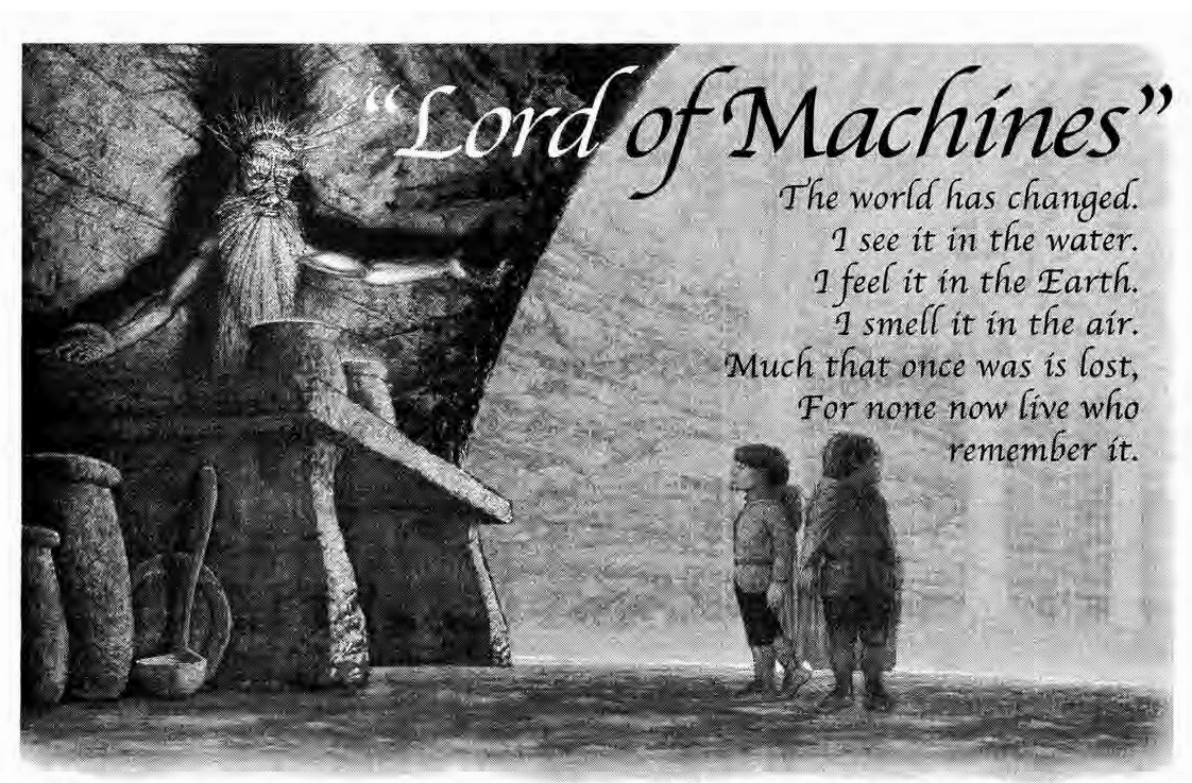


Lord of Machines

Into Middle Earth with J.R.R. Tolkien

James Bell



21 June 2002

Contents

Tolkien the Messenger	3
The Fellowship of the Monkeywrench	4
Middle Earth First!	7

“The world has changed. I see it in the water. I feel it in the Earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost, For none now live who remember it.”

These words, spoken against a black movie screen, conjure forth images of our own world just as much as they set the scene for the opening of the fantasy film *The Lord of the Rings—The Fellowship of the Ring*. This epic myth resonates on many levels with the changes our world faces, from global warming to war. It is this ability to tap into universal archetypes that has propelled its popularity today. After being nominated for 13 Academy Awards and winning four, we can be sure that wizards and hobbits will be part of our popular culture into the foreseeable future.

It was the same when *The Lord of the Rings* first gained mass appeal in the US as a paperback. The book sold three million copies between 1965 and 1968 coinciding with the worldwide student demonstrations of the late ‘60s. It gained an underground following among hippies and antiwar protesters, as the story seemed to speak directly to their causes for social justice and the environment. If anything, the book’s appeal to environmental activists has grown over the years, with its author, J.R.R. Tolkien, becoming a sort of patron saint of neo-luddites. Tolkien, at first glance, seems an odd choice for the storyteller favorite of the luddite and revolutionary—yet an examination of Tolkien’s epic sheds light on why these stories resonate with the rebels of our technologic times.

