

The Complexity of Tolkien's Attitude Towards the Second World War

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Introduction

“In its capacity to warn about such extremes, fantastic fiction has the edge over what is called realism. ‘Realism’ has a knee-jerk tendency to avoid extremes as implausible, but ‘Fantasy’ actively embraces them”: writes John Garth², who also observes that if the two world wars had not occurred, we would view JRRT as merely a follower of William Morris: “Middle-Earth looks so engagingly familiar to us, and speaks to us eloquently, because it was born with the modern world and marked by the same terrible birth pangs”³.

The 1966 *Foreword* to *The Lord of the Rings (LothR)* is, amongst other things, a collection of statements in which Tolkien (JRRT) – more or less intentionally – alters the real course of events. For example, he began writing *LothR* on 16th December 1937 and not in 1936; he did not visit the Balin tomb at the end of 1940, but at the end of 1939⁴. He admitted that the Second World War (WWII) delayed the writing of the book, but denied that the work made reference to it. His denial consists of two banal truths (that the book is not a one-to-one allegory, and in general that a writer cannot remain unaffected by his personal experiences) and the non banal lie that little or nothing in the book had been changed by the WWII. JRRT also wished to suggest that if a war had influenced *LothR*, this was not WWII, but rather the First World War (WWI). But, I would note and suggest here, even if it true that the crucial chapter “The Shadow of the Past” was written before war broke out, it is certainly not true that the menace of war began in 1939 (as JRRT would like to suggest).

These problems (and the “excusatio non petita” nature of the entire *Foreword*) derive from at least two causes. The first is the sum total of JRRT's ideological and psychological particularities – which we will return to below – which make it difficult for him to speak of the events of WWII (like, many years later, it still is for us: fascism, communism, and the USA remain controversial subjects, whereas the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Tsar and the Kaiser are not). The second is that the literary criticism and public opinion of the time tended much more than now to believe that works of fantasy were “one-to-one allegories”. Thus Tolkien, in denying the allegorical nature of *LothR*, suggested that it was not inspired by the dramatic events which had taken place. It is true, as he writes, that *LothR* has a moral significance (although it is not a political/historical analysis), but also true that moral values do not appear from nowhere, but rather from the historical reality in which a writer lives; in this case the WWII was an extremely important component.

Tolkienian criticism, both out of an exaggerated respect for JRRT's pronouncements and a personal tendency on the part of the critics to agree with his ideology (and prejudices), has often avoided examining the relation between the important historical events which occurred during JRRT's life and his works of fiction, almost as if this analysis – routinely carried out for Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Dickens - would have been disrespectful towards JRRT, and has concentrated instead (often with excellent results) on literary, religious and philosophical roots. In the *Proceedings* of the 1992 Oxford Centenary Conference, for example, only Tom Shippey's

¹ Simone Bonechi wrote the sections *Tolkien and the War* and “*Fruitless victories*”: *the First World War and The Silmarillion*; Franco Manni wrote the remaining parts of the paper.

² *Tolkien and the Great War*; New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2003, p. 223

³ *Ibidem*, p. 309.

⁴ Christopher Tolkien in JRRT, *The Return of the Shadow (RothS)*, *HoME* 6, HarperCollins, London, 1993, pp. 11,461

contribution (*Tolkien as a Post-War Writer*) addressed this aspect. Today things are changing⁵, but many Tolkienians could still benefit from a calmer, detached and more open approach.

Tolkien and the War

War is a constant feature of JRRT's works: not counting the two major books, whose epic mode requires, as it were, the representation of the confrontation between Good and Evil as much as the clash of opposing armies and peoples or the struggle of individuals against monsters and adverse destiny, even in a more conventional fairy tale like *The Hobbit* the real climax is provided by the long and exciting (even if indirect) description of the Battle of the Five Armies.

This central importance notwithstanding, the theme of war has seldom been investigated in depth by JRRT's critics beyond the more immediate symbolism of the struggle between Light and Darkness. Critics have usually limited themselves to declaring that JRRT, though hating the brute destructiveness and the futile horror of war, was not a pacifist, judging that some wars had to be fought in defence of a good cause.

Scant attention has been given to the question of the representation of war in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, with the aim of evaluating whether the eventual differences between the two works might be due to a change in JRRT's attitude toward the symbolic and historical significance of war, and to try to understand (were these differences found to be substantial) how much the experience of the two world wars that were fought during the most prolific period of his literary life had influenced his writings in this respect.

In the present essay we will try to show that such differences in outlook and representation are to be found between the wars of Elves, Men and Valar in the First Age and the great War of the Ring at the end of the Third Age and that they actually reflect a development in JRRT's thinking directly connected with the war years.

When Tolkien wrote *The Fall of Gondolin*, the first of the stories that would one day form *The Silmarillion*, the Battle of the Somme was being fought and Tolkien himself had seen some of the severest fighting. It is, therefore, perhaps understandable that his first story should take the form of a bitter conflict, that this and the other tales and poems that came to be put together in the vast collection first assembled in the "Sketch of the Mythology" (1930) related the seemingly hopeless defence of the good Elves and Men, symbols of what is high, noble and beautiful in humanity, against the overwhelming host of the tyrant Melko, lord of slaves and machines.

What is the meaning of all this? After 1918, Englishmen returning home from the battlefronts began to relate their experience in the literary terms of modernism and war-memoirs, of disillusionment and bitter anger against the "rants and lies" of the pre-war and war period. What, in this context, can we make of such an epic as JRRT's? Was he trying to delude us (and himself first of all) that nothing had changed since 1914 or was he perhaps struggling for a way to escape from the shock he had suffered, creating a Secondary World as "a therapy for a mind wounded in war"?⁶

Things are not that simple. Far from escaping or turning a blind eye to the moral and cultural consequences of the Great War, we know that JRRT cloaked "such knowledge as he has and such criticisms of life as he knows it, under mythical and legendary dress."⁷ Totally committed to pre-modernist values in literature and philosophy, to the traditions that the new culture emerging from the post-war years was threatening, he reinvigorated them for the struggles ahead. His personal inclinations combined with the cultural dislocation of the era to make him express all this in

⁵ See Shippey's work *Tolkien Author of the Century*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2000, the book referred to by Garth, and Janet Brennan Croft's, *War and the Works of JRRT*, Praeger Publishers, 2004.

⁶ The comment is from Hugh Brogan's 'Tolkien's Great War' in Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (eds.), *Children and their Books: A celebration of the works of Iona and Peter Opie*; Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989; pg. 358, cited in John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War* cit. p. 293.

⁷ JRRT to W. H. Auden, 7th June 1955; in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*; edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien; London, HarperCollins, 1995; p. 211

epic/fantastic mode. JRRT himself tells us as much in his letters to his son Christopher, written when another, still more destructive, conflict was raging.⁸

“Fruitless victories” : the First World War and *The Silmarillion*

If, starting from these premises, we take a closer look at the background in which the Wars of the Jewels are set, in order to define their distinctive features, we are confronted with a panorama in which the discourse on war is developed into a critique of man in general and of the world of the first quarter of the twentieth century in particular.

The production of arms by the Noldor is a direct result of the lies and snares sowed by Melkor/Morgoth among them in Valinor,⁹ and of the visions of “the mighty realms that they could have ruled at their own will, in power and freedom in the East”, if the Valar had not “kept them captive”, so that the weaker and short-lived race of Men “might come and supplant them in the kingdoms of Middle-earth.”¹⁰ In direct response to these insinuations and to the pride and jealousy of Fëanor, the Noldor revolt, flee Valinor and, killing their own kindred at Swanheaven, are cursed to endure sorrow, treachery, the vanity of their efforts and a hopeless death. For the war they brought to the Blessed Land they will have to pay with endless war. Thus war, rather than mere homicide, is chosen to represent here the Original Sin that definitively damns them.

The Noldor reach Middle-Earth and establish many realms there, but they are divided among themselves and mistrusted by the Sindar Elves and the Dwarves, their allies against Morgoth. They are befriended by some of the new race of Men, but many others join Morgoth and fight bitterly against them. As prophesized, all their victories turn to sorrow and in the end all their lands are laid waste. And even if Morgoth is eventually defeated by the intervention of the Valar, the cause the Noldor chose to embrace is lost, their pride humbled, the “power and freedom” they came to conquer revealed as self-delusions.

Many are the points of contact between this story and the political and cultural scenery of the early twentieth-century world. The Noldor seeking to conquer “mighty realms” to be ruled “in power and freedom in the East” makes one think of the European and American colonial powers, that by 1914 had extended the “white man’s rule” over the peoples of the east and south of the world, in a race for power and mastery that would soon lead to the conflagration of the Great War. Compare all this with the motivations of a great Elven chief like Fingon or even Galadriel, who was inflamed by the words of Fëanor, “for she yearned to see the wide unguarded lands and to rule there a realm at her own will.”¹¹

It is not only imperial hubris that JRRT is criticizing here: in exposing the evil side of these rousing speeches, all “liberty and a place in the sun”, he rejects the jingoistic, revanchist enthusiasm that had taken hold of the West since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and had been celebrated in England by Rudyard Kipling, in poems like *The White Man’s Burden* (1899) and in stories like *The Man who would be King* (1888).¹² And in the *Sil* we also see the Numenoreans conquering lands in the East “rather as lords and masters and gatherers of tribute, than as helpers and teachers”.

⁸ Ivi, pp. 75, 78 and 85.

