

MYTHOLOGY AND COSMOLOGY IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*



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Abstract: In my article, beside the homage to J.R.R. Tolkien's work, I'll try to explicit the Indo-European mythological structure within *The Lord of the Rings*. This structure, according to Dumézil, contains three functions: the royal function, the warrior function, and the productive function. By introducing these functions, Tolkien has provided his story a cosmological and metaphysical dimension based on the proposition "All is One". The second part of my article is dedicated to explain the importance of this proposition in Tolkien's work.

Key words: Tolkien – *The Lord of the Rings* - mythology – cosmology – All is One.

Sixty years after the publication of *The Fellowship of the Rings*, the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien's work has reached an international prestige and a worldwide acknowledgement. With its Hollywood adaptation on the big screen during the last decade, his story has now become even more famous and celebrated as a masterpiece. However beyond the agitation of all the renown and the fame, it is legitimate for real admirers of his work to seek the profound significance of his oeuvre. What was Tolkien's authentic ambition by writing this epos that is *The Lord of the Rings*? In an attempt to answer this question, I will at first, point out mythological elements that structure his novel. These elements will then lead us to a better understanding of its cosmological background based on a metaphysical proposition: "All is One".

As Georges Dumézil demonstrated through his life's works, all Indo-European myths are based on a tri-functional structure: the royal function, the warrior function, and the productive function (DUMÉZIL 1995). These three functions reflect the main concerns of all human societies, which are the need for religion, protection, and perpetuation. This structure is still observable through other means. For example, in France under the *Ancien Régime* in the 18th century, her society was divided in three orders: the clergy, the nobility, and the *Tiers-Etat*. It is also the main form of social organization within most traditional societies. As spiritual and intellectual creations, figures of Gods in myths symbolize abstract ideas stemming from simple social needs. For example, in Latin culture, Mars represented war while Jupiter represented royalty. As ideas and representations of values, Gods are out of time and thereby, remain in a kind of immutable eternity. They are expressions of human desire for the absolute, which means they are out of the human world, a world that suffers from imperfection and alteration. This immutable eternity leads to a problem: if Gods are beyond the human world, then how could

those ideas and values manifest in it? The answer can be found in epopee, where ideas and values are transposed into the human level through heroic figures in order to put ideas into action and then, escape from eternity's emptiness (CASSIRER 1955: II). This means, *stricto sensu*, that *The Lord of the Rings* is an epopee, not a myth. The difference is that epopees are mediations between universal and particulars permitting a harmony between the cosmos and human society. Heroes are then articulations between Gods and humans. In others words, heroes make possible the recognition between humans and Gods, between the phenomenal world and the ideal world. Without heroes, Gods shall remain merely abstractions without any of contents. Without heroes, humanity shall remain captive in their individualism and be unable to access culture; culture meaning to assemble every single man despite their differences and their particularism. More than that, transposition from myths to epopees aims to maintain and to perpetuate a stable social frame for future generations by transmitting cultural values shared within society (ARENDRT 2006). At this point lays the crucial significance of books like *The Lord of the Rings*.

If one looks more closely into Tolkien's work, one can find that the tri-functional structure appears clearly in the background of *The Lord of the Rings*. However in some way, the former cosmologic hierarchy is not respected. There are many Christian elements introduced by Tolkien that I will point out in the second part of my article. For now, let us clarify the three functions in Tolkien's work. The royal function is incarnated by Aragorn, and in a different level, Gandalf. The warrior function has a double figure: Gimli and Legolas. Generally, the Hobbits assume the productive function. As I indicated previously, these characters and heroes embody moral values defined by ancient cosmology.

Firstly, the royal function must remain virtuous and pious. These values are essential for he who has the responsibility to lead and to rule. Aragorn, whose destiny is to be king, reflects those values in every word, in every gesture. For

example, at the end of Minas Tirith's battle, Aragorn went to the house of the healing and successively healed, one by one, his companions fallen during the battle because: "The hands of the kings are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known" (TOLKIEN 1993: 897). It is interesting to remark also that the feat of the Paths of the Dead's crossing was indirectly told by Gimli after the battle which increases the merit of his action, and at the same time expresses the admiration and the trust that the warrior placed in his king and captain. "I was held to the road only by the will of Aragorn," admitted Gimli before leaving Legolas to tell the story (TOLKIEN 1993: 908). Aragorn's royalty appears not only by itself, but also through the eyes of his brothers-in-arm and friends. This point shows us that Tolkien was very aware of one of the most important political principle for an ancient ruler: the Prince has to know how to govern himself in order to govern others (FOUCAULT 2001). In others words, the King's self-government is the fundamental condition to guarantee harmony and order in his kingdom. The King's ethic is the main condition for a harmonious society (DUMÉZIL 1995: I). The Gondor's Steward, portrayed as an envious and iniquitous character, incarnates, from this point of view, the exact opposite of king's ethic. It explains why his politic against Mordor's invasion turns into a disaster. Not only does he lose his most capable captain and son, Faramir, at a crucial moment because of a foolish decision: he is not willing not to "yield the River and the Pelennor unfought", but he also lost the faith of his soldiers after Faramir's death (TOLKIEN 1993: 848). This contrast between two kinds of leadership brings out the central influence of the king's virtue on his kingdom's destiny. This influence reflects once again the cosmology doctrine, which is at the base of traditional mythology. Moral values defined by the cosmos' order are conditions that guarantee peace and stability. Then harmony on Earth can be considered as a reflection of harmony in the sky. And this harmony on Earth, in Middle-Earth in the case of Tolkien's books, could truly be established only when two other functions faithfully follow the royal function's lead.

