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Deep Roots in a Time of Frost (2014) by Patrick Curry

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Deep Roots in a Time of Frost: Essays on Tolkien, by Patrick Curry. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2014. viii, 255 pp. \$24.30 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703337.

Patrick Curry's collection of essays comprises fourteen pieces plus an introduction. Most of them are quite short, under ten pages, being reviews, occasional pieces, one after-dinner speech to the Tolkien Society. This and the fact that they came out at times ranging from the early 1990s to 2014 means that (as the author mentions in his introduction) there is a certain amount of repetition, and also that works mentioned as "recent" may well have gone by—sometimes fortunately. Its leading themes are: (1) the nature of "enchantment" and the need for re-enchantment; (2) opposition to "modernism" and the hopes for post-modernism; (3) the strange nature of critical responses to Tolkien. Obviously all three themes are connected, but it probably helps to try to disentangle them.

The last of those three items is, in a way, the least problematic, though there is a problem at its heart. Why were professional literary critics for so long not only unable to frame an adequate response to Tolkien, but capable of so many acts of foolish self-betrayal? There is no doubt that many of them simply had not read what they were criticising. It shows in the inability to get the names of the characters right, the evident inability to follow the plot, and (my favorite) Christine Brooke-Rose's angry expostulation that all these bits in funny languages weren't necessary, since they were all translated anyway. Ignoring the larger question—are translations the same as originals?—if you had to pick the one work most full of untranslated items in unknown languages, *The Lord of the Rings* would be it.

Curry speculates that perhaps they just couldn't bring themselves to read Tolkien, and I can confirm that. Some time in the late 1970s, when I was a Fellow of St John's, Oxford, I was asked down to the BBC for a radio programme on Tolkien, where I was set up to debate another Oxford Fellow (who had been at St John's himself). The debate got quite heated, and some point or other came up—was it the assertion that *The Lord of the Rings* was motivated entirely by class-feeling, the orcs being members of the working class, or maybe it was the statement that the whole work was tinged by allegory? I forget. But anyway, I denied it, and said something like, "Go on, give us an example of what you're saying?" Silence fell. I was just about to break it, lean forward, and say, "Go on, just one, one concrete example", when the producer held up his hand warningly to stop me. I got the point, sat back, and we allowed the silence to expand, embarrassingly. In the lift going down afterwards, I remarked to my opposite number (name and expletives deleted), "That was bad, even by *your* standards. Why didn't you come back at me with something." The reply was, and this is *verbatim*, "I've never read it." I see from page 155 of Curry's book that this has

not stopped the guilty party, named there, from actually writing about Tolkien. Perhaps he read the book later.

I'd add another terrific put-down I once heard, from Mrs. Le Guin, when once again I was on a radio programme with her, and another rent-a-critic from the local university whose name I have forgotten. At some point the latter launched into the familiar attack on Tolkien's style, saying as near as I can remember, "But he just can't *write*, he can't write *sentences*." (Tolkien, like me, was a Professor of English *Language*, not *Literature*, and capable of feats of grammatical analysis far beyond "diagramming.") The producer on this occasion turned to Mrs. Le Guin, and asked her if she would like to debate this. She replied, in tones of icy *grande dame* contempt: "Oh no. You cannot debate with *incapacity*."

So, no problem about the facts of the case. But what is the critics' problem? My own feeling is that—although Carey is no fan of Tolkien—the motivation was best explained by John Carey, also a Fellow of St John's before he went off to be Merton Professor. In his book *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), which Curry cites in this context on page 209, but without discussion, the real trouble was the bringing in of universal education and hence literacy. This created a new reading public, and new organs aimed at that reading public, while at the same time demographic expansion meant that the large country houses of the English upper-middle class, who considered themselves the arbiters of literature, were rapidly surrounded by commuter suburbs. The literate classes felt moved in on, physically and intellectually—see E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) for an absolutely typical snobbish / frightened response. Meanwhile—and this development is best described in Michael Saler's much more recent book *As If* (2012)—a new group of writers were appearing, whom Saler calls "the New Romancers," including Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, Bram Stoker, Robert Louis Stevenson, outriders like Rudyard Kipling and Andrew Lang of the "Fairy" books (who collaborated with Rider Haggard), and most influential of all, H.G. Wells. None of these could even be mentioned in my remote and ineffectual undergraduate course in English at Cambridge fifty years ago. They were not members of "the Great Tradition" of the English novel. F.R. Leavis and Raymond Williams would have had hysterics if they had lived to see "the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen."

