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Patrick Curry interview with Tom Shippey

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*Philology, the scholarly discipline to which Tolkien was most committed, was largely vanquished within his lifetime by structuralist linguistics and literary criticism. As a result, the kind of scholarship at which he excelled is almost extinct (although not entirely so) in the contemporary academy. This is quite a momentous change, yet partly as a result, it can sound obscure to those who happen to be unfamiliar with the sweep of intellectual history, not to mention British academic politics, and who haven't read your accounts in *The Road to Middle-earth* and *Roots and Branches*. At the risk of gross over-simplification, can you explain it in terms they might be likely to understand?*

There's a good book by James Turner, called *Philology*. (I will put my (very brief) review of it in *The Wall St Journal* on academia.edu, under my name.) Professor Turner claims that philology represents the "forgotten origins of the modern humanities". It stems in our times from the rediscovery of Classical and ancient manuscripts in the Renaissance. These had often been copied many times before they were rediscovered. They were subject to scribal error, misunderstanding, change of language: what they contained needed to be corrected. Moreover apparently historical texts, like chronicles or sagas, might have been written centuries after the event, for political purposes of their own time: their information needed to be checked. Philology rested on a sceptical attitude to texts. It wasn't just "love of words", it was "tough love of words".

The toughest love was directed to the Bible, no longer unchallengeable Holy Writ, the Word of God, suitable only to be memorised. Even the Gospels were the work of men, and much could be learned – from the way they contradicted each other, for one thing – about the men who wrote them. So philology affected literary studies, language studies, Bible studies, theology, anthropology, history – everything except philosophy! Turner does not say this but I will say it for him. Philology is one of the distinctive marks of Western civilisation, one of the "killer apps" which have powered its success. Philology is a potent dissolver of authority, a potent auditor of accounts.

And then there's comparative philology, the work of Jacob Grimm. (I will put my short piece on him also on academia.edu.) There I point out that Grimm was the Darwin of the humanities. The issue he tackled was not the origin of species, but the origin of languages. What made them different from each other? Clearly many of them were related. Latin *unus, duo, tres* is much like English *one, two, three*. But then you get to *quattuor / four* and *quinque / five*. Italian *cinque* derives from Latin, obviously. But *five* is the same word, and you can show how it derived from the same root (further back than *quinque*) by regular changes, which operate with almost inhuman consistency. The slogan of Grimm's followers came to be "sound laws admit no exceptions".

One great achievement of the comparative philologists was to "reconstruct" languages of which not a word had ever been recorded, like Proto-Germanic, which stood in relation to the Germanic languages as Latin did to the Romance ones. The next stage was to go back further, to Proto-Indo-European, the ancestor of Germanic, and Classical, and Indian, and other languages. And the stage after that was to say, well if this works on languages (philology), then it must work on beliefs as well (mythology). This is where Tolkien comes in!

What have been the consequences of the defeat of 'Language' by 'Literature' for scholarly studies of the humanities in particular?

It removed a vital tool from literary study, for one thing. I used to give a lecture in which I first summarised literary analyses of a rather baffling poem by T.S. Eliot (they got nowhere), and then did a syntactic analysis instead. That told us something, about the poem, about what it meant, about how it worked. Of course some thought this was very cold-blooded. It's much closer to the springs of creativity, though, than just having lovely feelings.

More disastrous has been the pedagogical failure. Most students of English leave university, in the UK and the US, with no knowledge of their own language – see my TLS review of a Mr Ritchie, also up on academia.edu. It prevents them from improving their own ability to write, except of course what they learn by trial and error. Some get good at it, many do not. Then they become lawyers, journalists, politicians, writers of manuals. I wonder how much their many failures of clarity cost us, in purely commercial terms.

It's also a cultural impoverishment. The readers' letters pages in every newspaper show that people care about language. They just don't know anything about it, and the academic world gives the people who pay their salaries no assistance.

What else, in broader intellectual and cultural terms – a tradition but also, perhaps, an associated awareness or sensibility – was lost with philology? And in your view, is it at all recoverable in any way that exceeds a personal quest?

The sense of the depth of time, and of the continuous never-broken links between one generation and another, which take us back from modern to Middle and Old English, past that to PG and PIE, and past that to we don't know what; and which radiate sideways to German and Norse and Gothic and who knows what; and which are still perceptible in the commonest everyday things, like our own names and the names of the places we live in: yes, we lost that!

I find it very difficult to imagine that that could now be recovered in the context of any contemporary educational institution. Would you agree?

Well, it's not quite impossible. If you read the latest issue of *Tolkien Studies* you'll see an article by Nelson Goering, which shows that there are still people who have learned philology, though I'm not sure where or how he did so – he's from Iowa, though he's doing his PhD at Oxford. But certainly it's neither common nor easy in the English-speaking world.

Given the general level of philological ignorance of most of Tolkien's readers, what do you think they are missing as a result? Or do you think they are actually noticing that dimension nonetheless, albeit in tacit or unconscious ways? How far do you think an untrained awareness of this kind can go?

