

Epic Pooh

By Michael Moorcock 1978

Why is the *Rings* being widely read today? At a time when perhaps the world was never more in need of authentic experience, this story seems to provide a pattern of it. A businessman in Oxford told me that when tired or out of sorts he went to the *Rings* for restoration. Lewis and various other critics believe that no book is more relevant to the human situation. W. H. Auden says that it "holds up the mirror to the only nature we know, our own." As for myself I was rereading the *Rings* at the time of Winston Churchill's funeral and I felt a distinct parallel between the two. For a few short hours the trivia which normally absorbs us was suspended and people experienced in common the meaning of leadership, greatness, valor, time redolent of timelessness, and common traits. Men became temporarily human and felt the life within them and about. Their corporate life lived for a little and made possible the sign of renewal after a realisation such as occurs only once or twice in a lifetime.

For a century at least the world has been increasingly demythologized. But such a condition is apparently alien to the real nature of men. Now comes a writer such as John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and, as remythologizer, strangely warms our souls.

Clyde S. Kilby: "Meaning in the Lord of the Rings",
Shadows of Imagination, 1969

I have sometimes wondered how much the advent of steam influenced Victorian ballad poetry and romantic prose. Reading Dunsany, for instance, it often occurs to me that his early stories were all written during train journeys:

*Up from the platform and onto the train
Got Welleran, Rollory and young Iraine.
Forgetful of sex and income tax
Were Sooranard, Mammolek, Akanax:
And in their dreams Dunsany's lord
Mislaid the communication cord.*

The sort of prose most often identified with "high" fantasy is the prose of the nursery-room. It is a lullaby; it is meant to soothe and console. It is mouth-music. It is frequently enjoyed not for its tensions but for its lack of tensions. It coddles; it makes friends with you; it tells you comforting lies. It is soft:

One day when the sun had come back over the forest, bringing with it the scent of May, and all the streams of the Forest were tinkling happily to find themselves their own pretty shape again, and the little pools lay dreaming of the life they had seen and the big things they had done, and in the warmth and quiet of the Forest the cuckoo was trying over his voice carefully and listening to see if he liked it, and wood-pigeons were complaining gently to themselves in their lazy comfortable way that it was the other fellow's fault, but it didn't matter very much; on such a day as

this Christopher Robin whistled in a special way he had, and Owl came flying out of the Hundred Acre Wood to see what was wanted.

Winnie-the-Pooh, 1926

It is the predominant tone of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Watership Down* and it is the main reason why these books, like many similar ones in the past, are successful. It is the tone of many forgotten British and American bestsellers, well-remembered children's books, like *The Wind in the Willows*, you often hear it in regional fiction addressed to a local audience, or, in a more sophisticated form, James Barrie (*Dear Brutus*, *Mary Rose* and, of course, *Peter Pan*). Unlike the tone of E. Nesbit (*Five Children and It* etc.), Richmal Crompton (the 'William' books) Terry Pratchett or the redoubtable J.K. Rowling, it is sentimental, slightly distanced, often wistful, a trifle retrospective; it contains little wit and much whimsy. The humour is often unconscious because, as with **Tolkien**, the authors take words seriously but without pleasure:

One summer's evening an astonishing piece of news reached the Ivy Bush and Green Dragon. Giants and other portents on the borders of the Shire were forgotten for more important matters; Mr. Frodo was selling Bag End, indeed he had already sold it-to the Sackville-Bagginses!

"For a nice bit, too," said some. "At a bargain price," said others, "and that's more likely when Mistress Lobelia's the buyer." (Otho had died some years before, at the ripe but disappointed age of 102.)

Just why Mr. Frodo was selling his beautiful hole was even more debatable than the price...