In brief—and this is my suggestion put to Patrick Curry—Tolkien had a lot in common with the New Romancers, and even more with the new literary audience they wrote for, especially, in the latter case, *not* being a member of the literary upper caste. It's revealing that Raymond Williams called him "half-educated." On page 208 Curry quotes my response to this—"He was as educated as they were"—adding (as if this was surely obvious), "Oxford professors usually are." Not always, though. Both Tolkien's tutors Henry Bradley and Joseph Wright were complete autodidacts without even an undergraduate degree. The point is that to

E.M. Forster, Raymond Williams etc. (and too many of their successors even now), the wrong kind of education, even if it included complete mastery of half-a-dozen dead languages and a reading knowledge of a dozen living ones, just didn't count. Education was a matter of *attitude*, not base plebeian knowledge.

Has this attitude-problem entirely faded? Certainly not entirely, but it has been checked. Curry remarks a couple of times that while defenders of Tolkien have become more numerous, their influence on “the professional literary, critical and academic world and its publishing outlets” has been much less (page 128); and (note on next page) invites anyone inclined to doubt this to try “to interest a mainstream and/or leading academic publisher” in producing a serious book on Tolkien.” The first point is correct, still. Some years ago Richard C. West produced a list of articles on Tolkien to prove that headway was being made, and I responded by noting the absence from his list of any leading journal. But as regards the second point, we've seen recent publications from University of Wales Press (Carl Phelpstead), I.B. Tauris, a branch of Palgrave Macmillan (Mark Atherton, Lynette Porter), University of Toronto Press (Marjorie Burns), University Press of Kentucky (Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans), Routledge (Michael Drout), Oxford University Press (Peter Gilliver, Jeremy Marshall and Edmund Weiner), and both Curry and I appear in the latest *Companion* from Wiley-Blackwell. To tell the truth, literary critics have lost the authority they once possessed, and both publishers and college administrators have noticed that you have to give the public what they want, or go out of business.

I move, then, to theme (2) of the ones listed above, the issue with modernism and modernity, post-modernism and post-modernity. Curry and I often understand these words different ways. To me, “modernism” is a literary and artistic movement, which in spite of its name has long gone by. Carey attacked Tolkien for his utter lack of interest in “the writers who were moulding English literature in his own day—Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence”—and Curry censures him for this on page 132. I agree entirely with Curry, but cannot feel passionately about it because it seems to me so self-evident that all these figures belong to my grandfather's day (and I am a grandfather myself): Joyce was only ten years older than Tolkien, but two world wars separate the conception of *Ulysses* from the birth of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Curry, however, sees modernism as a major and continuing threat, and by it he means, not the literary movement I mentioned, but “the self-conscious articulation and celebration of the chief goals of modernity.” And by modernity he means, “the co-dependent power of corporate and finance capital, the modern political state and modern science that is probably best summed-up in Lewis Mumford's term, ‘the mega-machine’.” I am not happy with this, partly because E.M. Forster also wrote an attack on something very like the mega-machine in his 1909 short

story “The Machine Stops,” and I would not like to belong to any movement that had E.M. Forster in it. So this needs a bit of dissection.

Meanwhile “postmodernism” to me is another literary movement, characterised above all by (as Curry notes) “tedious authorial reminders of textual artificiality” (page 173), and born of the horribly amateurish opinions about language now entrenched in “literary theory.” To Curry, though, it is the bright hope of the future. We are just talking about different things, once again requiring dissection.