⁹ See JRRT, *The History of Middle-Earth* (from now on *HoME*); Part One, vol. V: *The Lost Road and other writings*; London, HarperCollins, 2002; p. 228 and IDEM, *The Silmarillion*; London, HarperCollins, 2004; p. 61.

¹⁰ JRRT, *The Silmarillion*; cit.; p. 60.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 74. See also JRRT, *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*; London, HarperCollins, 1998; pp. 294-348

¹² Kipling himself, though, will draw very close to JRRT in the pre-war years of the twentieth century, with books like *Pook of Puck’s Hill* (1906), *Rewards and Fairies* (1910) and *A History of England* (1911), in which he points to the traditional values of the “Englishness” and draws a picture of history as a sort of cyclical and incessant fight of civilization against barbarism. During and after the Great War Kipling struck a more problematic and tragic note in his prose and poems, a note of disillusionment and bitterness more akin to Wilfred Owen or Sassoon’s poems than to JRRT’s exhortation to recover hope and fight on. A comparison between JRRT’s and Kipling’s works would be most rewarding.

The divisions among the Elves and their allies echo those between the Entente Powers (all bent on pursuing their own nationalistic goals) and point to the difficulty of choosing “the right side” in a conflict in which all the warring camps seemed engaged in the same scramble for supremacy.

This picture of a generally corrupted moral landscape in pre-war Europe is reinforced when one looks at the radically negative outlook JRRT takes of industrialism and the consequent mechanization of warfare, a “taint” from which none of the warring states could claim itself free. The forging of weapons by the Noldor and the mechanical-like monsters devised by Morgoth for his attack on Gondolin are the epic representations of man’s egotistic desire to dominate nature and coerce other wills, a desire intrinsically evil and self-destructive.¹³

Furthermore, features and events of the actual war find a close correspondence in JRRT’s depiction of some of the conflicts of the Wars of the Jewels. The first three Battles of Beleriand, during which Morgoth’s onslaughts are defeated and repulsed by the Sindar (the First) and the Noldor (the Second and Third) can be seen to mirror Germany’s 1914 offensives, stopped by the Allies at the Marne, on the Yser and at Ypres. These led to the stabilization of Western front and the beginning of the four-year-long, siege-like trench stalemate, much as the Third Battle of Beleriand (Dagor Aglareb) led to the Siege of Angband, “which lasted wellnigh four hundred years of the Sun.”

Some of the gruelling fights of 1916 and, especially, the appearance of the tank are echoed in the Fourth Battle of Beleriand, Dagor Bragollach, where Glaurung breaks through the lines of the Elves, (with more success than British armoured vehicles on the Somme).

But the *Silmarillion* perhaps depends more heavily on the actual events and overall feelings of the Great War in the chapter describing the Union of Maedhros and the disastrous Nirnaeth Arnoediad, the Fifth Battle. The mustering of strength for the grand assault on Angband, the summoning of allies from every nation of Beleriand (Sindar, Edain, Dwarves, Men of the East), the planning of a two-pronged offensive from West and East, all seem to echo the preparations made for the great Allied offensives of 1917, planned in the inter-allied Chantilly conference of November 1916.

The escalated warfare of the 1917 and 1918 battles, involving tanks, airplanes, gas bombs, heavy artillery, flamethrowers, trench mortars and light machine guns in ever increasing numbers reverberates in the long and furious fighting of the Nirnaeth, the bloodiest battle of the Wars, with the Elves and their allies contesting the full might of Morgoth’s “new weapons”: wolves and wolfriders, Balrogs and dragons and the Great Worm Glaurung. And the treachery that wrecks the Eastern Army and destroys the hope of the Elves cannot fail to make one think of the Russian Revolution and the crumbling of the Eastern Front in 1917.

From this discussion, we can see that war in *The Silmarillion* is presented, without qualifications, as just one of the consequences of the Fall, a *mala planta* grown out of the lies of Morgoth and the pride and possessiveness of the Noldor. Though JRRT thought at the time that, “for all the evil on our part”, the Great War was “in the large view good against evil”,¹⁴ when he pictured war in his writings he chose to put the stress on its wicked roots, on endless defeat rather than ultimate victory.

All the heroism and sacrifice of the Elves, like that of the English, Italians, Frenchmen and Russian and also Germans and Austrians, really comes to nought, as the Elven realms are swept away and the real world plunged into a new war twenty years after the end of the first. “I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories”: these sorrowful words could as well have been on the lips of many a diplomat present at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, when it started all over again in the autumn of 1939, though perhaps only a very few, even after the “War to end all Wars”, really had “deemed that evil was ended forever.”

¹³ On this theme see the voice “machines” in *The letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*; cit., J. Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*; cit.; pp. 220-223, and Colin Duriez, *Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. The Gift of Friendship*; Mahwah, New Jersey, HiddenSpring, 2003; p. 200.

¹⁴ See JRRT to Geoffrey Bache Smith, 12th August 1916, as cited in J. Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*; cit.; p. 218.

Through Elrond we hear JRRT speaking: Lieutenant JRRT who beheld the horrors of the Somme and Professor JRRT expressing, many years later, his “comment on the world” and its history in the epic words of *The Silmarillion*.¹⁵ But where poets like Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and T.S. Eliot saw in the war only old lies and waste lands, and memorialists like Robert Graves wrote to say *Goodbye to all that*, meaning that the war had opened an impassable rift between the *Belle Époque* and the post-war, “modern” world, JRRT refused to consider the conflict and its aftermath only in terms of disenchantment and disillusion (though he was well aware of them and would give a poignant portrait of the “disillusioned veteran” describing the life of Frodo back in the Shire), and chose to resolve them in a timeless epic about good and evil, beauty and loss, noble values and self-destructive egoism.¹⁶

Always looking at the great canvases of history, rather than concentrating on the contingent details of the memorialists and the poets, JRRT saw the Great War as one of the countless wars in the great struggle of man against “the monsters”: a burden to be carried, a punishment to be endured. In the mythological timelessness of *The Silmarillion*, with all the physical and moral disruptions of a futile war weighing heavily on his mind, the keynote is still on tragedy, loss and endless defeat. The epic romance of *The Lord of the Rings*, written during a second world war, will give him space, “a good many Orcs on our side” notwithstanding, to strike the chords of loyalty, glory, courage and (not so fruitless) victory. Stuart Lee writes: “Unlike the Second World War, which more easily falls into the ‘just war’ definition of right versus wrong, the First World War appears as a conflict with aims that were quickly lost”¹⁷.

Opinions on the Relationship Between *LothR* and the Second World War

Peter Jackson said: “It’s easy for people to speak of the theme of *Lord of the Rings* as though it were a classical struggle between good and evil. But it’s not that simple; Tolkien hated war, the futility and devastation of war, but he also said that sometimes there are things worth fighting for. Above all, freedom. Those who are enslaved, who are victims of the horrors of invasion and oppression, are right to offer resistance. This is the theme of the Second World War. The First World War was merely futile and devastating, a stupid war which should not have been fought. The Second, though, if it’s possible to justify war in the 20th century independently of one’s personal position towards war, *had* to be fought. I believe that Tolkien judged the War of the Ring – which I have portrayed in the film – as a war to be fought”¹⁸. And Ian McKellen said: “Tolkien and I both lived through the Second World War, and he was writing this during the war, and I was sleeping under a metal shelter in the north of England waiting for the bombs to fall. So there was a Sauron around. And although he doesn’t think of it as an allegory for the Second World War, how could he not be affected? /.../ Whenever I had to think, What is Sauron? I would think of Hitler. He’s the great evil force of our time, and certainly of Tolkien’s.”¹⁹.

Whether or not the majority of Tolkienian critics and others find references to the wars of the 20th century, or only to WWI, in *LothR*, Jackson and McKellen are of a different opinion, and they are not alone. For example, Philip French writes: “Traditional quests are in search of some numinous object that confers power and a special grace on its owner. But Tolkien, writing after the Nazis had come to power and during the Second World War, thought Wagner’s interpretation of the ancient Ring stories was dangerously perverse. So he made the object of Frodo’s journey not a search for power but its abnegation. The aim is to take the One Ring to Mount Doom and destroy it in the Fire of Doom where it was originally forged.”²⁰. And Edmund Fuller: “It has for me an

¹⁵ “I do this [writing fairy-stories] because (...) I find that my comment on the world is most easily and naturally expressed in this way.” In *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*; cit., p. 297.