The Fellowship of the Ring, 1954

I have been told it is not fair to quote from the earlier parts of *The Lord of the Rings*, that I should look elsewhere to find much better stuff so, opening it entirely at random, I find some improvement in substance and writing, but that tone is still there:

Pippin became drowsy again and paid little attention to Gandalf telling him of the customs of Gondor, and how the Lord of the City had beacons built on the tops of outlying hills along both borders of the great range, and maintained posts at these points where fresh horses were always in readiness to bear his errand-riders to Rohan in the North, or to Belfalas in the South. "It is long since the beacons of the North were lit," he said; "and in the ancient days of Gondor they were not needed, for they had the Seven Stones."

Pippin stirred uneasily.

The Return of the King, 1955

Tolkien does, admittedly, rise above this sort of thing on occasions, in some key scenes, but often such a scene will be ruined by ghastly verse and it is remarkable how frequently he will draw back from the implications of the subject matter. Like Chesterton, and other orthodox Christian writers who substituted faith for artistic rigour he sees the petit bourgeoisie, the honest artisans and peasants, as the bulwark against Chaos. These people are always sentimentalized in such fiction because traditionally, they are always the last to complain about any deficiencies in the social status quo. They are a type familiar to anyone who ever watched an English film of the thirties and forties, particularly a war-film, where they represented solid good sense opposed to a perverted intellectualism. In many ways *The Lord of the Rings* is, if not exactly anti-romantic, an anti-romance. Tolkien, and his fellow "Inklings" (the dons who met in Lewis's Oxford rooms to read their work in progress to one another), had extraordinarily ambiguous attitudes towards Romance (and just about everything else), which is doubtless why his trilogy has so many confused moments when the tension flags completely. But he could, at his best, produce prose much better than that of his Oxford contemporaries who perhaps lacked his respect for middle-English poetry. He claimed that his work was primarily linguistic in its original conception, that there were no symbols or allegories to be found in it, but his beliefs permeate the book as thoroughly as they do the books of Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis, who, consciously or unconsciously, promoted their orthodox Toryism in everything they wrote. While there is an argument for the reactionary nature of the books, they are certainly deeply conservative and strongly anti-urban, which is what leads some to associate them with a kind of Wagnerish hitlerism. I don't think these books are 'fascist', but they certainly don't exactly argue with the 18th century enlightened Toryism with which the English comfort themselves so frequently in these upsetting times. They don't ask any questions of white men in grey clothing who somehow have a handle on what's best for us.

I suppose I respond so antipathetically to Lewis and Tolkien because I find this sort of consolatory orthodoxy as distasteful as any other self-serving misanthropic doctrine. One should perhaps feel some sympathy for the nervousness occasionally revealed beneath their thick layers of stuffy self-satisfaction, typical of the second-rate schoolmaster so cheerfully mocked by Peake and Rowling, but sympathy is hard to sustain in the teeth of their hidden aggression which is so often accompanied by a deep-rooted hypocrisy. Their theories dignify the mood of a disenchanting and thoroughly discredited section of the repressed English middle-class too afraid, even as it falls, to make any sort of direct complaint ("They kicked us out of Rhodesia, you know"), least of all to the Higher Authority, their Tory God who has evidently failed them.

It was best-selling novelists, like Warwick Deeping (*Sorrell and Son*), who, after the First World War, adapted the sentimental myths (particularly the myth of Sacrifice) which had made war bearable (and helped ensure that we should be able to bear further wars), providing us with the wretched ethic of passive "decency" and self-sacrifice, by means of which we British were able to console ourselves in our moral apathy (even Buchan paused in his anti-Semitic diatribes to provide a few of these).

Moderation was the rule and it is moderation which ruins Tolkien's fantasy and causes it to fail as a genuine romance, let alone an epic. The little hills and woods of that Surrey of the mind, the Shire, are "safe", but the wild landscapes everywhere beyond the Shire are "dangerous". Experience of life itself is dangerous. *The Lord of the Rings* is a pernicious confirmation of the values of a declining nation with a morally bankrupt class whose cowardly self-protection is primarily responsible for the problems England answered with the ruthless logic of Thatcherism. Humanity was derided and marginalised. Sentimentality became the acceptable substitute. So few people seem to be able to tell the difference.

