Bilbo's Journey

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Discovering the Hidden Meaning of *The Hobbit*

Joseph Pearce

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For Jef and Lorraine Murray
and all who are hobbits at heart

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CHAPTER 1

Bilbo's Pilgrimage

J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S first work of fiction, *The Hobbit*, is often overlooked in favor of its epic follow-up, *The Lord of the Rings*. And not without reason. *The Lord of the Rings* carries a depth of meaning and an overall quality that outstrips its predecessor. It is also a publishing phenomenon. Since its initial publication, almost sixty years ago, more than 150 million copies of *The Lord of the Rings* have been sold. Furthermore, Tolkien's epic has triumphed over all its literary rivals in numerous opinion polls. A survey organized jointly by a major bookselling chain and a national TV network in the UK in 1996 revealed that *The Lord of the Rings* topped the poll in 104 of the 105 branches of the bookstore, receiving 20 percent more votes than its nearest rival, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*. It triumphed in similar fashion in other surveys conducted by the BBC, by national newspapers, and by literary societies. Perhaps its ultimate triumph in the age of the internet was its being voted best book of the millennium by

Amazon.com customers, signaling its conquest of the final frontier of cyberspace.

Not surprisingly, in the wake of the book's phenomenal success, Peter Jackson's three-part movie adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* became one of the most successful films of all time. In December 2012, a decade after *The Lord of the Rings* was premiered, the first part of Jackson's three-part adaptation of *The Hobbit* was released in movie theaters around the world. As the movie takes the world by storm, Bilbo Baggins is set to take the limelight from Frodo, his more famous and illustrious nephew. These are indeed heady days for the relatively simple children's story, originally published in 1937, which would pave the way for its author's far more ambitious epic, published almost twenty years later.

It should come as no surprise that Jackson's movie is not strictly speaking a children's film. The producer forged his reputation as a maker of gruesome horror movies and does not do Disney schmaltz (Deo gratias!). Containing a degree of violence and an array of monsters, including giant spiders, trolls, orcs, a fearsome dragon, and the incomparably creepy Gollum, the film is not for the very young or the timid. Younger children, who might have enjoyed the book, will find the violence a little unsettling and the visualization of the monstrous the very stuff of which nightmares are made.

On the other hand, it should be stressed that *The Hobbit* is much more than a simple children's story and that any dumbing down of the gravitas of its moral dimension would do much more damage to the integrity of the work

than the graphic depiction of violence and the frightening presentation of the monstrous. At its deepest level of meaning—and great children's literature always has a deep level of meaning—*The Hobbit* is a pilgrimage of grace, in which its protagonist, Bilbo Baggins, becomes grown-up in the most important sense, which is the growth in wisdom and virtue. Throughout the course of his adventure—and every pilgrimage is an adventure—the hobbit develops the habit of virtue and grows in sanctity. Thus *The Hobbit* illustrates the priceless truth that we only become wise men (homo sapiens) when we realize that we are pilgrims on a purposeful journey through life (homo viator).

Apart from the story's status as a Christian *bildungsroman*, charting Bilbo's rite of passage from ignorance to wisdom and from bourgeois vice to heroic virtue, *The Hobbit* parallels *The Lord of the Rings* in the mystical suggestiveness of its treatment of Divine Providence, and serves as a moral commentary on the words of Christ that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). In these three aspects, it can truly be said of *The Hobbit*, as Tolkien said of *The Lord of the Rings*, that it is "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work."[1]

On one level, Bilbo's journey from the homely comfort of the Shire to the uncomfortable lessons learned on the Lonely Mountain, in parallel with Frodo's journey from the Shire to Mount Doom, is a mirror of Everyman's journey through life. It is in this sense that Tolkien wrote in his celebrated and cerebral essay "On Fairy Stories" that "the fairy-story . . . may be used as a *Mirour de l'Omme*" or as "the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man."[2] In short, we

are meant to see ourselves reflected in the character of Bilbo Baggins and our lives reflected in his journey from the Shire to the Lonely Mountain. How is this? Clearly, we are not hobbits, literally speaking, nor could we ever journey with dwarves through the Misty Mountains and Mirkwood, encountering goblins and elves en route, except vicariously by allowing our imagination, as readers, to follow in Bilbo's footsteps. In order to see the story as Tolkien wishes us to see it, we have to transcend the literal meaning of the story and ascend to the level of moral and anagogical applicability.