Tolkien the Messenger

Tolkien, who lived from 1892 to 1973, was a stuffy Oxford don who grew up in the Warwickshire countryside during the turn of the last century. He moved with his widowed mother when he was eight to the dirty industrial city of Birmingham. Years later when he finally returned to his childhood stomping grounds in his treasured hamlet of Sarehole, it had been overtaken by urban sprawl. This “loss of paradise” inspired Tolkien’s outspoken lifelong hatred of cars, roads and machinery.

Tolkien never owned a television or a washing machine. He was a confirmed luddite, rejecting refrigerated food and cars. “How I wish the ‘infernal combustion’ engine had never been invented,” he said. When asked about his life, he responded, “I am in fact a hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe and like good plain food... I go to bed late and get up late.” In an enlightening letter written to his son, Christopher, in 1943, Tolkien vented his frustration with government and the industrial age, “My political opinions lean more and more to anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs)... There is only one bright spot and that is the growing habit of disgruntled men of dynamiting factories and power stations.” It is this last statement and others like it that lead one to wonder if Tolkien would have approved of today’s “elves”—those of the Earth Liberation Front. It is a fact that Tolkien was deeply troubled by

the impact of modern industry and technology on the world's environment, especially "the lunatic destruction of the physical lands which Americans inhabit."

In his letters, Tolkien considered technology a kind of "black magic." The machines of our world, and the dark magic of Mordor, were both expressed in Tolkien's words by a craving for "speed, reduction of labor and reduction of the gap between idea or desire and the result or effect." The magic of creative enchantment was opposite that of technology's black arts, Tolkien saw enchantment as the artistic construction of "Secondary Worlds," like his own creation of Middle Earth. Tolkien thought of his enchantments as introducing new fantasy worlds and wonderlands into our own, making the Primary World a better place to live. In particular, Tolkien believed that words held power. Professor T.A. Shippey in *The Road to Middle Earth* wrote, "[Tolkien] thought that people could feel history in words, could recognize language styles, could extract sense from sound alone... It was like him to think, Bombadil-style, that beneath all this there might be a 'true language,' one 'isomorphic with reality'..." Enchantment through words was Tolkien's ultimate elfish craft and the primary reason behind his creation of Middle Earth.

Tolkien started enchanting us in 1937 when *The Hobbit* became the *Harry Potter* of its day. Tolkien was a philologist—one who studies words and researches their origins and histories. In Ancient Egypt, the name "Hob" meant "messenger." It is the name most commonly given to the Egyptian god Thoth, the messenger of Ra. Thoth was the god of writing and language. Tolkien coined the word "hobbit" and created the main hobbit characters Bilbo and Frodo to be his "messengers." In doing this, Tolkien was drawing a parallel between the god of words and himself. More importantly, Tolkien believed that these old words held power, and thus he used their ancient meanings to give his enchantments life.

The Fellowship of the Monkeywrench

Tolkien would take years to craft a "sequel." *The Lord of the Rings*, published in 1954, would become a sort of epic anti-quest where Tolkien's heroes seek to rid the world of a great evil. This was the opposite of mythical quests throughout history where heroes set off to find something to bring back and aid their people. Tolkien's heroes turn the tool of the enemy against itself, tossing it into the fires of the Cracks of Doom like a monkeywrench thrown into the gears of a machine. Our society's growing desire to rid itself of runaway technologic progress resonates with this anti-quest element of the story. Tolkien would agree, "If there is any contemporary reference in my story at all, it is to what seems to me the most widespread assumption of our time: that if a thing can be done, it must be done. This seems to me wholly false."