The Lord of the Rings is much more deep-rooted in its infantilism than a good many of the more obviously juvenile books it influenced. It is *Winnie-the-Pooh* posing as an epic. If the Shire is a suburban garden, Sauron and his henchmen are that old bourgeois bugaboo, the Mob - mindless football supporters throwing their beer-bottles over the fence the worst aspects of modern urban society represented as the whole by a fearful, backward-yearning class for whom "good taste" is synonymous with "restraint" (pastel colours, murmured protest) and "civilized" behaviour means "conventional behaviour in all circumstances". This is not to deny that courageous characters are found in *The Lord of the Rings*, or a willingness to fight Evil (never really defined), but somehow those courageous characters take on the aspect of retired colonels at last driven to write a letter to *The Times* and we are not sure - because Tolkien cannot really bring himself to get close to his proles and their satanic leaders - if Sauron and Co. are quite as evil as we're told. After all, anyone who hates hobbits can't be all bad.

The appeal of the Shire has certain similarities with the appeal of the "Greenwood" which is, unquestionably, rooted in most of us:

In summer when the sheaves be shene
And leaves be large and long,
It is full merry in fair forest
In hear the fowle's song;
To see the deer draw to the dale,
And leave the Hilles hee,
And shadow them in levès green,
Under the greenwood tree.
A Tale of Robin Hood

(quoted in *Ancient Metrical Tales*, 1829)

There is no happy ending to the Romance of Robin Hood, however, whereas Tolkien, going against the grain of his subject matter, forces one on us - as a matter of policy:

And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death. Fairy stories provide many examples and modes of this - which might be called the genuine escapist, or (I would say) fugitive spirit. But so do other stories (notably those of scientific inspiration), and so do other studies... But the

"consolation" of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. For more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending.

J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories"

The great epics dignified death, but they did not ignore it, and it is one of the reasons why they are superior to the artificial romances of which *Lord of the Rings* is merely one of the most recent.

Since the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, at least, people have been yearning for an ideal rural world they believe to have vanished - yearning for a mythical state of innocence (as Morris did) as heartily as the Israelites yearned for the Garden of Eden. This refusal to face or derive any pleasure from the realities of urban industrial life, this longing to possess, again, the infant's eye view of the countryside, is a fundamental theme in popular English literature. Novels set in the countryside probably always outsell novels set in the city, perhaps because most people now live in cities.

If I find this nostalgia for a "vanished" landscape a bit strange it is probably because as I write I can look from my window over twenty miles of superb countryside to the sea and a sparsely populated coast. This county, like many others, has seemingly limitless landscapes of great beauty and variety, unspoiled by excessive tourism or the uglier forms of industry. Elsewhere big cities have certainly destroyed the surrounding countryside but rapid transport now makes it possible for a Londoner to spend the time they would have needed to get to Box Hill forty years ago in getting to Northumberland. I think it is simple neophobia which makes people hate the modern world and its changing society; it is xenophobia which makes them unable to imagine what rural beauty might lie beyond the boundaries of their particular Shire. They would rather read Miss Read and *The Horse Whisperer* and share a miserable complaint or two on the commuter train while planning to take their holidays in Bournemouth, as usual, because they can't afford to go to Spain this year. They don't want rural beauty anyway; they want a sunny day, a pretty view.

Writers like Tolkien take you to the edge of the Abyss and point out the excellent tea-garden at the bottom, showing you the steps carved into the cliff and reminding you to be a bit careful because the hand-rails are a trifle shaky as you go down; they haven't got the approval yet to put a new one in.

I never liked A. A. Milne, even when I was *very* young. There is an element of conspiratorial persuasion in his tone that a suspicious child can detect early in life. Let's all be cosy, it seems to say (children's books are, after all, often written by conservative adults anxious to maintain an unreal attitude to childhood); let's forget about our troubles and go to sleep. At which I would find myself stirring to a sitting position in my little bed and responding with uncivilized bad taste.

