of his Romantic forbears. He weaves together semantic patterns, chosen details and literary allusions to create a moment of eucatastrophe. Tolkien's choice of prose, we might argue, serves as a foil to such moments of lyrical or visionary clarity. In this, perhaps he goes a step further than the Romantics; while they focussed on keeping their sense of imagination in overdrive, Tolkien's prose more closely mimics the experience of reality: our lives are not overflowing with this kind of imaginative, eucatastrophic clarity – what Virginia Woolfe would call 'moments of being'. A prosaic exposition of an imaginary world therefore allows us to integrate more fully with its mundane experience and its moments of being – something that poetry does not always permit us.

Tolkien's prose is littered with such instances; almost invariably, he ties that sense of 'poetry' to the experience of eucatastrophe, as in this example from *The Two Towers*:

'Look, Sam!' [Frodo] cried, startled into speech. 'Look! The king has got a crown again!'

The eyes were hollow and the carven beard was broken, but about the high stern forehead there was a coronal of silver and gold. A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in

reverence for the fallen king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed.

‘They cannot conquer forever!’ said Frodo. And then suddenly the *brief glimpse* was gone. The sun dipped and vanished, and as if at the shuttering of a lamp, black night fell. (LotR 727, emphasis mine)

This second passage is perhaps less spine-tingling than the first coming, as it does, not on a field of battle but really just in a field – but the power of imagination and its culmination in eucatastrophic glimpses of something beyond us is nevertheless outspoken. We are presented first with a microcosmic, personal experience of the power of imagination in Frodo’s response to the natural world. In fact, his experience is so overpowering that it startles our troubled hobbit hero to speech, the verbs *cried* and *startled* strongly implying a moment of transcendence before we reach its verbal expression in ‘The king has got a crown again!’. It is in the imagining of a crown – expressed delicately but evocatively in Tolkien’s detailed attention to the natural world, where the flowers become ‘small white stars’ – that we are led to the moment of clarity: ‘they cannot conquer forever’. Like a true Romantic, Tolkien turns to the natural world and infuses it with a sense of the eternal so as to express the power of the imagination to lesson us in eternal things. But Tolkien is at pains to show the temporal nature of this experience: Frodo’s ‘brief glimpse’ is gone as suddenly as it appeared, and a more prosaic diction (with the vanishing sun compared to a shuttered lamp) reinforces our sense that everyday experience always truncates the moments in which our imaginations are liberated to glimpse beyond it. The juxtaposition is heart-rending – but it is chiefly achieved through creative mastery of natural details.

As *The Lord of the Rings* nears its end, Tolkien’s engagement with the natural world becomes a *tour de force* of pathetic fallacy. The road to Mordor becomes somewhat of a physical representation of Frodo and Sam’s emotional and spiritual journey, heightening our sense of their exhaustion and nigh despair. Against this framework, Tolkien sets the scene for another moment of transcendent imagination:

The land seemed full of creaking and cracking and sly noises, but there was no sound of voice or of foot. Far above Ephel Duath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. (LotR 957)

C. M. Bowra once wrote that: ‘The Romantics... explore[d]... the world of the spirit... each of them believed in an order of things which is not that which we see and know... They wished to penetrate to an abiding reality... [and] were convinced that, though visible things are the instruments by which we view this reality, they are not everything and have indeed little significance unless they are related to some embracing and sustaining power’. (Bowra 9). In this passage, Tolkien does just that.

The artistry and setting of the natural world have again become the vehicle for a powerful epiphany of imagination. Tolkien's language here oscillates, in a way that is delightfully appropriate to Samwise, between the touching tones of the everyday ('peeping', 'twinkle for a while') to the high and poetic modes of romance ('smote', 'forsaken'). Sam is aware both of the transience of the piercing star and the permanence of the idea it represents in his imagination. Tolkien perfectly captures the essence of a moment of divine vision as it occurs, not in the Romantic imagination, but in human experience – and, vitally, this linking of reality and the eternal leads to eucatastrophic renewal: hope returns to Sam so that 'his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him'.

The twinkling white star in every way indicates to us an embracing and sustaining power. This very Romantic capacity of using the natural world to capture the essence of spiritual moments is evident throughout Tolkien's work. The same imagination that conjures up wild worlds uses the very fabric of those worlds to transmit hope and imagination as best it can.