In a different way, the royal function is also incarnated by Gandalf, especially Gandalf the White. Here the magical element takes over the moral value. This point indicates another important dimension of the royal function, which is the manifestation of his power as symbol of his link with the cosmos or a superior Force. In his typology of domination's forms, Max Weber showed that charismatic domination came from a magical power of prophets, sages, therapists, jurists, leaders, or heroes (WEBER 1995: 3. §10). This magical power, or charisma in his terminology, is an extraordinary quality of a person who is blessed with forces or supernatural power inaccessible to common man. He is then considered by others as an envoy of Gods, or at least of a superior force: "a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor" as he claimed himself (TOLKIEN 1993: 348). Thus, Gandalf's figure is a representation on Earth of a superior power, which is not clearly identified as Christian God but rather a cosmological force. His closeness and his familiarity with animals, and his knowledge of Middle Earth's mysteries and races make him more a pagan pantheist than a Christian priest. Even the allusion of a mysterious life after life, causing his metamorphosis from Gandalf the Grey into Gandalf the White, has a profane aspect because he seems to acquire a new soul in his former body. This detail reveals an ancient belief in metempsychosis.

The second function has a double figure as well which are Gimli and Legolas. These figures belong to a typical heroic representation of the warrior function. Gimli incarnates the Strong, the Herculean type who is hot-tempered and rude. He always desires to engage immediately in a fight in order to resolve every problem. He usually uses a mace, an axe, or simply the strength of his arms. As a solitary fighter, he used to be in the vanguard. Legolas is more of a benefactor type. That means he is more attentive to moral or social effects of his skills and his actions. He is known for his agility and his archery skill. Usually well-armed, he is an archer with extraordinary projectiles (DUMÉZIL 1995: I). In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Boromir belongs also to the warrior function but his role is quite a negative one: he is here essentially to remind lecturers about the danger of warrior's outbreak.

Warriors always have an ambiguous place in every society. They are certainly admired and glorified by the majority, but at the same time feared and suspected because of their power to destroy. Indeed, he can be employed to defend his community. But, in the other hand, he might destroy it. This appears to be the essential problem of a warrior's ethic: how can a warrior manage to master himself in order to efficiently serve his community? In this perspective, Boromir represents the fellowship's weak component and a danger for its harmony: as a human being, he is dominated by his lust for power. Just like Isildur's lust for power that led him to conserve the Ring instead of destroy it, Boromir succumbed to the Ring's spell: "Why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power to Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor and all men would flock to my banner!" said the warrior to Frodo before tempting to take the Ring by force (TOLKIEN 1993: 418). This scene clearly reflects the human weakness of temptation, and shows at the same time that a warrior's lack of self-control always leads into a rupture. From another point of view, one can perceive through this critique of human desire that some catholic elements have been mixed with those from ancient cosmology. Human desire disturbs the cosmos' order. Human desire brings man to his own doom. This condemnation of human desire has deep Catholic roots but placed in a cosmologic frame, it becomes a little harder to recognize. This cosmology identifies God as nature, *Deus sive natura*, according to Spinoza's expression (SPINOZA 2010: 366-367). Then the critique of human desire appears more like an ecological matter than a moral matter. Nevertheless, in the end, these two perspectives rejoin themselves in a common concern: human salvation.