According to C. S. Lewis his fantasies for children - his Narnia series of seven books beginning with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and ending with *The Last*

Battle - were deliberate works of Christian propaganda. The books are a kind of Religious Tract Society version of the Oz books as written by E. Nesbit; but E. Nesbit would rarely have allowed herself Lewis's awful syntax, full of tacked-on clauses, lame qualifications, vague adjectives and unconscious repetitions; neither would she have written down to children as thoroughly as this childless don who remained a devoutly committed bachelor most of his life. Both Baum and Nesbit wrote more vigorously and more carefully:

Old Mombi had thought herself very wise to choose the form of a Griffin, for its legs were exceedingly fleet and its strength more enduring than that of other animals. But she had not reckoned on the untiring energy of the Saw-Horse, whose wooden limbs could run for days without slacking their speed. Therefore, after an hour's hard running, the Griffin's breath began to fail, and it panted and gasped painfully, and moved more slowly than before. Then it reached the edge of the desert and began racing across the deep sands. But its tired feet sank far into the sand, and in a few minutes the Griffin fell forward, completely exhausted, and lay still upon the desert waste.

Glinda came up a moment later, riding the still vigorous Saw-Horse; and having unwound a slender golden thread from her girdle the Sorceress threw it over the head of the panting and helpless Griffin, and so destroyed the magical power of Mombi's transformation.

For the animal, with one fierce shudder, disappeared from view, while in its place was discovered the form of the old Witch, glaring savagely at the serene and beautiful face of the Sorceress.

L. Frank Baum, *The Land of Oz*, 1904

Elfrida fired away, and the next moment it was plain that Elfrida's poetry was more potent than Edred's; also that a little bad grammar is a trifle to a mighty Mouldiwarp.

For the walls of Edred's room receded further and further till the children found themselves in a great white hall with avenues of tall pillars stretching in every direction as far as you could see. The hall was crowded with people dressed in costumes of all countries and all ages - Chinamen, Indians, Crusaders in armour, powdered ladies, doublet gentlemen, Cavaliers in curls, Turks in turbans, Arabs, monks, abbesses, jesters, grandees with ruffs round their necks, and savages with kilts of thatch. Every kind of dress you can think of was there. Only all the dresses were white. It was like a redoute, which is a fancy-dress ball where the guests may wear any dress they choose, only the dresses must be of one colour.

The people round the children pushed them gently forward. And then they saw that in the middle of the hall was a throne of silver, spread with a fringed cloth of chequered silver and green, and on it, with the Mouldiwarp standing on one side and the Mouldierwarp on the other, the Mouldiestwarp was seated in state and

splendour. He was much larger than either of the other moles, and his fur was as silvery as the feathers of a swan.

E. Nesbit, *Harding's Luck*, 1909

Here is a typical extract from Lewis's first Narnia book, which was superior to some which followed it and is a better than average example of Lewis's prose fiction for children or for adults:

It was nearly midday when they found themselves looking down a steep hillside at a castle - a little toy castle it looked from where they stood which seemed to be all pointed towers. But the Lion was rushing down at such a speed that it grew larger every moment and before they had time even to ask themselves what it was they were already on a level with it. And now it no longer looked like a toy castle but rose frowning in front of them. No face looked over the battlements and the gates were fast shut. And Aslan, not at all slacking his pace, rushed straight as a bullet towards it.

"The Witch's home!" he cried. "Now, children, hold tight."

Next moment the whole world seemed to turn upside down and the children felt as if they had left their insides behind them; for the Lion had gathered himself together for a greater leap than any he had yet made and jumped - or you may call it flying rather than jumping - right over the castle wall. The two girls, breathless but unhurt, found themselves tumbling off his back in the middle of a wide stone courtyard full of statues.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, 1950

As a child, I found that these books did not show me the respect I was used to from Nesbit or Baum, who also gave me denser, better writing and a wider vocabulary. The Cowardly Lion was a far more attractive character than Aslan and Crompton's William books were notably free from moral lessons. I think I would have enjoyed the work of Alan Garner, Susan Cooper and Ursula Le Guin much more. They display a greater respect for children and considerably more talent as writers. Here is Garner:

But as his head cleared, Cohn heard another sound, so beautiful that he never found rest again; the sound of a horn, like the moon on snow, and another answered it from the limits of the sky; and through the Brollachan ran silver lightnings, and he heard hoofs, and voices calling, "We ride! We ride!" and the whole cloud was silver, so that he could not look.