In fact at this point I have to move on to theme (1), the nature of “enchantment” and the need for re-enchantment. This is what Curry feels most passionately about, and returns to again and again. I hope he will forgive me if I say I cannot always follow him, in sense (a) see what he means, and also (b) agree with him. I will trace out his thoughts as best I can to see where we part company, over this and over the “modernity” complex.

First, enchantment is not the same as magic. They are as different from each other as Galadriel is from Sauron. Magic is about domination. So far so good, for this is an Inklings opinion, expressed (faintly) in Galadriel’s reluctance to accept Sam Gamgee’s use of the word, more clearly at the start of Lewis’s *The Silver Chair*, where Eustace corrects Jill on her idea of compelling Aslan by circles and spells, and most of all in Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength*, where (as also in the first chapter of his survey of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*) he sees science and magic as alternative forms of the urge towards human domination of nature. It’s confusing, because Lewis also distinguishes (good) *magia* from (evil) *goeteia*, and we now habitually distinguish magic from science, but if one holds on to the opposition with enchantment, one can accept Curry’s terms. His further remark that “Glamour” is “Enchantment in the service of Magic” (page 72) can be understood too: he means Disney, he means Jackson.

What then is this beneficent force of enchantment. Curry here quotes Tolkien “On Fairy-stories,” and I have to say I have never found this to be a compelling demonstration: too diffuse, too many scattershot thoughts. In particular Curry quotes Tolkien defining enchantment as “the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder,” and this time I have to say that although I understand all the words here, the total sense escapes me. How can I realize something imagined? And whose is the conceiving mind? Mine? Some author’s? Curry’s further explanation, on page 68, gets me no further. But it does bring up the issue of “imagined wonder,” and here at least I hear a chord, though I fear it is not one Curry would approve of.

My strongest experiences of wonder come from science fiction, and that seems to be on the wrong side of the barrier, to Curry as to Lewis. Nevertheless, and in spite of Lewis’s evident arguments with and satires of H.G. Wells, from start to finish of his “Ransom trilogy,” the strange landscapes of Wells in *The*

Time Machine and of many of his heirs and successors in *Astounding Science Fiction* aroused in me an acute sense of wonder which I have never forgotten (and wish I could experience again). But part of that wonder was a sense of possibility. People could—though I probably couldn't—visit other planets, meet alien beings, travel to the stars. We just didn't yet have the technology, which was an immensely powerful reason for developing it.

Curry, I think, would regard this as another and an improper urge, connected with modernity and “the mega-machine.” But going back to his definition of modernity, cited above, it seems to me to be a roll-up of things not intrinsically connected: capital, state and science. I also disagree with Max Weber's claim that the world has been “disenchanted,” that there are no longer “mysterious incalculable forces,” that one can “in principle, master all things by calculation.” Since Weber died in 1920 things have just got mysteriuser and mysteriuser—quarks and quantum mechanics and Heisenberg's Uncertainly Principle and Schrödinger's blasted alive/dead cat. As far as I can make out, no-one thinks that we can master these by calculation, even in theory. Though we might just be able to master them enough to be useful, and using them—it seems to me—might open up whole new worlds of wonder.

So how should we go about re-enchantment? It's no good pretending we can forget what we have learned, and give up all the benefits that have come from that, primarily the ability to feed far more people than ever before and maintain many of them at a standard of living never before imagined. (They may of course be taken away from us by antibiotic-resistant bacteria, mutated viruses, exhaustion of resources and over-population, but that won't be very re-enchanting at all.) Curry and I would no doubt agree that modern consumption of fossil fuels cannot go on; that sustainable alternatives need to be found; that the unquestioned goal of ever-rising growth in GNP must eventually be challenged; and so on.