On the contrary, Gimli, the dwarf, is elaborated in such a way as to minimize the aggressiveness and to soften the representation of a warrior's furor. His small size diminishes lector's impression of ferocity. Gimli often makes jokes on himself and on his own race, even if he considers it very highly. This dialectic between a warrior's gentleness and brutality has been exploited by different cultures, if not all of them. In diverse mythologies, there are several parts under a blind rage, where

warriors are capable of brutalities and inhumanities beyond imagination, and then some moment later, they appear to be compassionate and benevolent. For example, one can easily think about Achilles who, under the spell of vengeance, ravaged his enemy's body but then seemed to be touched by a father's pain and loss (HOMER 1999: 22-23). This point indicates a cultural process aiming to soften man's aggressive impulses. In other words, epopee seemed to point out that gentleness is an attribute of virility and strength as well (DE ROMILLY 1979). And Gimli manifests precisely these seemed-to-be opposite qualities in his character. But then, there is still something rude, even animal, in dwarves: they live in mines, beneath the earth, and physically they are quite unpleasant. This resemblance with animals has two significations quite different. In one hand, it reminds all lectors the possibility of a warrior's outbreak, turning himself into a beast and then being able to destroy what he is sworn to defend. We have then a clear opposition between self-control and madness, madness considered here as a regression into bestiality. But on the other hand, it perpetuates and deepens the idea of a correspondence between a warrior's outer form and his inner form, like his soul. The classic example is naturally Scandinavian *berserker* whose name means « with bear's (*ber*) cover (*serkr*) ». According to Dumézil, « it seems that former Germans had no difficulty to attribute to the same man different "souls" and further, the "outer form" had been considered as the clearest characteristic of personality» (DUMÉZIL 1985: 208-209). Once again, this traditional metaphor of animal is also found in Gimli's description.

The principle of correspondence between a warrior's outer form and his inner form is also valid as one turns his gaze to the other representative of the warrior function, Legolas, the Elf Prince. Unlike Gimli, he incarnates a pure moral principle. His immaculate beauty reflects his moral purity, the source of all warriors' nobility. His absolute loyalty to Aragorn in every situation, as attested to his sworn to fight "for the love of the Lord of the White Tree", shows that he has mastered his furor in order to faithfully serve the society, represented here by the royal function

(TOLKIEN 1993: 912). His disdain towards the dwarves in the first volume shows a tension inside the warrior function. On one hand, we have an idealistic perfection of moral and beauty (Legolas) and on the other hand, a rude behavior without elegance and grace (Gimli). This tension points out the gap between two extremes inside the warrior function: an ideal of perfection and the risk to regress into a beast. The friendly relationship that Gimli and Legolas succeed to develop along their journey marks reconciliation between these two extremes, reconciliation necessary to the old society's harmony and to the cosmos' order.

Now let us talk about the Hobbits. In the mythological structure, the productive function is usually represented by twins, just like our Hobbit pair: Frodo and Sam or Merry and Pippin. They are mainly characterized by their kindness, docility, and devotion. In their mythological origin, they do not fight. However in Tolkien's epic transposition, they sometimes use swords but mostly, they employ the sharpness of their mind and the vivacity of their intelligence. Traditionally, the third function devotes itself entirely to the royal function, indicating thereby a complete submission of a subject towards his sovereign. However, Tolkien inverses this aspect by making Frodo the fellowship's heart and center. The other characters seem to be here simply to help him to fulfill his mission. Somehow, the theme of fidelity is still conserved in the story but with some variation. For example, Sam's devotion to Frodo, or the fact that Pippin becomes a guard serving under the Steward of Gondor's command. However, submission to the royal function is no longer the main quality of the productive function. It was rather replaced by brotherhood in *The Lord of the Rings*. The fellowship's breaking rang clearly the end of the former cosmological order and along with it, values that promoted the tri-functional structure. Thus, starting from *The Two Towers*, Tolkien modified some aspects of this function by giving the Hobbits a very important part of the story. Frodo's journey to the Mordor marks a real difference with the former mythological structure. The Hobbits as representations of the productive function seem to gain their independence from the royal function and also from the former cosmologic

order. Frodo's mission to destroy the Ring is as important as the warriors, if not more. By this third function's liberation, Tolkien introduces some crucial elements of Christian doctrine. The Ring can be compared to the Cross, and Frodo's journey to Jesus' march to the Golgotha. The Ring symbolizes very explicitly the burden of mankind's sin: their lust for power, their will to conquer, and their immoderate pride. In this perspective, Frodo's ultimate ambition is to bring redemption to every creature and the entire world. In other words, the savior of the world is not a heroic warrior figure anymore but a little and humble creature. This modification reveals a very deep Christian belief that the poor and the humble are those who can really save the world. That is why Heaven is promised to them (THE HOLY BIBLE, MATTHEW 5:3-12). Exactly like the end of the book where Frodo leaves Middle-Earth alongside the Elves to the land of eternity. But this modification also points out a democratic tendency of western societies beside the Christian theological basis. Because of workers increasing importance in every modern society, Hobbits as productive function's representation acquired a much more significant part in such an epopee as *The Lord of the Rings*. I am not saying here that there is a communist tendency in Tolkien's way of glorifying the humble, but one should remember, when reading his story, of all the social struggles in the 19th and 20th centuries that our author was a direct witness. This social reality attests somehow to the struggle for recognition, especially for fundamental rights that characterize western democracies (HONNETH 1996). And this recognition, in Tolkien's book, appears with the valorization of the Hobbits as the third function. This point shows how myths and epopees are not merely fictions, but are permeable to social context and evolution of ideas, whether political ideas or theological ideas (DUMÉZIL 1995: I). In addition, the enthusiasm for Tolkien's work nowadays might not be a simple mode opened by Hollywood, but rather a sign of youngsters' need for stable moral values in front of all the cynicism and the individualism in western societies.