The hoof-beats drew near, and the earth throbbed. Cohn opened his eyes. Now the cloud raced over the ground, breaking into separate glories that wisped and sharpened the skeins of starlight, and were horsemen, and at their head was majesty, crowned with antlers, like the sun.

But as they crossed the valley, one of the riders dropped behind, and Colin saw that it was Susan. She lost ground though her speed was no less, and the light that formed her died, and in its place was a smaller, solid figure that halted, forlorn, in the white wake of the riding.

The horsemen climbed from the hillside to the air, growing vast in the sky, and to meet them came nine women, their hair like wind. And away they rode together across the night, over the waves, and beyond the isles, and the Old Magic was free forever, and the moon was new.

[*The Moon of Gomrath*, 1963](#)

Evidently, Garner is a better writer than Lewis or Tolkien. In the three fantasy novels *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1961), *The Moon of Gomrath* (1963) and *Elidor* (1965) his weakness, in common with similar writers, is his plot structure. In a later, better-structured book, *The Owl Service* (1970), **he improved considerably**.

This deficiency of structure is by no means evident in Ursula K. Le Guin, Gillian Bradshaw or Susan Cooper. For my taste Susan Cooper has produced one of the very best sequences of novels of their type (modern children involved in ancient mystical conflicts). They have much of Masefield's *Box of Delights* magic. Her sequence, *The Dark is Rising*, has some fine moments. The strongest books are the title volume and the final volume *Silver in the Tree* (1977), while some of the best writing can be found in [*The Grey King*](#) (1975):

They were no longer where they had been. They stood somewhere in another time, on the roof of the world. All around them was the open night sky, like a huge black inverted bowl, and in it blazed the stars, thousand upon thousand brilliant prickles of fire. Will heard Bran draw in a quick breath. They stood, looking up. The stars blazed round them. There was no sound anywhere, in all the immensity of space. Will felt a wave of giddiness; it was as if they stood on the last edge of the universe, and if they fell, they would fall out of Time... As he gazed about him, gradually he recognised the strange inversion of reality in which they were held. He and Bran were not standing in a timeless dark night observing the stars in the heavens. It was the other way around. They themselves were observed. Every blazing point in that great depthless hemisphere of stars and suns was focussed upon them, contemplating, considering, judging. For by following the quest for the golden harp, he and Bran were challenging the boundless might of the High Magic of the Universe. They must stand unprotected before it, on their way, and they would be allowed to pass only if they had the right by birth. Under that merciless starlight of infinity any unrightful challenger would be brushed into nothingness as effortlessly as a man might brush an ant from his sleeve.

Ursula K. Le Guin in her trilogy *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971) and *The Farthest Shore* (1972) is the only one of these three to set her stories entirely in a wholly invented world. She writes her books for children as

conscientiously as she writes for adults (she is a leading and much admired sf author whose work has won many awards). Here is a passage from near the beginning, again with its echoes of Frazer's *Golden Bough*:

On the day the boy was thirteen years old, a day in the early splendour of autumn while still the bright leaves are on the trees, Ogion returned to the village from his roving over Gont Mountain, and the ceremony of Passage was held. The witch took from the boy his name Duny, the name his mother had given him as a baby. Nameless and naked he walked into the cold springs of the Ar where it rises among the rocks under the high cliffs. As he entered the water clouds crossed the sun's face and great shadows slid and mingled over the water of the pool about him. He crossed to the far bank, shuddering with cold but walking slow and erect as he should through that icy, living water. As he came to the bank Ogion, waiting, reached out his hand and clasping the boy's arm whispered to him his true name: Ged.

Thus was he given his name by one very wise in the use of power.