¹⁶ These themes have been explored in detail in John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*; cit., especially in the Postscript: ‘*One who dreams alone*’; pp. 287-313

¹⁷ *Introduction to First World War Poetry*, 1996, at <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ltg/projects/jtap/tutorials/intro/>

¹⁸ In the extended version of his film *The Fellowship of the Ring*

¹⁹ Interviewed by Steven D. Greydanus at <http://www.decentfilms.com>

²⁰ *The Fellowship of the Ring*, “The Observer”, December 16th, 2001

allegorical relation to the struggle of Western Christendom against forces embodied, successively but overlapping, in Nazism and Communism. The work was conceived and carried forward when the darkest shadow of modern history was cast over the West and, for a crucial part of the time, over England in particular”²¹. And John Reilly: “No medieval epic, and indeed no epic of which I am aware, conveys the sense of the world in motion that the "Lord of the Rings" does. The work is more like *The Winds of War* than *Le Morte d'Arthur*.”²² And Isabelle Smadja: “Despite Tolkien's protests to the contrary, the moral universe of *LothR* is recognizably that of the Second World War”²³. And Joe Hartney: “However, it is worth considering why this novel has proven to be so popular. My own view is that it is a Second World War story displaced to the realms of magic and mythology. Tolkien's tale of the reluctant hero suddenly drawn into a global struggle of good against evil reflects the official presentation of the Second World War still familiar to us today. The sense of menace and threat, especially in the first book of the trilogy, surely reflects the anxiety of the liberal world faced with the military successes of the Nazis.”²⁴ And Keith Akers: “Reading *LothR*, one seems to be caught up in a world which is very similar to how we remember the Second World War: as an epic struggle of good versus evil. For most of us, the Second World War was surely justified: and surely the violence used in resisting the evil Sauron in *LothR* would be justified /.../ I think it is best just to admit at the outset that the way in which Tolkien is able to evoke the ethos of the Second World War, in a mythical way, is absolutely uncanny. In both the battles of Middle Earth and the Second World War we had an epic, universal struggle of good versus evil. Many tried to remain neutral, but found it impossible. Frodo, Gandalf, and friends are not just up against a personal evil, but against *universal* evil, involving them in a struggle which obliterates all other petty struggles and concerns”.²⁵ And Charles Nelson wrote: “Saruman’s long disquisition on the exercise of power refers to the old order and former alliance that must be sepr away along with sneering asides about the fading races /.../ His argument echoes Hitler’s justifications for WWII”²⁶.

And Brian Rosebury is of the opinion that Tolkien would not have been able to write *LothR* if he had not lived in the 20th century. “*LothR* describes a continental war in which the survival of whole peoples and cultures is at stake”²⁷. And Christopher Garbowski: “In the foreword to the

²¹ *The Lord of the Hobbits* in Zimbaro – Isaacs (editors), *Understanding the Lord of the Rings*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2004, p. 26

²² At <http://pages.prodigy.net/aesir/index.htm> , reviewing *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century*, by Norman F. Cantor, William Morrow and Company, 1991

²³ In “Le Monde Diplomatique”, December 2002, quoted by Ray Cassin, *Just give me that old-time mythology* January 5th 2003 at www.theage.com

²⁴ *The Struggle of Good against Evil*, March 2002, at <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/>

²⁵ At www.compassionatespirit.com . The piece continues: “But just how does Tolkien do this? Explanations as to how this is done often come up short. People have tried to identify Sauron with Hitler, and you might try to draw an analogy between the Hobbits, the humans, and the Western democracies, but these kinds of crude comparisons generally fall flat. /.../What Tolkien does is to evoke the *social* context of a great crisis, and that is what makes LOTR “feel” like the Second World War. Social relationships in a time of crisis are fundamentally different from social relationships at other times. It is not at the level of the individual, but at the level of society, that the vividness of the struggle between good and evil is brought to light. /.../ But even more bizarre is how Tolkien would have to dispose of the Orcs. In real life, Germany and Japan became some of American's closest allies. /.../The enemies of the Shire must not merely be vanquished, they must be destroyed or at least completely isolated. They are of an alien race. /.../Tolkien cannot be accused of simple racism here: clearly there are some races in Middle Earth, such as humans and Hobbits, which can co-exist; there are others, such as elves and dwarfs, which are antagonistic to each other but which can learn to cooperate. /.../However, we can see in the LOTR myth a reflection of the way in which the Nazis saw the world. For these other races of beings in LOTR are simply inherently different. And what makes the evil nations in LOTR evil, is not that they have *chosen* evil, but that they *are* evil. *This is exactly how the Nazis saw their racial enemies*. There was nothing specifically immoral with them, but -- like termites or rats -- they simply had to be destroyed. /.../LOTR does not merely represent in mythical form how we saw the Second World War. *It also represents, in mythical form, how many Germans saw the Second World War* (with a different ending, of course). In fact, in this respect it probably represents the German point of view better than it does that of the Western Allies.” I recommend reading the entire essay.

²⁶ Charles W. Nelson, *The Sins of Middle-earth : Tolkien’s Use of Medieval Allegory*, in *JRRT and His Literary Resonances*, (editors G. Clark and D. Timmons), Westport, 2000, p. 86.

²⁷ *Tolkien. A Cultural Phenomenon*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2003, p. 163.

American paperback edition Tolkien drew attention to the impact of WWI on his imagination, but he did not in fact deny the impact of WWII. You could almost call them one war. Much like the War of the Ring, in fact, includes the war of the Last Alliance/.../ When I read the chapters on the Riders of Rohan's participation in rescuing Gondor I think of the participation of Polish soldiers on many fronts of WWII 'For your freedom and ours', as it is written on their section of the war cemetery at Monte Cassino. The choice Polish soldiers had to face of whether to continue to support the Western Allies after it was clear that the Soviets had overrun Poland was a monumental one, and one that has hardly been recognized by the rather ungrateful Western Europeans."²⁸

John A. Ellison, comparing *LothR* and WWII, writes: "One may continue by remarking on the odd but diverting impression of amateurishness pervading much of *The Fellowship of the Ring*; not on Tolkien's part, one hastens to add, but on that of the participants. 'And you are lucky to be alive too, after all the absurd things you have done since you left home', says Gandalf to Frodo at Rivendell. He too, though, has been markedly 'slow in the uptake', in reaching vital conclusions about the Ring, in the light of all the evidence that he had had available to him. If there is really a war in progress, being fought in order to meet and destroy a deadly menace of worldwide proportions, is not this a somewhat casual way of preparing for it, and carrying it on? Tolkien himself remarked on the evident contrast of tone between the bulk of *FotR* [Fellowship of the Rings] and *LotR* as a whole. Does this not faintly recall the wholly distinct atmosphere that pervaded the early months of wartime; the sense of unreality that acquired the nickname of 'the Phoney War'. A sense of unreality that, in the months before Churchill became Prime Minister, arose from indications apparent to everybody of general unpreparedness, incompetence in high places, and military bungling of this and that kind. It was not long, of course, before this sense faded from everyone's consciousness as the total dedication and professionalism with which war came to be carried on, took over on all fronts and at home. 'Total war' came to mean concentration on everyone's part, in or out of the forces, on the single objective of the defeat of the Axis powers to the exclusion of everything else. The latter course of the War of the Ring seems to reflect this attitude of mind, as much in regard to Gandalf as in any other respect. When he reappears, to the astonishment of Merry and Pippin, amid the debris of Isengard, he has changed in a way they find difficult to understand. He acts as a briskly professional commander in the field; with, 'ten thousand orcs to manage', he has no time on his hands for acting as a father-figure for a pair of rather puzzled hobbits. In a similar fashion the 'Strider' of the earlier stages of the 'History of the War of the Ring' becomes more impersonal and remote as 'Aragorn', as the nature of his role changes, and becomes, as the war moves towards its final issues, concentrated on leadership in the field, and in battle."²⁹

Tom Shippey notes evident connections between characters and scenes in *LothR* and recent history: for example between Saruman and many European intellectuals and their "trahison des clercs" in favour of Hitler and Stalin; between the perplexities of Frodo at the beginning of the journey and the inaction of Neville Chamberlain, advocate of the strategy of *appeasement* towards Hitler; between Elrond's memories of the previous victory over Sauron and the renewal of European conflict between the First and Second World Wars; between the difficult and inefficient construction of the Wall of Rammas Echor in front of Minas Tirith and the illusion of security which the Maginot Line gave to France; between the harsh conditions of peace dictated by Mouth of Sauron and Hitler's dominion over French soil annexed to the Reich after the disaster, whilst the Vichy puppet government was set up in the un-annexed territory; between the Shire dominated by Sharkey and the spectre – which hung over Europe after WWII – of a Soviet-type communism, rhetorical in its pronouncements as it was criminal in its actions; between Saruman's deforestation and pollution and the ecological disasters produced by communism in the nations of Eastern

²⁸ Email to Franco Manni, 11th July 2005

²⁹ *The Legendary War and the Real One. LothR and the Climate of its Times*, "Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society", 1989, p. 17.

Europe; between Denethor's competitive (and desperate) hatred towards Sauron and the Western nuclear arms race – potentially suicidal (“better dead than red”) – which began in 1947.³⁰

But the position of the “Vulgate” of Tolkienian criticism is distant from the opinion that WWII had a marked effect on the content of *LothR*. Janet Brennan Croft has written an entire book – *War and the Works of JRRT*³¹ – which represents well the prevalent conviction amongst Tolkien's critics: “thematically and stylistically the *LothR* is in many ways more clearly a product of Tolkien's WWI experiences”³². Both in Croft's work and in the “Vulgate” – we believe – the fundamental reason for this position is the uncritical attitude taken towards JRRT's *Foreword*, an approach which has led even to accept that *LothR* was begun in 1936³³!