It's hard to tell, but my impression is that people are more sensitive than one might think. The UK is a good place to acquire such sensitivity. We all know that names like Achnasheen or Drumnadrochit come from some other root than English. And many could also tell that Caernarvon or Aberystwyth are different again. Ditto Braithwaite and Holderness on the one hand, and Farnham and Alton on the other – and on the third hand Boscombe or Minterne. They can recognise difference in sound-patterns in Britain and in Middle-earth too, though they can't tell you how they recognise that. But Tolkien clearly thought that would do, as shown by his care over Bree and Chetwood, Archet and Combe. All the Bree-land names (except for Staddle, which I can't explain) contain Celtic elements, though those elements are

all found, sometimes frequently, in England, mostly in the west. So they're very like Shire names, but not quite.

I would characterise Tolkien's working method, very broadly, as a combination of working from an invented language to the kind of imaginary world that would support it (as you point out in, e.g., 'Creation from Philology in The Lord of the Rings') + creatively rewriting history (as you point out in your recent paper 'Goths and Romans in Tolkien's Imagination') + the art of story-telling.

In similar terms, I would characterise Tolkien's concerns in his fiction as (again) pleasing readers through telling a story well + his deeply-held Catholicism + his admiration for pagan 'Northern courage' + his love of Faërie (enchantment) and dislike and fear of Magic (power) + death and deathlessness.

(Each of these items can, of course, be backed up by quotations from Tolkien.)

What would you add to these two lists, or take away, or qualify? And if the last, then how? Within each of the two categories, would you care to prioritise them?

On working methods, I'd just query the word "method". Tolkien worked catch-as-catch-can. Any detail might trigger something in his mind. Also any gap, any apparent contradiction. He denied having a grand design.

On concerns, to me the Catholicism is the least visible. But then, I am not a perfect reader of Tolkien, and nor is anyone else. We all grasp some things and miss others (and even after fifty years, I am still surprised by the things I've missed or not thought about). I'd also say that Tolkien kept on changing his mind. I think the paganism visibly faded as he grew older, and the Catholic concerns became stronger, while the issue of death and deathlessness (naturally) became more immediate and more absorbing. I have never understood what he meant by "enchantment", and on magic I think he was much affected by Lewis, who took the matter more seriously and more academically – see chapter 1 of his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, a most unexpected start to a subject on the edge of tedium.

Since it's of special interest to me, obviously, let me press you a bit on enchantment. Negatively, if you understand what Tolkien meant by "magic" (will, with an elective affinity with machines), then it's easy to understand enchantment as its opposite (wonder, with an elective affinity with art). Positively, if you understand the importance of the Elves – who, Tolkien remarked (in a letter, p. 146 of the revised edn), "are there (in my tales) to demonstrate the difference between the two" – then again, you can hardly avoid understanding enchantment. (Granted, the Elves are not central actors in the War of the Ring, but they are integral to Tolkien's legendarium as a whole, so they cannot be ignored.) Given all this, are you sure you want to claim that you "have never understood enchantment"? Or do you simply think, for example, that it's not that important?

I'm afraid I'll have to stick to not understanding enchantment, and *hope* that it's not that important. After all, I have been told that I lack faith (a phrenologist told me the dent in my head is where the organ of faith ought to be), and on rather better authority (Sir Richard Southern, no less) that I lack spirituality. So maybe being deaf/blind to enchantment is just a defect on my part. I do however feel rather sullenly that I have a strong sense of wonder,

though it seems it's the wrong *kind* of wonder. I'm really quite keen on machines as well, call me Saruman (as people have).

Going back to Catholicism, or maybe (Lewis's term) "Mere Christianity", I now think – though this took about forty years for me to work it out – that one of Tolkien's great achievements in *LotR* was to show how Providence works, and so (ironically) fulfil the Protestant Milton's declared aim, to "assert eternal providence / and justify the ways of God to man". But I am not sure that this has occurred to anyone else, and there are those who deny it. My comments on this were actually published, in Italian, in *Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican City paper, a strange outlet for one brought up United Reformed, with a strong dose of Kirk of Scotland. I think Lewis would have approved of that. By "mere Christianity" he meant what all Christians share.

You don't seem to be an admirer of Tolkien's essay 'On Fairy-Stories'. Why is that? Would you (for example) accept its importance as a kind of programmatic statement, a manifesto he set out to realise in his succeeding works of fiction?

No, I'm not an admirer. It strikes me as scrappy, unfocused – and there's surely no doubt that it's largely negative. It tells us that fairy-stories aren't necessarily about fairies; that fairies should not be thought of as tiny creatures living in flowers; that Lang did wrong to put Gulliver in his "Fairy Books" just because Lilliputians are little; and beast-fables ditto; we're told they're not for children only, and they're not escapist nor inferior to realism. I knew all that already, and I'd have thought most people did. There's also an attack on Max Müller which doesn't explain what Müller thought, or why he thought it. Sure, this is all connected with Andrew Lang and his long feud with Müller, Tolkien's piece being an Andrew Lang lecture, but does anyone catch on to what it was all about?