[A Wizard of Earthsea](#)

Lloyd Alexander is another American writer who has had considerable success with his books set in an invented and decidedly Celtic fantasy world, but for my taste he never quite succeeds in matching the three I have mentioned. He uses more clichés and writes a trifle flaccidly:

The Horned King stood motionless, his arm upraised. Lightning played about his sword. The giant flamed like a burning tree. The stag horns turned to crimson streaks, the skull mask ran like molten iron. A roar of pain and rage rose from the Antlered King's throat.

With a cry, Taran flung an arm across his face. The ground rumbled and seemed to open beneath him. Then there was nothing.

The Book of Three, 1964

One does become a little tired, too, of Hern the Hunter turning up here. Another legacy from Frazer. Sometimes he appears in books of this kind almost as an embarrassment, as if convention demands his presence: an aging and rather vague bishop doing his bit at official services.

There are a good many more such fantasies now being written for children and on the whole they are considerably better than the imitations written ostensibly for adults. Perhaps the authors feel more at ease when writing about and for children - as if they are forced to tell fewer lies (or at least answer fewer fundamental questions) to themselves or their audience.

Among these newer writers, Gillian Bradshaw has produced yet another Arthurian trilogy. This one, however, is written from the point of view of Gwalchmai, the son of the King of Orkney and Queen Morgawse (who might be a sorceress). He encounters

the Sidhe, some of whom help him as he journeys to be with King who is fighting a desperate battle against the Saxon invaders. Bradshaw's writing is clear and vibrant, her story-telling has pace and verve.

She lifted her arms and the Darkness leapt. But she was distant again, and I stood at Camlann. I looked up and saw Lugh standing in the west, opposite Morgawse, holding his arm above the island so that the Queen could not touch it. Behind was light too brilliant, too glorious to be seen. For a moment I saw these two confronting one another, and then my field of vision narrowed. I saw the island and the figures of armies. I saw the Family and myself in it. The armies began to move, and the sounds of battle arose. I realized that I saw things that were yet to come, and was terrified. I covered my face with my arms and cried, "No more!"

And abruptly there was silence.

[*Hawk of May*, 1981](#)

The subsequent books in this sequence are *Kingdom of Summer* (1982) and *In Winter's Shadow*(1983).

Several of the emerging children's novelists actually display more original gifts and greater talent than the majority of those ostensibly for adults. In my view Robin McKinley is one of the very best of these. Her *The Blue Sword* (1982) won the John Newbery Medal in 1984 and she is building an excellent reputation. *The Blue Sword* is the first of her Chronicles of Damar. She has a fresh and interesting approach to the genre which immediately makes it into something of her own. Her style is robust, elegant and considered, qualities which are a great relief after so many clunking archaicisms and cuticisms which inhabit the great majority of present-day fantasies. Angharad Crewe, the young woman who is her central character, is far more likeable than the tribe of leggy, slightly awkward, pony-loving teenagers appearing all too frequently in recent fantasies. Again McKinley's writing makes me wish I had been able to read them when I was young. They would have been a wonderful antidote to the bland fare which generally became acceptable on all the myriad planes and demi-planes of the English middle-class when I was young.

The power that washed over that face, that rolled down the arms and into the sword and shield, was that of demonkind, and Harry knew she was no match for this one, and in spite of the heat of Gonturan in her hand her heart was cold with fear. The two stallions reared again and reached out to tear each other; the white stallion's neck was now ribboned with blood, like the real ribbons he wore in his mane. Harry raised her sword arm and felt the shock of the answer, the hilts of the swords ring together, and sparks flew from the crash, and it seemed that the smoke rose from them and blinded her. The other rider's hot breath was in her face. His lips parted and she saw his tongue: it was scarlet, and looked more like fire than living flesh.

[*The Blue Sword*](#)

After reading a good many of these contemporary fantasy stories I remained impressed by the number of authors of adult books who described their characters as children and the number of children's writers who produce perfectly mature and sensible characters who think and act intelligently. I found myself wishing that the likes of McKinley would choose to do more work for grown-ups. Perhaps the reason they don't is that they find they can, writing for teenagers, preserve a greater respect for their audience.