A Ratio

I propose the following ratio as an analogy. *Sil* : *LothR* = WWI : WWII. Feanor and Fingolfin's imprudent attacks against Angband, Hurin's anger towards Thingol, the vindictiveness of Feanor and his sons, the isolationist pride of Turgon, Thingol's avidity, Galadriel's desire to dominate, the war of Feanor's sons against the Doriath, and Numenorean imperialism resemble the attacks of Joffre's French army with “*élan vital*”, the ultimatums and mobilizations (such that of the Tsar) which started WWI, the French desire for re-conquest, Bolshevik Russia's isolationism, the avidity of the Kingdom of Italy, the Entente's support to the war of the “White” armies against Bolshevik Russia, and British imperialism. The “goodies” of *Sil* often have motives which are not good, just as the Entente powers were impregnated with militarism, nationalism and power politics. On the contrary, Aragorn, Gandalf, Elrond, Theoden, and the “mature” Galadriel have only good motives, just as the four WWII Allies (UK, France, US, URSS) had only good reasons for going to war: all four acted with reluctance to defend their lives and liberty. Furthermore, the three Western powers also moved to defend freedom in the world and the dignity of human beings. Shippey points out that Bertrand Russell – a pacifist during WWI – came to the painful realization at the outbreak of WWII that pacifism in certain circumstances is indefensible.³⁴

There is, in WWII, an ideological and ethical³⁵ dimension which is not present in WWI. Just as in *LothR* in comparison with *Sil*.

When I proposed this analogy to John Garth – the author of a serious and erudite biographical study of JRRT's youth, and in particular of the WWI years – he replied that it was an “interesting” hypothesis and did not raise objections to it. But I do not believe that Garth or the majority of Tolkien scholars are in agreement with the idea.

³⁰ *Author*, cit, pp.165-166. With respect to Shippey, he sees the influence of the war in *LothR*, but does not agree with our opinion regarding its prevalence over WWI: “As regards WWI and WWII, I am reminded of a piece by my friend John Bourne (a history professor at Birmingham) in which he remarks that to people of his and my generation, attitudes to WWI were coloured by attitudes to WWII – the two wars were usually contrasted along the lines stated by Jackson. But much of this is not true. For one thing, WWII strikingly failed to reach its stated goals, the liberation of Poland, and some would say – Tolkien probably among them – succeeded only in replacing one awful tyranny by another. Was Hitler worse than Stalin? Hard to say. WWI by contrast did succeed in breaking up the German and Austro-Hungarian empires, which could have been beneficial (though of course things went badly wrong later). Perhaps we should regard the two wars as merely two phases of the same war.” (email to Franco Manni, 13th January 2005).

³¹ Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 2004, 174 pp.

³² J. Croft, *War*, cit., p. 58,

³³ *Ibidem*. Croft writes that to follow (without having read the *HoME*) the “*ipsissima verba*” of JRRT in the *Foreword*: “It was begun soon after *The Hobbit* was written and before its publication in 1937”.

³⁴ *Author*, cit, p. xxxi.

³⁵ See Churchill's words (January 20, 1940, Broadcast, London): “Very few wars have been won by mere numbers alone. Quality, will power, geographical advantages, natural and financial resources, the command of the sea, and, above all, a cause which rouses the spontaneous surgings of the human spirit in millions of hearts – these have proved to be the decisive factors in the human story. If it were otherwise, how would the race of men have risen above the apes; how otherwise would they have conquered and extirpated dragons and monsters; how would they have ever evolved the moral theme; how would they have marched forward across the centuries to broad conceptions of compassion, of freedom, and of right? How would they ever have discerned those beacon lights which summon and guide us across the rough dark waters, and presently will guide us across the flaming lines of battle towards better days which lie beyond?” These “beacons” to me remember those ones light in between Gondor and Rohan!

The Composition of *The Lord of the Rings*

In the *History of Middle-Earth (HoME)* Christopher Tolkien gives us various indications concerning the compositional chronology of *LothR*, indications that are still seldom used in critical studies on JRRT's work. My general "weak" hypothesis is that the times and content of the various parts of *LothR* could be related to external WWII events. A "stronger" general hypothesis is that as it became clear that WWII was going to be long, the plan for *LothR* (contents and plot development) was extended in consequence. In addition (with full awareness that they may be controversial), I propose specific hypotheses regarding particular moments during the compositional process.

On between 16th and 19th December 1937, three months after the publication of *The Hobbit*, JRRT began – in response to his publisher's request – to write a sequel (called "New Hobbit" at first, on 31st August 1938 renamed "The Lord of the Rings")³⁶. On 24th July 1938 the writing had its first halt : JRRT wrote to the publisher, saying that the sequel had lost his "favour": Bilbo was to live happily ever after and the story finish there.³⁷ Could it have been that Chamberlain's strategy of "appeasement" – which seems in these months to have been unopposed – demotivated JRRT? But on 28th August Chamberlain, under pressure from public opinion, decided to make a show of resoluteness and instructed the ambassador Henderson to warn Hitler with respect to Czechoslovakia, and JRRT on August 31st wrote to his publisher, saying that he had started to write again *two or three days* previously (at this point he chose the name "The Lord of the Rings")³⁸. Perhaps this presumed political counterattack inspired JRRT's literary recovery? In these mere "two or three days", the story of *LothR* takes a leap forwards: the Hobbits finally leave the Shire and pass through the Old Forest, where they encounter Bombadil and the Barrowwight, and reach Bree.³⁹ But on 30th September Chamberlain and Daladier reached an agreement with Hitler at Munich and many hoped that war has been avoided: Chamberlain returned to England a popular hero, speaking of "peace with honour" (echoing an earlier prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli) and "peace in our time." And Christopher Tolkien observes that in October 1938 the nature of the One Ring is long from being elaborated, the vast and distant lands of Gondor, Lothlorien, Fangorn, Isengard and Rohan do not yet exist and that in that moment his father thought that after the Misty Mountains the Ring would be thrown into the chasm of the Fiery Mountain.⁴⁰ Was it that, thinking that with Munich the prospect of war had been vanquished (in fact it still existed and menaced ever larger and more distant territories), JRRT decided to put a rapid end to the literary drama?

It then became clear that Hitler was not going to be satisfied with the Sudetans, and France and Britain appeared weak and wrongfooted as in the worst moments of the appeasement period. In the meantime – December 1938 - JRRT interrupted the writing of *LothR*.⁴¹ Perhaps the discouragement and above all the confusion and indecision of the moment influenced him. JRRT restarted to write his book in August 1939 and on 15th September 1939 (12 days after Great Britain declared war on the Third Reich), JRRT wrote a letter to his publisher in which he referred to the "gloom of the approaching disaster"⁴². In the papers his father wrote in this crucial August, Christopher finds that he is thinking of radically altering the storyline hitherto under development: "New Plot. Bilbo is the hero all through. Merry and Frodo his companions. This helps with Gollum (though Gollum probably gets new ring in Mordor)". And Christopher comments: "The astonishing suggestion in the first part of this note ignores the problem of 'lived happily ever after', which had bulked so large earlier"⁴³. Maybe JRRT, in the wake of the world-wide conflict found himself facing the

³⁶ H. Humphrey Carpenter, *JRRT. A Biography*, HarperCollins, London, 1977, p. 185 ; JRRT, *RothS*, cit, p. 11 .

³⁷ *Letters*, cit, N°31

³⁸ *Letters*, cit, N°33 ; *RothS*, cit., p. 109

³⁹ *RothS*, cit, p. 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 189.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 309.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 370

⁴³ *ibidem*.

thought – an unconscious thought, I believe – that he should participate directly (Bilbo = JRRT) and not only through his children (Merry and Frodo = Michael and Christopher)?

There was along interruption in the composition in late 1939 (tomb of Balin) and Christopher says that his father was mistaken when he wrote in the 1966 *Foreword* that this interruption began in 1940⁴⁴. In a letter to the publisher on 19th December 1939 JRRT speaks of the “anxieties and troubles that all share”, and says once more that he has almost finished *LothR* and will be able to finish it in spring 1940. Why this continual underestimate on the part of JRRT of the plot development and the writing timetable? Perhaps the “Phoney War”⁴⁵ made him expect an imminent peace agreement between Britain and the Reich, and a correspondingly rapid solution (on the level of literary inspiration) to the drama of Middle-Earth?

After August 1940, JRRT took up the story once more and wrote the Bridge of Khazad-dûm⁴⁶: how can one not see a connection between this return of the will to write and Gandalf’s “You cannot pass!” to Balrog with the Battle of Britain, the most dangerous part of which, by 15th September 1940, had been won? From late 1940 until the end of 1942 JRRT continued to develop the story up till the end of the Third Book of *LothR*, with the appearance of Lothlorien, the Great River, Rohan, Isengard and Fangorn. Might one not be reminded of the rapid opening of vast new areas of conflict in WWII during the same period: Libya, Ethiopia, Iraq and Syria, Greece and Yugoslavia, then Russia, and later South-East Asia and Oceania ?

There then follows a second long interruption from the end of 1942 until April 1944⁴⁷; in November 1942 the Soviet Russians surrounded von Paulus at Stalingrad and Montgomery defeated at el-Alamein the Italians and Germans commanded by Rössel, followed in 1943 by the American advances in the Pacific and those of the USSR in Russia, the fall of Italy, and on 1st December the Tehran conference between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. On 9th December JRRT wrote to Christopher a letter about the conference of Tehran, in which he deplored “that bloodthirsty old murderer Josef Stalin”, said that Churchill “actually *looked* the biggest ruffian present”, foresaw the future Americanised globalisation of the world, which he strongly deplored, and even makes the suggestion that “in the long run” the Allied victory might not have better results for the world than that of their enemies would have done.⁴⁸ Perhaps JRRT also took a long break to meditate on the problems of the Ring, which is to say (*as well*) those of World Power!.

From April until October 1944, JRRT wrote the Fourth Book (Marshes, Ithilien, Shelob’s Lair and Sam in front of Cirith Ungol) and began Minas Tirith, the first chapter of the Fifth⁴⁹.