For the Christian, who spurns the nihilism of the existentialist, life is charged with meaning and purpose and is at the service of the final goal and purpose of every human life, which is its being united with the Divine Life of God in heaven. This being so, every life should be a quest to achieve the goal of heaven through a growth in virtue, thereby attaining the power, through grace, to overcome the monsters and demons which seek to prevent the achievement of this paramount goal. It is in this way and with this understanding of the meaning and purpose of life that we are meant to read *The Hobbit* and it is in this way, and this way alone, that we find its deepest and most applicable meaning.

Another key component of *The Hobbit*, which it shares with *The Lord of the Rings*, is the presence of the invisible hand of Providence or grace. This invisible hand, euphemistically labeled "luck" in the story, has led to a degree of misunderstanding on the part of many critics. Colin Manlove is typical of those who see the presence of such "luck" as a

literary weakness, describing it as "the continued presence of biased fortune." Manlove complains that "a whole skein of apparent coincidences" signifies that "[i]t is not moral will but luck which is the architect of success." In the presence of such "biased fortune" or "luck," Manlove argues that the struggle with evil in Tolkien's work is "mere posturing in a rigged boat."[3] Such criticism lacks subtlety because it fails to see the subtlety at work in the narrative. As Gandalf makes plain at the book's conclusion, what had been called "luck" was not really "luck" at all. "You don't really suppose, do you," Gandalf tells Bilbo, "that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck . . . ?"

Pace Manlove, "moral will" is never sufficient in itself as "the architect of success," either in Middle-earth or in the wider world in which we live. Contrary to the claims of Nietzsche, Hitler, and other secular "progressives," there is no triumph of the will without the supernatural assistance of grace. This is the whole point of Frodo's failure to destroy the Ring of his own volition in *The Lord of the Rings*. "Moral will," on its own, is never enough. An outside agent, i.e. grace, is always necessary. Thus it is Gollum, ironically and paradoxically, who is the unwitting agent of grace at the climactic moment on Mount Doom. Yet his sudden appearance at the crucial moment is not mere "luck," if by "luck" we mean mere chance. He is there because his life had been spared at earlier crucial moments by Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam, all of whom, at various times, had been tempted to kill their enemy when the opportunity presented itself. In each case, the hobbits chose mercy and pity over the desire for vengeance. These successive acts of virtue, of loving their

enemy instead of hating him, were moral tests, the passing of which was necessary to the defeat of evil. Having passed the test, Gollum's appearance at the crucial moment was the hobbits' reward for the passing of the test, an unexpected but necessary gift, given to them by the same invisible Hand which had given them the earlier tests. This is not "luck" but providence.

In *The Hobbit*, as in *The Lord of the Rings*, good "luck" is inextricably connected to good choices and bad "luck" is inextricably connected to bad choices. With regard to the latter, we should recall the words of Gandalf to Pippin that "[o]ften does hatred hurt itself"[4] or the words of Theoden that "oft evil will shall evil mar."[5] Thus, there is a supernatural dimension to the unfolding of events in Middle-earth, in which Tolkien shows the mystical balance that exists between the promptings of grace, or of demonic temptation, and the response of the will to such promptings and temptations. This mystical relationship plays itself out in the form of transcendent providence, which is much more than "luck" or chance. For a Christian, this is life as it is. It is realism. A Christian believes in dragons, even if he can't see them, and knows that they are perilous and potentially deadly. They are certainly not to be courted, nor is it wise to toy with them. "The more truly we can see life as a fairy-tale," said the great G. K. Chesterton, "the more clearly the tale resolves itself into war with the dragon who is wasting fairyland."[6]