Another variety of book has begun to appear, a sort of Pooh-fights-back fiction of the kind produced by Richard Adams, which substitutes animals for human protagonists, contains a familiar set of middle-class Anglican Tory undertones (all these books seem to be written with a slight lisp) and is certainly already more corrupt than Tolkien. Adams is a worse writer but he must appeal enormously to all those many readers who have never quite lost their yearning for the frisson first felt when Peter Rabbit was expelled from Mr. Macgregor's garden:

As Dandelion ended, Acorn, who was on the windward side of the little group, suddenly started and sat back, with ears up and nostrils twitching. The strange, rank smell was stronger than ever and after a few moments they all heard a heavy movement close by. Suddenly, on the other side of the path, the fern parted and there looked out a long, dog-like head, striped black and white. It was pointed downward, the jaws grinning, the muzzle close to the ground. Behind, they could just discern great, powerful paws and a shaggy black body. The eyes were peering at them, full of savage cunning. The head moved slowly, taking in the dusky lengths of the wood ride in both directions, and then fixed them once more with its fierce, terrible stare. The jaws opened wider and they could see the teeth, glimmering white as the stripes along the head. For long moments it gazed and the rabbits remained motionless, staring back without a sound. Then Bigwig, who was nearest to the path, turned and slipped back among the others.

"A lendri," he muttered as he passed through them. "It may be dangerous and it may not, but I'm taking no chances with it. Let's get away."

Watership Down, 1972

Adams's follow-up to this was *Shardik* (1974), better written, apparently for adults, and quite as silly. It was about a big bear who died for our sins: *Martyred Pooh*. Later, *The Plague Dogs* (1977) displayed an almost paranoid conservative misanthropism.

I sometimes think that as Britain declines, dreaming of a sweeter past, entertaining few hopes for a finer future, her middle-classes turn increasingly to the fantasy of rural life and talking animals, the safety of the woods that are the pattern of the paper on the nursery room wall. Old hippies, housewives, civil servants, share in this wistful trance; eating nothing as dangerous or exotic as the lotus, but chewing instead on a form of mildly anaesthetic British cabbage. If the bulk of American sf

could be said to be written by robots, about robots, for robots, then the bulk of English fantasy seems to be written by rabbits, about rabbits and for rabbits.

How much further can it go?

Of the children's writers only Lewis and Adams are guilty, in my opinion, of producing thoroughly corrupted romanticism - sentimentalized pleas for moderation of aspiration which are at the root of their kind of conservatism. In Lewis's case this consolatory, anxiety-stilling "Why try to play Mozart when it's easier to play Rodgers and Hammerstein?" attitude extended to his non-fiction, particularly the dreadful but influential *Experiment in Criticism*. But these are, anyway, minor figures. It is Tolkien who is most widely read and worshipped. And it was Tolkien who most betrayed the romantic discipline, more so than ever Tennyson could in *Idylls of the King*, which enjoyed a similar vogue in Victorian England.

Corrupted romanticism is as unwholesome as the corrupted realism of, say, Ayn Rand. Cabell's somewhat obvious irony is easier to take than Tolkien's less obvious sentimentality, largely because Cabell's writing is wittier, more inventive and better disciplined. I find William Morris naïve and silly but essentially good-hearted (and a better utopianist than a fantasist); Dunsany I find slight but inoffensive. Lewis speaks for the middle-class status quo, as, more subtly, does Charles Williams. Lewis uses the stuff of fantasy to preach sermons quite as nasty as any to be found in Victorian sentimental fiction, and he writes badly. A group of self-congratulatory friends can often ensure that any writing emerging from it remains hasty and unpolished.