On 20th October the Allies conquered Aachen (Aquisgranum), the first city of pre-war Germany to fall, on 15th October the Russians had overrun Estonia and laid siege to the Germans in Latvia, and on October 20th they took Belgrade. And in October 1944 JRRT once more interrupted his writing. We might ask ourselves: in JRRT’s mind, who is under siege, and by whom? Certainly many literary influences contributed to the siege of Minas Tirith (the siege of Troy, for example, as Alex Lewis⁵⁰ saw), together with historical factors: we may hypothesize that, amongst these, there was a fusion in JRRT’s mind between Britain under siege by the Nazis in 1940 and Germany surrounded by the Americans and Russians in 1944.

This long pause in the composition of *LothR* lasted until September 1946. The peace treaties signed during this month laid down that Germany would remain divided in two and the war with the USSR that had been feared (by JRRT!⁵¹) did not break out. On 30th September 1946 he announced

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 461

⁴⁵ The name given to that phase of WWII between 3rd September 1939 and 10th May 1940, during which France and Britain, though at war with the Reich, had not yet been attacked (in French, “drole de guerre”).

⁴⁶ See what Christopher writes in *The Treason of Isengard*, HoME 7, 1993, p. 192.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 1

⁴⁸ *Letters*, cit, N°53

⁴⁹ See what Christopher writes on p. 234 of JRRT, *The War of the Ring*, HoME n° 8 HarperCollins, London, 1992.

⁵⁰ Alex Lewis and Elisabeth Currie, *The Forsaken Realm of Tolkien*, Medea Publishing, Wimbledon, 2005, pp. 144-181

⁵¹ On 29th May 1945 he wrote “But at least the Americo-Russian War won’t break out for a year yet” : *Letters*, cit, N°100.

that he had restarted writing *LothR* a week previously⁵², and towards the end of the year closed the Fifth Book with the chapter *The Black Gate Opens*. JRRT remained largely unproductive during 1947. The main part of the last Book, the Sixth (Mount Doom, The Scouring of the Shire, etc.), was written in 1948 and finished before 31st October 1948, with revision work continuing until autumn 1949⁵³.

I hope not to have irritated those Tolkienians who are convinced that JRRT's writing of the book was not influenced by WWII. Each of these specific hypotheses, taken one at a time, could be mistaken. But I am sure that the two general hypotheses - that I suggested at the beginning of this section - cannot be wrong, and hope that my efforts with respect to the specific questions serve to provoke stimulating doubts in the minds of other Tolkien scholars, who might wish to examine the argument in greater depth.

The Influence of "History" on "Stories"

Matthew Dickerson observes⁵⁴ that Gandalf, in the chapter *The Last Debate*, is very occupied with military matters, but understands that – without the destruction of the Ring – any victory would be meaningless. This makes me consider the idea that, if after WWII there had been no civil reconstruction of moral and social values, the victory of the Allies would have served no purpose. Dickerson also notes that Gandalf does not glorify war because he declares that, although war involves killing, he feels pity for Sauron's slaves; furthermore, Sauron's enemies show mercy towards Gollum⁵⁵. Consider also how different the behaviour of the Allies in WWII was towards defeated soldiers and civilians in comparison to that of the Third Reich (this difference was not present between the two sides in WWI).

John Garth writes "The Russian revolution had established the first totalitarian dictatorship /.../ Lenin became a template for Hitler, Stalin, Mao and the other political monsters of the twentieth century"⁵⁶. This reminds me of the regime of Sauron which ruled over Mordor (whereas there were no totalitarians in WWI).

Elrond says to the Council that he has seen "many defeats and many fruitless victories", and then states that the victory of the Last Alliance "did not achieved its end", that is, it did not manage to destroy Sauron, and the foundations of the Dark Tower remained, to disappear only with the destruction of the Ring⁵⁷. This makes me think of those historians who see WWI and WWII as two phases of a single war, which they call the "Thirty Years' War". This implies that the second phase – WWII – was different in some way to the first, because it succeeded in putting an end to the conflict and its causes, whereas the first did not. Denethor – Gandalf remembers – had said: "You may triumph on the fields of the Pelennor for a day, but against the Power that has now arisen there is no victory"⁵⁸. This brings to mind French defeatism – which prepared the way for Vichy - about which Marc Bloch has written so well⁵⁹ and on the subject of which Churchill spoke to the Canadian parliament on 30th December 1941: "But their generals misled them. When I warned them that Britain would fight on alone whatever they did, their generals told their Prime Minister and his divided Cabinet: 'In three weeks England will have her neck wrung like a chicken'. Some chicken; some neck."⁶⁰

The figure of Churchill seems to me to have inspired JRRT. I can imagine that this claim might cause many Tolkienians to knit their brows. But I think that the human mind is complex, not

⁵² *Letters*, cit., N°106.

⁵³ *Sauron Defeated*, *HoME* 9, 1993, pp. 12-13 ; Humphrey Carpenter, *JRRT. A Biography*, HarperCollins, London, 1977, p. 207 ; *Letters*, cit., N°117.

⁵⁴ *Following Gandalf. Epic Battles and Moral Victory in TLothR*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2003, p. 54.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 55, 69.

⁵⁶ *Tolkien and the Great War*, cit., p. 223.

⁵⁷ JRRT, *TLothR*, Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1986, p. 260.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 912

⁵⁹ *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence* (1940), 1946

⁶⁰ Winston S. Churchill, *Unrelenting Struggle*, p. 363

simple, that it may contain contradictions and semi-contradictions and that there are various levels or planes of consciousness, semi-consciousness, pre-consciousness and unconsciousness. I am well aware of the references to Churchill in JRRT's *Letters!* But I also think that a person can be, more or less consciously, influenced on some level of his life by another person whom (on another level) he does not like. Specifically, that the ideological and political part of JRRT the *citizen* was a level not necessarily coherent with the poetic part of the *novelist* JRRT.

In his speeches Churchill often talks about the "Free Peoples", the same phrase we often read in *LothR*. Gandalf in the Council of Elrond speaks of a wisdom that could seem madness born of desperation and false hopes, just like Churchill's line regarding appeasement and defeatism.

"So it was that Gandalf took command of the last defence of the City of Gondor. Wherever he came men's hearts would lift again././ Tirelessly he strode from Citadel to Gate, etc.⁶¹": like how Churchill, after he became Prime Minister, flew often to France to put fresh life in that government in flight from Hitler. In a speech on October 29th 1941 at his old school, Harrow, he said: "Surely from this period of ten months this is the lesson: never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never-in nothing, great or small, large or petty - never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy".

Churchill wrote that on 3rd September 1939 he went down into the air-raid shelter armed with a bottle of brandy and observed "They were all cheerful and joking, as is the habit of the English when they go to meet the unknown". This reminds me of Shippey's words concerning the Hobbits: "Is it possible to be cheerful and without hope at the same time? Modern optimistic convention says not././ but the Gamgee family seems to take a skeptical view of that idea: *While there's life there's hope*, says the Gaffer, conventionally enough, but he usually tacks on the deflating words, *and need of vittles*".⁶²

On the eve of the crucial Battle of Britain (14th July 1940) Churchill spoke on the radio: "We must show ourselves equally capable of meeting a sudden violent shock or - what is perhaps a harder test - a prolonged vigil. But be the ordeal sharp or long, or both, we shall seek no terms, we shall tolerate no parley; we may show mercy-we shall ask for none. /./ but let all strive without failing in faith or in duty, and the dark curse of Hitler will be lifted from our age". Words which resemble those of Gandalf concerning Sauron and Middle Earth, and his behaviour with regard to Mouth of Sauron. In the same speech Churchill said: "While we toil through the dark valley we can see the sunlight on the uplands beyond". This reminds me of the chapter *Helm's Deep*: "So King Theoden rode from Helm's Gate and clove his path to the great Dike. There the company halted. Light grew bright about them. Shafts of the sun flared above the eastern hills /::/There suddenly upon a ridge appeared a rider, clad in white, shining in the rising sun."⁶³

Ideology

In his *Introduction* to the *Letters of JRRT* Carpenter writes: "It became obvious that an enormous quantity of material would have to be omitted". This is clear to the reader: e.g. in a period as crucial as that between February 1939 and December 1939 we find not one letter, and again from March 1940 until the end of September 1940, and from November 1941 to December 1942. With regard to JRRT and WWII we must conclude, therefore, that the published epistolary material is full of gaps.

Carpenter states in his biography of JRRT: "His distress for the continuation of hostilities was almost as much for ideological as for personal reasons"⁶⁴. In the next paragraph I will comment on the former category, and in the following on the latter.

In Letter N° 52 (late 1943) JRRT says that he prefers anarchy or non-constitutional monarchy; he would like a king who can sack his advisers if they criticize the cut of his trousers, and says that it is unnatural for men to command others. JRRT says "non-constitutional" rather than

⁶¹ *LothR*, cit., 856.

⁶² *Author*, cit., p. 152

⁶³ *LothR*, cit., pp. 564-5.