### **Shelob's Lair: An Aside on Tolkien and the Gothic**

Of course, the Romantic imagination did not simply conjure up instances of revelatory clarity. The movement was experiential and so also indulged in the sensuous and the nightmarish. The idealism of the Romantics gave rise to the thrills of the gothic – literature so radical that it was deemed unsuitable for women. While many of these works – such as *Frankenstein* or *Wuthering Heights* – are now considered among the classics of world literature, they were sensational and unpredictable.

The link between the monstrous and the world of Romance may well seem evident to us – knights were fighting dragons long before Spenser's Redcrosse knight encountered Error in her den or Gawain ventured to the Green Chapel – but the radical nature of the Romantics produced an equally radical version of the monstrous. For some, the gothic quickly became viewed as a distasteful literary expression of excess, calculated to thrill and little else.

And here is another place where Tolkien differs from his Romantic and Gothic forbears: he wrote that 'every romance that takes things seriously must have a warp of fear and horror, if however remotely or representatively it is to resemble reality, and not the merest escapism.' (L 120). While acknowledging the integral link between romance and horror Tolkien's focus is still clearly that of resembling reality. In the same letter, he adds about the horror he has attempted in his own novel: 'But I have failed if it does not seem possible that mere mundane hobbits could cope with such things. I think that there is no horror conceivable that such creatures cannot surmount, by grace (here appearing in mythological forms) combined with a refusal of their nature and reason at the last pinch to compromise or submit' (L 120).

For Tolkien, the purpose of fear and horror is to both render the world of the imagination

more life-like, and to produce a platform for the outworking of grace. This is perhaps seen nowhere as clearly as in Shelob's lair:

In a few steps they were in utter and impenetrable dark... Here the air was still, stagnant, heavy, and sound fell dead [...] As they thrust forward they felt things brush against their heads, or against their hands, long tentacles or hanging growths perhaps... and still the stench grew.

... from behind them came a sound, startling and horrible in the heavy padded silence: a gurgling, bubbling noise, and a long venomous hiss. They wheeled round, but nothing could be seen. Still as stones they stood, staring, waiting for they did not know what.

... Then, as he stood, darkness about him and a blackness of despair and anger in his heart, it seemed to [Sam] that he saw a light: a light in his mind, almost unbearably bright at first, as a sun-ray to the eyes of one long hidden in a windowless pit...

The bubbling hiss drew nearer, and there was a creaking as of some great jointed thing that moved with slow purpose on the dark. A reek came on before it. 'Master, master!' cried Sam, and the life and urgency came back into his voice. 'The Lady's gift! The star-glass!...'

'The star-glass?' muttered Frodo, as one answering out of sleep, hardly comprehending. 'Why, yes! Why had I forgotten it? A light when all other lights go out! And now indeed light alone can help us.' (LotR 744ff.)

Tolkien does not stint in building up the horror of Shelob's lair and is masterful in his execution of suspense. But where Peter Jackson unashamedly turns to the tropes of the horror-film (itself a genre drawing heavily on the gothic) Tolkien keeps the narrative details concrete and sense-focussed, drawing his readers into the lair itself. Like Frodo and Sam, we are left with only our senses of touch, sound and smell – literal and metaphorical sight only returns with the memory of Galadriel and the use of the star-glass. It is Galadriel's gift – that of light in the darkness – which acts as the grace that permits the hobbits to surmount the horror of Shelob's lair. Keeping his focus on overcoming horror rather than allowing it to overwhelm the narrative sets Tolkien apart from those who first followed in the steps of the Romantics.

### **The Great Instrument for the Moral Good**

Shelley once wrote that the imagination was 'the great instrument for the moral good'. Although their interpretation of moral was not necessarily uniform the statement is summative of much that the Romantics strove to achieve. Imagination was a tool to enrich human experience.

Tolkien undeniably lived and wrote in the tail of the Romantics' visionary comet, and his work has traits in common. But in Tolkien's case, 'moral' good would perhaps be better read as spiritual good – for him, imagination is a pathway to the integration of the world around us with the world beyond us. It is when the two are imaginatively connected,



allowing us through one to catch a glimpse of the other – when we are, as Tolkien puts it, escape and then return to the world able to see green as green again – that imagination has served its highest purpose. He strove to unify the realms of experience and ‘being’ in a way that encompassed the eternal but enriched, rather than cast aside, the temporal. Standing at the threshold between imagination and faith, Tolkien’s romanticism truly is a kind of divine vision.

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