Ideally fiction should offer us escape and force us, at least, to ask questions; it should provide a release from anxiety but give us some insight into the causes of anxiety. Lin Carter, in his *Imaginary Worlds* - the only book I have been able to find on the general subject of **epic fantasy** - uses an argument familiar to those who are used to reading apologies from that kind of sf or thriller buff who feels compelled to justify his philistinism: "The charge of 'escapist reading,'" says Carter, "is most often levelled against fantasy and science fiction by those who have forgotten or overlooked the simple fact that virtually all reading - all music and poetry and art and drama and philosophy for that matter - is a temporary escape from what is around us." Like so many of his colleagues in the professional sf world, Carter expresses distaste for fiction which is not predominantly escapist by charging it with being "depressing" or "negative" if it does not provide him with the moral and psychological comforts he seems to need. An unorthodox view, such as that of Tolkien's contemporary David Lindsay ([Voyage to Arcturus](#)), is regarded as a negative view. This, of course, is the response of those deeply and often unconsciously wedded to their cultural presumptions, who regard examination of them as an attack.

Carter dismisses Spenser as "dull" and Joyce as "a titanic bore" and writes in clichés, euphemisms and wretchedly distorted syntax, telling us that the PreRaphaelites were "lispering exquisites" and that Ford Madox Brown (1821-93) was a young man attracted to the movement by Morris's (1834-96) fiery Welsh (born Walthamstow,

near London) dynamism and that because Tolkien got a CBE (not a knighthood) we must now call him "Sir John" - but Carter, at least, is not the snob some American adherents are (and there is nobody more risible than the provincial American literary snob - Gore Vidal being the most developed example). In a recent anthology compiled by Robert H. Boyer and Kenneth J. Zahorski, *The Fantastic Imagination*, we find the following: "In addition to their all being high fantasy, the stories selected here are good literature." Amongst the writers to be found in the volume are C. S. Lewis, John Buchan, Frank R. Stockton and Lloyd Alexander, not one of whom can match the literary talents of, say, [Fritz Leiber](#), whose work has primarily been published in commercial magazines and genre paperback series. For years American thriller buffs with pretensions ignored Hammett and Chandler in favour of inferior English writers like D. L. Sayers and here we see the same thing occurring with American fantasy writers. Those who produce the closest approximation to an English style are most praised. Those who use more vigorous American models are regarded as less literary! The crux of the thing remains: the writers admired are not "literary" or "literate". As often as not they flatter middle-brow sensibilities and reinforce middle-class sentimentality and therefore do not threaten a carefully maintained set of social and intellectual assumptions.

Yet Tennyson, who had his moments, inspired better poets who followed him, who sought the origin of his inspiration and made nobler use of it. Both Swinburne and Morris could, for instance, employ the old ballad metres more effectively than Tennyson himself, refusing, unlike him, to modify their toughness. Doubtless Tolkien will also inspire writers who will take his raw materials and put them to nobler uses. I would love to believe that the day of the rural romance is done at last.

The commercial genre which has developed from Tolkien is probably the most dismaying effect of all. I grew up in a world where Joyce was considered to be the best Anglophone writer of the 20th century. I happen to believe that Faulkner is better, while others would pick Conrad, say. Thomas Mann is an exemplary giant of moral, mythic fiction. But to introduce Tolkien's fantasy into such a debate is a sad comment on our standards and our ambitions. Is it a sign of our dumber times that *Lord of the Rings* can replace *Ulysses* as the exemplary book of its century? Some of the writers who most slavishly imitate him seem to be using English as a rather inexpertly-learned second language. So many of them are unbelievably bad that they defy description and are scarcely worth listing individually. Terry Pratchett once remarked that all his readers were called Kevin. He is lucky in that he appears to be the only Terry in fantasy land who is able to write a decent complex sentence. That such writers also depend upon recycling the plots of their literary superiors and are rewarded for this bland repetition isn't surprising in a world of sensation movies and manufactured pop bands. That they are rewarded with the lavish lifestyles of the most successful whores is also unsurprising. To pretend that this addictive cabbage is anything more than the worst sort of pulp historical romance or western is, however, a depressing sign of our intellectual decline and our free-falling academic standards.