Despite the fact that the basic mythological structure has been modified under

religious and political influences, the main metaphysical proposition remains the same. *The Lord of the Rings* perpetuates the affirmation that “All is One” (WISMANN 2012: 198ss). This affirmation draws its strength from the former cosmology, but on the other hand, from the Christian belief in the creative power of Word. From a cosmological point of view, “All is One” means “Nature is One”. In other words, the totality of all things can be unified in one and unique substance which is Nature, or in Tolkien’s world, Middle-Earth. In this perspective, different races in the story are merely different expressions of the same substance that constitutes this world as a totality. That is why each race has to have their own language in order to express, in its own way, its relation to the totality. However this totality, unlike all the former mythologies, no longer represents nor pretends to be a metaphysical principle permitting to explain the whole world. It rather indicates a horizon of symbols that thickens the story and the languages the author develops. “All is One” becomes, within the novel, an aesthetic principle rather than an explicative principle. If Tolkien managed to develop each race’s history and characters, his intention is to enrich its language with historical and mythical significations, and then becoming a real instrument of expression. Tolkien has always considered the Esperanto as a dead language because it lacks this essential historic and mythic dimension. It is merely a language of service, which one uses to name things but not to communicate. Communication supposes a meaning level that exceeds the simple fact of nomination. It means that language is more than a toolbox where one can easily find his readymade utensil in order to describe reality (CASSIRER 1955: I). That is why a sentence will always contain more significations than a simple addition of words that compose it and a text more sense than an aggregation of sentences. The strange and mysterious calling of Tolkien’s novel that happens in most reader’s mind seems to have its secret precisely in this dimension of language, and in its capacity to describe a vision or an imagination’s creation. There is no doubt that each race was not simply what it just is, but signified much more than that because each race symbolized particular values as I have established previously with the tri-functional structure. And in the

same way, their languages carried more than just sounds and syllables. They also contain a dimension of symbols and significations that exceed simple noises (CASSIRER 1955: I). Here lies the reason why one can immerse oneself in Tolkien's world because somehow it has more meaning than the bare real world. This is due to the tri-functional structure and to the former cosmology.

From a Christian point-of-view, language has in its essence a holy dimension. The Word always has something magical and mysterious because it has something to do with immaterial forces and creation (CASSIRER 1955: II). In the story, to be able to speak another race's language like Gandalf or Aragorn supposes knowledge of mysteries, and a power on things and other creatures. One can also think of Sauron who invents, by himself, the Black Speech in order to unify and to rule the Orcs. This shows that, in the linguistic level, language is a universal element that can suppress differences and unify the diversity. Thereby, it permits to maintain stability where there was only confusion and changing. In the artistic level, creating a new language means to create a whole race's history, legends, and myths, which ultimately means to create an entire world. However, this creation, as one can easily observe, is not a physical creation but an intellectual creation, which imparts significations to human spiritual life. In this perspective, Tolkien's effort to create new languages, especially the Elvish, means pushing further creation's process in order to express more profoundly the unity of his world and the unity based on consistency of its history; history that is contained in language itself. As a representation of physical perfection, as well as moral perfection, the Elves must have a perfect language too. It does not mean that Elvish has to have the perfect grammar, but rather it has to have the longest and richest history compared to other races. This point explains why they are the first race to have a language and are immortal.

By this observation about creation, I do not insinuate that Tolkien considered himself as a god, but such an operation belongs to a long past of western culture's

meditation about what creation and what art is. This meditation came from philosophical questions about the world's creation and the meaning of existence. Tolkien's answer is a double one. Firstly, he borrowed the tri-functional structure of Indo-European myths in order to give a historical dimension to his oeuvre. A dimension that also enriches his work with a metaphysical proposition: "All is One". Secondly, from this mythological dimension he created languages, which are artistic and concrete answers to the meditation about art and creation. Ordinarily, language has an ambiguous position: it can be used as a tool to nominate things in order to simplify and manipulate the reality (for example, technical and bureaucratic languages). It can also have a poetic purpose that no longer aims to manipulate things, but creates new significations and perceptions of the reality. In Tolkien's novel, the languages he created are not mere tools, but symbols reflecting values stemming from the tri-functional structure and the cosmological order. In other terms, languages are extracted from their dimension of designation to enter into the universe of pure signification where each language is a manifestation of the totality.

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