⁶⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, *JRRT. A Biography*, HarperCollins, 1992, p.197

“absolute” monarchy (the adjective would be too evidently at odds with the idea that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”, in other words that men are not made to rule over other men, an idea that JRRT stated in the same letter), but the historical reality is that the two things are equal: non-constitutional monarchies *have been* absolute monarchies. In his latest book, Brian Rosebury comments: “I still regret Tolkien’s expressed indifference to what I called in 1992 the necessity of those unaesthetic political structures which, however imperfectly, curtail the concentration of power.”⁶⁵ In Letter 52 JRRT also makes a sarcastic reference to “Winston and his gang” and in Letter N° 53 writes that he loves England, but not Great Britain, the Commonwealth or the USA. One must ask, what would have happened if only the English had fought in WWII and not also Scots, Welsh, Irish, Canadians, Australians, Indians, New Zealanders, South Africans and Americans? And in Letter 100 (29th May 1945) he writes that he has not another drop of patriotism left and that, were he a free man, he would not send a penny, much less a son, to help the war. This makes me think of the young American soldiers who, at that moment, were dying in Okinawa, and of Manchuria – where the Japanese had perpetrated terrible war crimes against the Chinese – which was still enslaved.

It seems to me, therefore, that JRRT’s ideology, which Patrick Curry describes with acuteness and sympathy⁶⁶, has some contradictory and negative aspects. On the other hand – e.g. in Letter N° 45 – JRRT expresses hatred for Hitler who had corrupted the “Germanic ideal/:::/ that noble northern spirit/.../that nowhere was it nobler than in England, nor more early sanctified and Christianized”. And in various other letters – in the name of his own Christianity and “Englishness” – he expresses his aversion to Hitlerism.

In effect – as Rosebury writes – many readers assimilate the observations present in *LothR* concerning the nature of the Ring to the liberal theory of the division and balance of power, and they are not entirely wrong because *LothR* has a “liberal temper” and is in opposition to the works of other writers such as Sartre and Pound and many others “sneering at liberal humanism”⁶⁷. In Letter N° 81 JRRT has an attack of anger and compares the English press to Goebbels: the English talk about the Germans like the Germans talked about the Poles and the Jews. Then he collects himself a moment, and adds: “of course there is a difference here. The article was answered, and the answer printed”.

An interesting example of the confusion and contradiction present in JRRT’s ideology is the following. In Letter N°53 he writes “I am not really sure that its victory is going to be so much the better for the world as a whole and in the long run than the victory of OMISSIS”. And in N° 66 he writes that the Allies try to defeat Sauron using the Ring, but they will thus only breed new Saurons and - “slowly” – transform Men into Orcs. These worries of the frustrated and angry *citizen* JRRT diverge from a profound conviction of the *novelist* JRRT. In *LothR* those phrases (“in the long run”, “slowly”) are not to be found. The novel does not say that it is useless to combat today’s evil because in the future there will be other evils; on the contrary, let us listen to Gandalf: “Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule”⁶⁸.

When JRRT allows his mood of rancour to get the upper hand, he starts to prophesy that the good in the world will be reduced to an entombed church surrounded by the end of civilization; but, when he thinks seriously – which he does in the same Letter N ° 79 – he uses words very similar to those of *LothR*: “gloomy thoughts, about things one cannot really know anything of; the future is impenetrable especially to the wise”

⁶⁵ Tolkien, cit., p. 191.

⁶⁶ *Defending Middle-earth. Tolkien : Myth and Modernity*, HarperCollins, London, 2004, especially the first two chapters.

⁶⁷ Tolkien, cit., p. 166.

⁶⁸ *LothR*, cit, p. 913.

Years later, commenting on W. H. Auden's review of the last volume of *LothR* which had by then been published, JRRT expressed apparently novel ideas about war. Many times in letters written during WWII he had considered the two sides in the war as equal, or almost equal, because of the fact that persons or groups on the Allied side were, according to him, motivated by morally censurable reasons. Now though (1956), the judgement changes: "There are clear cases: e.g. acts of sheer cruel aggression, in which therefore *right* is from the beginning wholly on one side, whatever evil the *resentful* suffering of evil may eventually generate in members of the right side". And if the individuals fighting on the right side do bad things, this condemns them morally as individuals, but does not invalidate the rectitude of their cause. Those who fight on the wrong side "at any rate have not right to demand that their victims when assaulted should not demand an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth" /.../ Similarly, good actions by those on the wrong side will not justify their cause /.../ A judge may accord them honour /.../ but this will not alter his judgement as to which side was in right, nor his assignment of the primary blame for all the evil that followed to the other side".⁶⁹

In 1956 Stalin was dead and the war between USA and USSR - which JRRT feared - had not broken out, the world had become aware of the evidence of the horrors of the Shoah, and JRRT seems to have embraced the idea that WWII had been a "bellum iuxtum".

As "poet" JRRT had understood this quickly⁷⁰: *LothR* talks of a bellum iuxtum of the Free Peoples of Middle-Earth. In 1956 he seems also to have understood this as "philosopher", or developer of a Theory of Ethics. This ideological transformation - I believe - was fruit of WWII and his reflection upon its progress and subsequent effects, and certainly not due to reading Thomistic treatises on the "bellum iuxtum"!⁷¹

Why, then, another 10 years later, in the 1966 *Foreword*, did JRRT deny the influence of WWII on himself and on *LothR*? A possible reason might be that the human mind is not a crystalline monad, but rather made up of geological strata, and so an ideological change in an adult person is always partial and problematical. In synthesis: the change due to maturation which occurred in JRRT "philosopher" - who asked questions concerning the ultimate status of good and evil - did not reach JRRT "literary critic", concerned to defend *LothR* both against hostile "mainstream" criticism and against that, friendlier but at times ingenuous, of his fans. And JRRT "literary critic" carried out this defence largely still wrapped in that "Inklings Ideology" (perhaps also strengthened by his great publishing success, which seemed to show that he was right!) which disapproved of modernity, romantically over-valued individual creativity with respect to environment, society, external factors etc. and under-valued or ignored psychoanalytical theories concerning the formation of the personality.

Psychology

I have looked for - but been unable to find - specific psychological studies on JRRT's personality. To my knowledge (certainly imperfect), the information available includes the material in the biographies by Carpenter and (more recently) by Garth, who only deals with the early life. It would be most interesting to have more detailed studies on this subject (if, of course - I repeat -, they do not already exist!). Here I should like to present a few fragments and suggestions for a psychological analysis of JRRT, and only with reference to the subject of the present essay.

⁶⁹ *Letters*, cit., N°183

⁷⁰ Quickly, but not immediately: Christopher writes (*RothS*, cit., p. 189) that in October 1938: "If the nature of the Ring, in its effects on the bearer was now fully conceived, there is as yet no suggestion that the fate of Middle-earth lay within its circle". In fact, JRRT's initial idea (see the chapter *Of Gollum and the Ring* in *RothS*, pp. 73-87) was to destroy the Ring; an evil ring, therefore, but only one amongst the many rings of power, which subjugated its possessor to the wicked Lord of the Rings, but was primarily the cause of an individual tragedy (following a Greek-inspired individualistic notion of ethics), not a tragedy for Middle-Earth (following a community-based ethical model, of Judaeo-Christian type). But soon afterwards (in *RothS*, p. 220, Christopher says that he cannot give an exact date) the idea of the Ruling Ring, crucial for the destiny of the world, emerges (*RothS*, pp. 226-227).

⁷¹ Janet Croft (*War and the Works*, cit., p. 140) analyses this text of JRRT but - given her general convictions - does not see the connection or the change compared to the judgements on WWII expressed by him in preceding years.

Literary criticism – from at least the 19th century onwards – takes it for granted that an author’s interpretation of his own works may well not be by itself the most exact, informative or truthful interpretation possible. I do not see why JRRT should be an exception. It does not seem to me a heresy if in studying Tolkien a critic, with good reasons and some sort of argument to put forward, contests particular statements made by JRRT regarding his works. An eminent modern medievalist - Norman F. Cantor – in his erudite and brilliant study of 20th-century medievalists, after reviewing the numerous and various explanations of the meaning of *LothR* which JRRT gave at various times, writes: “The *LothR* exists, apart from what Tolkien said at one time or another it was supposed to mean. It was largely a product of the realm of fantasy in the unconscious: that was the ultimate source. Therefore, what Tolkien later consciously thought about it is interesting, but not authoritative as to the work’s meaning”⁷².

From Carpenter’s three books⁷³ various aspects of JRRT’s personality emerge; these are not necessarily harmonious or concordant with one another: a devoted “friend”, but also possessive and exclusive; a romantic “husband” lacking in empathy, silent and absent; an affectionate “father”, but also over-dependent on the company of his children; an independent and nonconformist “critic”, but also aristocratic, one-sided and excessively polemical; a highly erudite and eminent “philologist”, but also lazy and not up-to-date; a precise and hard-working “teacher”, but boring and with little charisma; a profound “philosopher” but also amateurish and unsystematic; a law-abiding “citizen”, but passive and indifferent with respect to politics. The aspect of his personality that dwarfed the others was that of JRRT novelist and poet, that in which he gave of his best. This, I believe, is his best aspect, because it was above all here that JRRT was free from the roles and prejudices imposed by society in general and by the particular groups he belonged to. More than in other aspects, here his profound conscious convictions were in harmony with his deep unconscious convictions.

But when he wrote the *Foreword* in 1966 JRRT was not in his role as storyteller and poet, but in that of “critic”, of interpreter of himself, member of the Inklings, and wanted to make clear that the war that influenced him was WWI - in which almost all his friends died - and not WWII, and also that the final part of *LothR* was not inspired by the England of the aftermath of WWII, but by that of the first years of the century, when the English countryside had already begun to be disfigured by industrialization. In these declarations JRRT seems to want to deny the emergence of new developments in history and in his own life, as though all that really mattered had already happened a long time ago. Why? He had certainly made new important friendships after those of the TCBS (his school club) in adolescence, and had certainly seen many new developments in England after the reign of Edward VII.