I'd add that much of what he sees as the goal of enchantment, I already live out on a daily basis. I live in Buckland Newton, a village with a Shire-like name and ambience; I grow my own roots like Gaffer Gamgee (legumes have been terrible this year); I turn out for joint village chores like hedge-clipping and painting the village hall; and I am the Footpath Officer for the area, a kind of Shirriff, complete with 18-inch pheasant's tail-feather to put in my hat. And when it comes to resisting greed-motivated speculative development, I am noisily and abrasively to the fore. But I have nothing against modern science. The story I picked to lead off my selections in *The Oxford Book of Science Fiction* was Wells's “The Land Ironclads,” a future war story in which an army of hard-bitten outdoorsmen opposes an army of soft townies. The reporter watching can see how horrible the outdoorsmen are—the sort of people who'd shoot lions for fun, to mention the current scandal of Cecil the lion and the dentist from Minnesota—but he couldn't see how the townies stood a chance. Then they invent tanks. And the

reporter switches round and starts romanticising “men against machines.” Wells closed with the sardonic remark that the reporter did not spoil his dispatch by remarking that the slender townies in their un-military overalls still had something in them “not altogether degraded below the level of a man.”

It seems to me that there are other roads to enchantment besides pastoralism, and besides Middle-earth, and some of them are part of modernity, and of post-modernity. I do not think the world is disenchanting at all—unless you live in London, of course, and *possibly* not even then, though you don’t catch me visiting. Looking again at Curry’s programme for re-enchantment, on page 79, I see it’s a three-stepper. (1) is “Wonder in and at the natural world . . . independent of any use they may have to human beings . . . the central insight of deep ecology.” OK on that, though I note Curry’s dislike of the genetically-engineered tomato, and wonder why that’s out but sweet corn—selectively bred by human beings over generations to be useful, like other plants without which we’d starve—is in? (2) is “consistent pluralism,” viewed epistemologically, axiologically and politically. More or less OK, but I think multiculturalism is now a busted flush, except among outdated modernists. So we come to (3) “An end to . . . secularism . . . with the frank admission of a spiritual dimension of human experience that is not exhausted by institutionalised religion.” I have a feeling this beats me. Indeed, I have it on good authority—that of Sir Richard Southern, President of St John’s—that it is bound to beat me. After something I said while serving on the College’s Church and Patronage Committee, he said severely, “You lack spirituality, Tom.” I thought I was just pointing out corruption and nepotism, but perhaps he was right. I am a keen bird-watcher and tree-patter, if not quite a tree-hugger, and could get along with animism, but that’s as frank an admission as I can manage.

Finally, Curry asks (page 34), “Is Tom Shippey . . . soft on Orcs?” Anyone who has captained an Old Edwardians rugby XV can see that orcs have potential. They would need a firm hand, of course, and I always admired Uglúk’s way of terminating profitless discussion, wishing I could have extended some form of this to department meetings. I doubt I can persuade Curry of this point of view, but sometimes I wish that he could get along with a more “broad-church” attitude to ecology. The forces powering chain-saws and concrete-mixers are so powerful that rejecting the wrong kind of ally is a luxury. Let’s focus more on what we can resist—and Curry makes the point powerfully that Tolkien has inspired resisters against nukes and tanks, from David Taggart of Greenpeace to young Russians opposing the August 1991 coup against Gorbachev’s reforms. Even orcs could be talked round. It’s administrators and politicians with “targets” that are the problem, see once more Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength*.

That said, I can only repeat what I wrote to go on the back of this volume, namely that “If Tolkien were alive today, he would, I believe, endorse Patrick

Curry above all others as the critic closest to the secret of enchantment: the primal desire of imagined wonder, that trace-element missing . . . in the assumptions and ideology of Tolkien's modernist critics, the heart of his own universal appeal." I wish Curry had added the list he has made of 64 non-cultivated plants mentioned in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I would look out for them while walking the footpaths, to see how many I could see and check off.

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