Returning to Manlove's misapprehension about the nature of "luck" in Middle-earth, or "biased fortune" as he calls it, we can see his error in describing the struggle

with evil in Tolkien's work as "mere posturing in a rigged boat." The truth is that "fortune" in Middle-earth, and in the world beyond it, is biased in both directions. On the one hand, grace is always available to those who seek it and ask for it, biasing "fortune" in the direction of goodness; yet, on the other hand, the fallenness of nature means that man's natural tendency is towards concupiscence and its destructive consequences. If we don't ask for help, we are bound to fall. It is in this choice, rooted in the gift and responsibility of free will, that the struggle with evil is won or lost. The will must willingly cooperate with grace or, in its failure to do so, must inevitably fall into evil. Far from the struggle being a "mere posturing in a rigged boat," it is a dangerous adventure in a perilous realm.

If the interplay of providence and free will is the means by which the dynamism of virtue and its consequences drive the narrative forward, the overarching moral of *The Hobbit* would appear to be a cautionary meditation on Matthew 6:21 (*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*).

The Hobbit begins with Bilbo's desire for comfort and his unwillingness to sacrifice himself for others. His heart is essentially self-centered, surrounding itself with the treasures of his own home, an ironic and symbolic prefiguring of Smaug's surrounding himself with treasure in his "home" in the Lonely Mountain. Bilbo, on a microcosmic scale, is, therefore, nothing less than a figure and prefigurement of Smaug the dragon. He is afflicted with the dragon sickness. His pilgrimage to the Lonely Mountain is the means by which he will be cured of this materialist malady. It is a via dolorosa, a path of suffering, the following of which

will heal him of his self-centeredness and teach him to give himself self-sacrificially to others.

The paradoxical consequence of the dragon sickness is that the things possessed possess the possessor, much as the possession of the Ring in the later book leads to those who wear it becoming possessed by their possession. In the case of the Ring, the bearer of it can resist its power only by refusing to succumb to the temptation to wield its power by wearing it. In other words, the Ring's malevolent power over the one who carries it is directly connected to the degree of attachment that the bearer has towards it. The more detached the bearer is from his possession, the less possessed is he by it. In similar fashion Bilbo is far too attached to his own possessions at the beginning of the story, not for their own sakes but for the pleasure that they offer. His possessions are not valued for the power that they wield, as is the case with the Ring, but for their ability to supply a soporific comfort. Although he only values his possessions as a means to an end, and not as an end in themselves, the fact that they are necessary, or so he thinks, to the attainment of the creature comforts that he craves, bestows upon them a power over their possessor which is akin to possession of him. Thus Bilbo is a slave to his possessions at the beginning of the story and is liberated from them, or from his addiction to them, by its end. Similarly Smaug is a prisoner of his own treasure-hoard, unable to leave his brooding over his possessions for fear that someone might steal something. The dragon's sickness is especially ironic because it is clear that Smaug has no practical use for any of the treasure. He is a slave of something that is essentially

useless to him. His dragon-heart is possessed by the addiction to something which, for a dragon, is nothing but trivia and trash.

Ultimately, as we shall see as we follow Bilbo on his pilgrimage from the Shire to the Lonely Mountain and back again, *The Hobbit* is not merely about slaying the dragon who is wasting fairy land but is also, and more importantly, about slaying the dragon who is attempting to waste our own souls. Even as Bilbo wanders further from his own home, the truth that he exemplifies is always close to home for each of us as readers. Each of us is prone to the ill effects of the dragon sickness and each of us needs to walk with Bilbo so that we may be healed from its potentially deadly consequences. With this sobering and sanctifying thought in mind, let's make the pilgrimage with Bilbo, following in his furry footsteps on the path of grace.