It is as though JRRT wished to exclude his adult life – with its formative events and meetings – from the inspirational background of his literary masterpiece, as if, after childhood and youth nothing else of significance occurred that inspired *LothR*. I see two possible reasons for this behaviour: one is more ideological, in that in the Inklings he disparages the “modernist” culture which spread after the WWI. The other is more intimate and personal: as a child and young man JRRT was strongly traumatized by the death of his parents and the terrible and bloody experience of the trenches, and like any traumatized person he continually turns – with a desperate desire for liberation – to the shocked parts of his being.⁷⁴

⁷² *Inventing the Middle Ages. The Lives, Works and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century*, William Morrow, New York, 1991, pp. 230-231

⁷³ *The Inklings, Biography, Letters*.

⁷⁴ See (if you are interested, of course!): Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 1915 ; Melanie Klein, *Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States* (1940) in *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis 1921-1945*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1948; Ronald Fairbairn, *Endopsychic Structure Considered in Terms of Object Relationship* (1944) in *Psychoanalytic Studies on Personality*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1952 ; Roger Money-Kyrle, *The World of the Unconscious and the World of Common Sense* (1956) in *The Collected Papers of Roger Money-Kyrle*, Clunie Press, Perthshire, 1978 ; Donald W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment. Studies in Theory of Emotional Development*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1965; John Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, Routledge, London, 1993.

After WWI his life stabilized: he experienced peace, the pleasures of family life and had the university post to which he aspired. He might have imagined – and deceived himself – that his real self was similar to that of Bilbo at the end of *The Hobbit*, calm and untroubled. But, by the first half of 1938 – with Hitler’s explicit threats to Austria and Czechoslovakia, and the open challenge to France and Great Britain - JRRT could not but be aware of the “return of the Shadow”, both in the world at large and, as a consequence, in his own life and the lives of those dear to him. In July he told his publisher that the “New Hobbit” (*LothR*) no longer inspired him, and that there should be no sequel to *The Hobbit*, so as not to disturb the scenario in which Bilbo “remained very happy to the end of his days and those were extraordinarily long”. Christopher, commenting upon this letter, is amazed: how could it be that the final sentence of *The Hobbit* constituted an “insuperable obstacle” to a sequel, since the pages of the “New Hobbit” written so far dealt not with Bilbo, but his nephew Bingo (later renamed Frodo)?⁷⁵ My interpretation would be that JRRT wrote thus because Bilbo and Frodo represented two parts of himself, which he was unable to recognise and distinguish, if not occasionally⁷⁶. Roughly speaking (it would be most interesting to perform a careful analytical study) Bilbo represented his “crystallized” self, turned melancholically towards the past (to the “traumatic” period of his life), coated and overlain by the consolatory illusion of the “calm and carefree life”, in which he smoked his pipe, looked after the garden, chatted with his friends and wrote books; nothing else.

Frodo, on the other hand, represented the living part which had to face up to real events in the present, outside and inside of himself. We know what the result was: *exit* Bilbo, enter Frodo (who inherited the house, the friendship with Gandalf and the leading role). This solution was reached only after tormented changes of mind. Bilbo felt tired and old and restless in the Shire, the quiet life no longer satisfies him: his melancholic Self has to give way to that in contact with life. But the dramatic events in Europe cause JRRT to sway first one way and then the other. Were new tragedies, like those of his childhood and youth, on the way? No, it was better to remain an Oxford don who busied himself with literary discussions with his Inklings friends and distanced himself (in a sort of Flight of the Deserter?) from the reality of his country and the world. Yet it was impossible to withdraw: Bilbo-JRRT feels “all thin, sort of stretched, like butter that has been scraped over too much bread”.⁷⁷ That is, the consolatory illusion of the life of tranquillity no longer manages to hide and sustain the profound depression of the melancholic Self. These oscillations are reflected in the composition of *LothR* and in Frodo’s voyage and were greatly stimulated by the grandiose, tragic and glorious historical events of those years, as above I have attempted to demonstrate.

Who has to take the “burden” of the Ring to Mount Doom, Bilbo or Frodo? JRRT was born in 1892 and in 1940 – when WWII really arrived in the West – he was 48 years old. Another eminent scholar, Marc Bloch, professor of Medieval History at the Sorbonne, was born in 1886 and was 54 when he decided to join the French Army as a volunteer. He fought, but survived the rout and went to England and then returned to Vichy France where – after trying to put in safety his wife and four young children (the older two sons were already enrolled in De Gaulle’s Free French Forces) – he entered the Resistance as an active fighter and, after being arrested by the Gestapo in 1944, died heroically. JRRT wrote to his son Michael: “One War is enough for any man. I hope you will be spared a second”.⁷⁸ And to his son Christopher: “If I was of military age, I should, I fancy, be grousing away in a fighting service”.⁷⁹ He justifies himself: he had already been in one war (but Marc Bloch had also fought, rather more than JRRT, in WWI), and is too old. Yet staying safely at Oxford does not satisfy him: “to carry on the old pre-war job is just a poison. If only I could do something active!”⁸⁰. Janet Croft writes: “WWII taught him the frustrations of a parent, too old for

⁷⁵ *RothS*, cit., pp. 108-109.

⁷⁶ See in *RothS* the extremely tormented composition of *A Long-expected Party* (the first chapter of *LothR*), in which the roles of Bilbo and Bingo-Frodo were continually modified, interchanged and confused; the same goes for their motivations and the relationship which unites them.

⁷⁷ *LothR*, cit., p. 45.

⁷⁸ *Letters*, cit., N° 45.

⁷⁹ *Letters*, cit., N° 53.

⁸⁰ *Letters*, cit., n°45

active duty, forced to watch his sons risking their lives”⁸¹; but I think that at least part of JRRT’s mind cast doubt both on the “too old” and on the “forced”.

In WWI Marc Bloch had been awarded the Legion d’Honneur and the Croix de Guerre, whilst JRRT had not demonstrated particular courage and certainly not a desire to fight⁸². For sure, people are not all the same (and neither should we wish they were), and I am not criticizing JRRT for not having fought in WWII: I am merely trying to understand a certain mental confusion which was present in JRRT at that moment in his life. If he had had clearer ideas he would have said to himself and others: “I am not going to fight, not because one war in a life is enough, or because I am too old, but because I have another vocation and other duties, other things to do”. In first place he had to write *LothR*!

However, even if not explicitly, JRRT moves in this direction: he manages to control the impulse to leave his “quiet life”, identifying strongly with his son Christopher, enrolled in the RAF, who comes to represent his Frodo-self: “I certainly live in your letters although my circumstances are so very much more easy. In my case weariness, sheer boredom of sameness is the enemy. I were younger, I should wish to exchange with you”⁸³. But Christopher also represented for JRRT his Bilbo-self – that which was writing the book – because he seemed to be a faithful disciple of the father and an Inkling *in pectore*. And to Christopher he sends – the only valid thing that he seems to be able to do at Oxford – parts of *LothR*, a book of war, the War of the Ring. This work neither concentrates on the “fatuous” world of the Shire – that is, the illusion of the “quiet life” of the Oxford philologist – nor repeats the “pure mythology of *The Silmarillion*” (Letter N° 31), or in other words the melancholic returns to the romanticism of the TCBS and the “fruitless victories” of WWI. It is a new development, which is going to transform the world of the Shire - the world of *The Hobbit* - and that of *The Silmarillion*, as Alex Lewis and Elisabeth Currie demonstrate clearly in their book.⁸⁴ It is the right and personal way that JRRT can take part in the great events of the present.

I do not know how aware JRRT was of this. There is a decidedly strange sentence in the 1966 *Foreword*: “It was during 1944 that, leaving the loose ends and perplexities of a war which it was my task to conduct, or at least to report, I forced myself to tackle the journey of Frodo to Mordor”. My interpretation would be that here JRRT is saying that in 1944 – when his alter ego Christopher has left him to serve his country as a pilot in the RAF⁸⁵ - he becomes increasingly aware that participating in WWII for him meant writing *LothR*. Alex Lewis and Christopher Garbowski, to whom I communicated this interpretation, are not in agreement⁸⁶. Patrick Curry, on the contrary, wrote to me thus: “Regarding your hypothesis, I can only say you may well be right - it's certainly an interesting idea - & I don't see any serious objections to it. Is one implication that

⁸¹ *War and the Works*, cit., p. 145.

⁸² See John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*, cit.

⁸³ *Letters*, cit., N° 73.

⁸⁴ *The Uncharted Realms of Tolkien*, Medea Publishing, Wimbledon, 2002, pp. 68-147.

⁸⁵ Ian McKellen: “I’m really taken by the fact that when Tolkien was writing Lord of the Rings during the Second World War, Tolkien’s own son Christopher was serving in Europe, fighting the ultimate evil”. Which makes me think of Churchill’s words to the House of Commons on 4th June 1940: “There never has been, I suppose, in all the world, in all the history of war, such an opportunity for youth. The Knights of the Round Table, the Crusaders, all fall back into the past-not only distant but prosaic; these young men, going forth every morn to guard their native land and all that we stand for./.../ deserve or gratitude”.