There are of course interesting and suggestive remarks, notably on the soup and the great pot of story – though I think this is Tolkien being defensive – and on "eucatastrophe". I was also not impressed by the remarks about creating a "Secondary World". Every writer of science fiction, even more than fantasy, knows you have to create a plausible scenario which must above all be consistent, and that one way to do this is to hint at suggestive detail which is not however explained. There's no need to make a mystery of that. Of course, some writers are better than others, and it is worthwhile considering what makes the difference!

Have you ever felt that non-belief, whether yours or readers', is an impediment to understanding and appreciating Tolkien's fiction? If not, why not?

Not really, and the reason is Tolkien's very evident near-universal appeal (except to literary critics in English departments and journos writing for the *Guardian* – they took another smack at Tolkien last Saturday, just can't control themselves). But non-Catholics read Tolkien, people who know nothing about sagas read Tolkien, people who don't know philology from geology read Tolkien, and I would never say they don't appreciate him. There are different ways of appreciating him. It works even for people who can't understand enchantment.

The more I learn about Tolkien and Lewis, the more aware I become of their differences. Do you see them as sharing significant common ground, and if so, what is it? And in terms of your own concerns and projects, especially ones that you share with Tolkien, does Lewis's work play any role?

I think Tolkien became more aware of their differences, and I can certainly see them, but they very clearly discussed things among themselves, and that in the centre of their major creative periods. Who learned what from whom? Well, Lewis's "bent" eldils surely owe something to Tolkien's "wraiths", since "wraith" connects semantically with "writhe" and "wreath". Conversely I suspect that Tolkien's ideas of magic were sharpened by Lewis's distinctions in that area. Lewis was (except in his personal life) a much more open character than Tolkien, and sometimes I think that he provides the best gloss on Tolkien: on the origins of sin, on the nature of myth, on temptation.

*It's difficult not to be struck by the contrast between Christopher Tolkien's severe verdict on Peter Jackson's films of *The Lord of the Rings* (to which I lean myself) and your own more tolerant response. How would you explain that, and have you had any cause to rethink your position in the intervening period?*

I guess I allow more for the effect of different media, different eras, different audiences, than other people do. Certainly I was impressed by Jackson's own commentary on the *LotR* films. He and his associates knew Tolkien's work well and treated it respectfully. Where he had made changes, he often had a reason which seemed to me unanswerable. Drop a character like Arwen from the second movie entirely (as she is in the second book)? No, you just can't do that in a set of movies issued at yearly intervals! Skip over action-scenes like the sack of Isengard and the passage of the Paths of the Dead, and have them told in flashback? No. Stress the power of the Ring all the way though and then just have Faramir ignore it? No.

Comprehensible, but not so inevitable, are things like the coarsening of the characters of Denethor and especially Theoden. My own feeling is that this is a result of the difference between a world of military veterans, such as Tolkien and Lewis and all their friends, and a world which has only experienced warfare in video-games. It's very easy to be brave and bold in the latter, and see withdrawal as chickening out. Tolkien's Theoden has his head screwed on, and knows when to withdraw to prepared lines of defence. Also, of course, when to blow his horn and charge. But you can't do the latter every single time.

I have to admit that this coarsening, and indeed dumbing-down, is much more obvious in the *Hobbit* movies. Jackson still put his finger on one thing about *The Hobbit*. Its structure is episodic, one thing after another. It needed connections and a narrative thread – as also a good explanation for why Gandalf just disappears on the edge of Mirkwood! Would a modern movie audience just accept that? But I thought that Bilbo's stage-by-stage development, from little fellow crying out with fear to troll-robber, Gollum-defeater, spider-killer, dragon-thief and finally to the moral courage demonstrated by handing over the Arkenstone – and then returning to the power of Thorin – well, it's a pity that was largely replaced by a lot of charging and sword-waving. That's video-game bravado, not three o'clock in the morning courage. In the book, all Bilbo's big scenes take place in the dark, on his own. Hollywood isn't good at that sort of thing, which is a diminishment. One of Tolkien's great achievements, perhaps his greatest, was to revive an image of the hero – a word he hardly ever uses by the way, and in *LotR* never once, I think, without some kind of distancing – for a world which had been educated in irony.

I agree. Perhaps this also explains why Jackson couldn't bring himself to allow Faramir to be a straightforwardly noble or heroic character.

Though he did not diminish Aragorn, apart from – for instance – adding the comic scene with Eowyn trying to figure out how old he was, and I thought that was genuinely funny. I guess that the different images of heroism are a result of the seventy-year gap between us and people like Tolkien, Robert Graves, Tolkien's classmate (another Catholic, by the way) Field-Marshal Slim, three men I'm proud to say I've shaken hands with. They knew what heroes were, and were under no illusions about it.

Thank you, Tom.

You're welcome.