⁸⁶ A. Lewis : “Yes, the sentence in Tolkien’s Foreword is a real conundrum: The problem we have is as follows: a) is JRRT talking about LotR in both the first part of the sentence and the second? If so, then the ‘war’ he is conducting and reporting is the War of the Ring, perhaps the progress of Aragorn and other Fellowship members. b) is JRRT talking about something else in the first part of the sentence, and *LotR* in the second part only? This is NOT the usual reading given by most scholars (who seem to assume JRRT is only discussing *LotR* - however that is difficult to sustain as an argument, for Tolkien when talking about allegory, gives an example of how the War of the Ring is not similar to the real war WW2 and how it would have played out if he had meant to write an allegory).” (email Franco Manni, 22nd July 2005) , C. Garbowski : “I myself don’t really see any other meanings to the passage you are wondering about than the one that is at the surface: that Tolkien had got up to the Siege of Gondor / Battle of Pelennor Fields on the one hand, but had got behind on the Frodo/Sam strain. In other words he had written the easier stuff before getting down to the more difficult work” (email to Franco Manni, 26th July 2005)

WWII contributed more to *TLotR* than is generally realized - or admitted by T.? The more I think about the more I think you are right!"⁸⁷.

In the letters to Christopher JRRT does not talk of the important events of WWII, but speaks in detail of those of the War of the Ring⁸⁸, which thus appears to have been his "vicarious" war: he wrote and rewrote, discussed with his son, read parts of *LothR* on Thursdays to the Inklings and discussed with them. Carpenter says that one of the reasons the Inklings' Thursdays came to an end was that JRRT, at the end of 1947, stopped reading *LothR* during the meetings.⁸⁹

On 18th June 1940 Churchill said to the House of Commons: "every man and every woman will have the chance to show the finest qualities of their race, and render the highest service to their cause. For all of us, at this time, whatever our sphere, our station, our occupation or our duties, it will be a help to remember the famous lines: He nothing common did or mean, Upon that memorable scene. /.../But if we fail, then the whole world /.../ will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science".

I think that JRRT showed his "finest qualities" and rendered his "highest service" to the cause, performing his personal "duty", which was – or at least included – the writing of *LothR*. In the mystery of the individual destiny (unique, unrepeatable) of each human life, each has his own particular talent (his "charisma", as Saint Paul says), and that of JRRT – during those terrible but great years – was to create this powerful portrayal of the drama of desperation and hope. To use the words of Shippey: "If Tolkien were to choose a symbol for his story and its message, it would be, I think, the horn of Eorl. He would have liked to blow it in his own country, and disperse the cloud of post-war and post-faith disillusionment, depression, acquiescence, which so strangely (and twice in his lifetime) followed on victory."⁹⁰

"He nothing common did or mean".

The Literature of the Second World War

Janet Croft points out in the literature of WWII characteristics such as "disillusionment", "distrust of authority", the presence of an "ideological vacuum" and a lack of "romanticism". She comments that these features are present in *LothR*, to support her thesis that "there is little if any evidence of any distinctively and clearly WWII influence on its themes or style", inasmuch as in *LothR* we find the themes of honour, courage, glorious undertakings, etc.⁹¹. But John Garth demonstrates that these characteristics do in fact distinguish the *literature of WWI*, in the work of writers such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves⁹². In addition, Croft does not take into account how full – in fact - the literature of WWII *is* of courage, the net distinction between good and bad causes, adventure and glorious deeds. Neither does she seem aware of how, whereas in the WWI trenches the soldiers were able to experiment the "animalic horror" of which Garth writes, in WWII millions of civilians and military experienced a "diabolic evil" absent from WWI. Enough to recall: Ann Frank, *Diary* ; Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* ; Alistair MacLean, *Guns of Navarone* ; Frank Bonham, *Burma Rifles* ; Lore Cowan, *Children of the Resistance* ; William Brinkley, *The Ninety and Nine* ; Janina David, *A Square of Sky* ; Mladin Zarubica, *The Year of the Rat* ; James Jones, *The Pistol* ; Corrie Boom, *The Hiding Place* ; John R. Tunis, *Silence over Dunkerque*, amongst many others. It is for this reason that Tom Shippey puts JRRT's novel together with others which came out during or after WWII, such as those of C. S. Lewis, T. H. White, G. Orwell and W. Golding. C. S. Lewis had recognised that JRRT in *LothR* had found (in

⁸⁷ email to Franco Manni , 24 July 2005.

⁸⁸ See the details in Carpenter, *Biography*, cit., pp. 200-203.

⁸⁹ *The Inklings*, George Allen & Unwin Publishers, London, 1978.

⁹⁰ *Author*, cit., p. 220.

⁹¹ *War and the Works*, cit., pp. 62-63.

⁹² *Tolkien*, cit., pp. 287-313

contrast to the extremes of militaristic propaganda and disenchantment) “the cool middle point between illusion and disillusionment”⁹³.

I would like to single out one WWII book in which the themes of “disillusionment”, a lack of “romanticism”, the demythologization of courage, and an “ideological vacuum” – typical of WWI literature – are absent; on the contrary, the opposite values (of which also *LothR* is full) shine out: *Le Lettere dei Condannati a Morte della Resistenza Europea*.⁹⁴ This work was published in 1954 (the year *LothR* came out) in Italy, a compilation of the last letters – sent to relatives and friends – of fighters against Hitler: Albanians, Austrians, Belgians, Bulgarians, Czechs, Danes, Frenchmen, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Yugoslavians, Norwegians, Dutchmen, Poles, Romanians, Russians and Hungarians.

The Preface to this book, of which I quote several lines, was written by Thomas Mann⁹⁵: “Every one of these condemned men believes in the future, they cannot help but believe that their deaths will benefit the future and that, if they must finish in the grave so young, it is to ‘fertilize the soil’: ‘You know, Father, it’s good to die hoping for a better future for all humanity’; ‘I believe that after this war a life of happiness will begin’ /.../A lethal constellation is undermining democracy and pushing it into the arms of fascism, which it has defeated only to help it, as soon as it is fallen, back onto its feet [Mann refers to McCarthyism here] /.../Was it in vain, therefore, overcome and deserted by life, that the faith, hope and the will to sacrifice of European youth, which, though it took the fine name of Résistance, international resistance and concord against the ruin of its homeland, against the insult of a Hitlerian Europe, did not want simply to resist, but felt itself to be the vanguard of a better human society? Was all this in vain? Useless, a waste of their dream and their deaths? No, it cannot have been. There has never been an idea for which men have fought and suffered with a pure heart, and given their lives, which has been destroyed. There is no idea which has not been made reality, *at the cost of making a pact with all the stains of reality, but acquiring life*. It was a childish idea, that of a nineteen-year-old, ‘that after this war a life of happiness will begin’. *The world is not the home of happiness and moral purity*, and less than ever could become so by means of war – even the most just and necessary war. But the impulse to bring human life closer to goodness, to that which conforms to reason and satisfies the spirit, is a task imposed from above, which no scepticism can weaken and no passivity ignore”.⁹⁶

Conclusions

I would like to stress that the observations made above are only hypotheses to guide future research; time and work are needed – ours and perhaps that of other scholars – in order to find convincing demonstrations (or refutations) of them. To conclude, I list our suggestions :

- JRRT was inspired mainly by WWI in writing *SIL* and mainly by WWII in writing *LothR*
- In the second case, JRRT - in part consciously, in part unconsciously - tried to conceal his inspiration, because of his personal political opinions and because of some features of his psychological make-up.
- *LothR* shows similarities with respect to its “moral atmosphere” with other literary works of the WWII years and the decade which followed.
- We should not “iurare in verba magistri”, or in other words sanctify JRRT (or indeed any writer or other person). The defence of his literary works by those who – like us – greatly admire them constitutes a counterbalance with respect to the hostility of many “mainstream” critics. We should, however, seek to retain a correct balance, and specifically not combine in a confused amalgam the various aspects of his personality:

⁹³ Ibidem, p. 312.

⁹⁴ Edited by Piero Malvezzi and Giovanni Pirelli, Einaudi, Torino, 1954, 816 pages.

⁹⁵ This Preface was written in March 1954; in 1944 Thomas Mann had become a US citizen.

⁹⁶ *Le Lettere dei Condannati a Morte*, cit., pp. XIV-XV, italics added.

poet, man of faith, citizen, father, husband, philologist, teacher, literary critic, philosopher and friend.

- When we refuse to consider the influence of contemporary history and politics (or of personal psychology) on a writer's artistic production, the reason might be fears that to admit such influences could lead to the denial or under-valuation of other sorts of influence: ancient political history, literature, art, philosophy and religion. Such fears must be resisted; one influence does not exclude others! Amongst the many books produced during WWII *LothR* is unique and unmistakeable, because only JRRT was an eminent scholar and lover of medieval literature *and* fascinated by natural and artificial languages *and* a lover of the fantasy "mode" *and* able to recount children's stories *and* vaccinated against the minimalist and materialist prejudices of the contemporary literary modernism *and* a veteran of WWI *and* deeply Roman Catholic *and* an orphaned child *and* inclined towards philosophical speculation *and* a lover of male clubs and friendship, and so on. The presence of all these (and other) characteristics is *unique*, and should discourage any interpretative reductionism. And to this distinguishing assemblage I wish to add, and to underline, the fact that JRRT was an emotionally involved witness to the grand drama of WWII. On the other hand, just as political or psychological critical reductionism deludes, the same applies to other types of reductionism which one would wish to identify (and limit!): reducing JRRT and *LothR* to neo-medievalism, fantasy writing, Roman Catholicism, aestheticism, ecologism, etc.