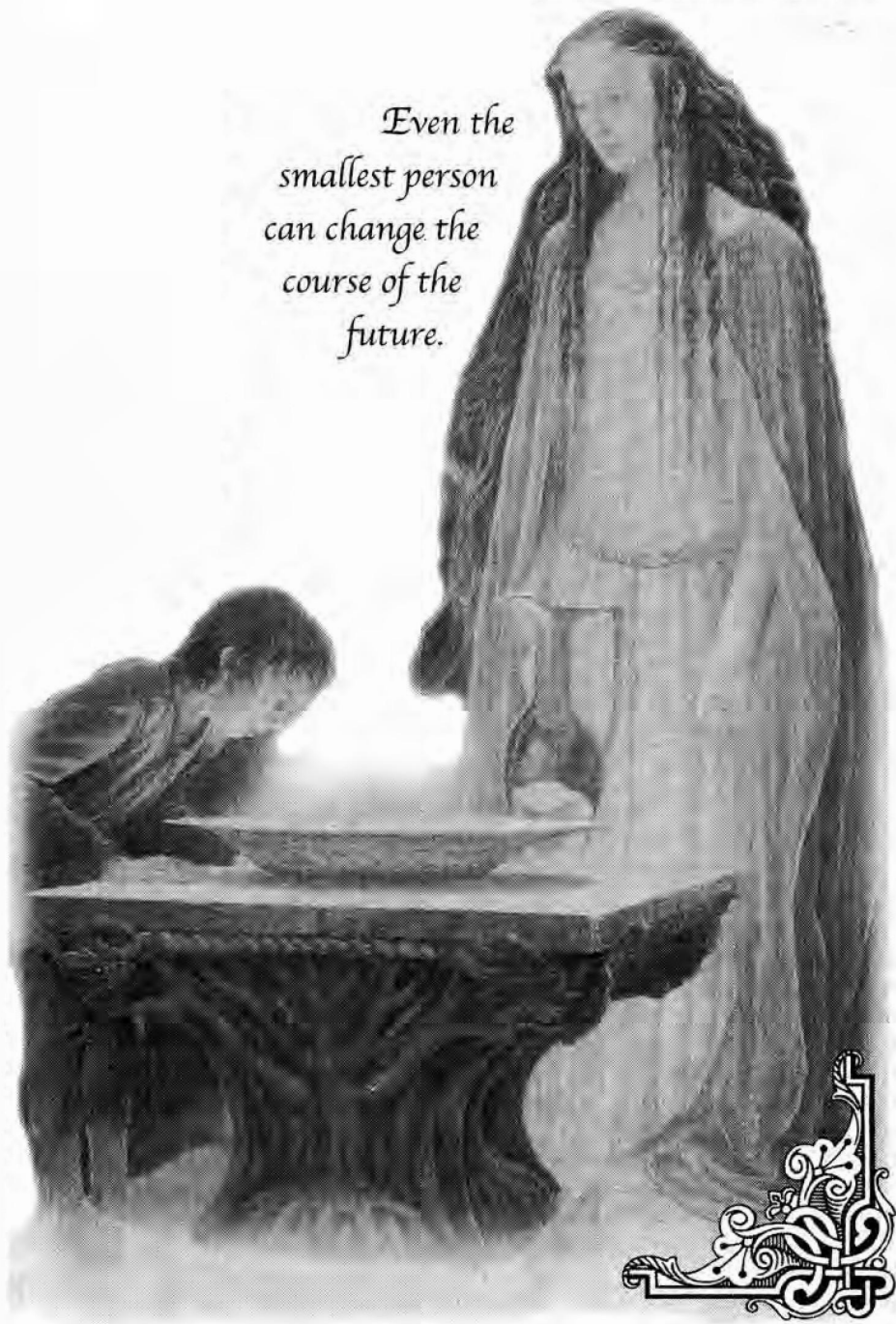
The science fiction author Gene Wolfe, who corresponded with Tolkien, described the secret behind the epic's inspiration. "He uncovered a forgotten wisdom among the barbarian tribes who had proved (against all expectation) strong enough to overpower

the glorious civilizations of Greece and Rome; and he had not only uncovered but understood it. What he did, then, was to plant in my consciousness and yours the truth that society need not be as we see it around us.” Tolkien’s goal was to create a new mythology for England and a modern myth for “everyman.”

England’s mythology was forgotten, buried around the countryside. The Arthurian legends, Tolkien believed, were an imported French myth. He knew that the Anglo-Saxon metalsmiths of old were storytellers, forging their epics in their work. He reached back into the archeological and linguistic roots of England to resurface a lost mythology.

Tolkien found inspiration elsewhere as well, like from the rune singers of Finland and their oral histories contained in the historic text of the *Kalevala*. He recognized that the existence of the *Kalevala* gave an identity to Finland that helped it exist as a nation separate from Sweden. He wanted to fill his stories with such power and meaning. Tolkien captured all these various tendrils of mythology in his novels, creating a modern mythology for the “little guy”—the peasant, the worker, the student, the underclass, the minority, the rebel.

*Even the
smallest person
can change the
course of the
future.*





Every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate.

Middle Earth First!

Today the success of the movie version of *The Lord of the Rings* continues to extend the reach of Tolkien's mythology. Galadriel, the elf queen of Lothlorien, sums up his message when she tells the Hobbit Frodo that, "Even the smallest person can change the course of the future." Cate Blanchett, who plays Galadriel in the film, comments on her character's purpose: "She's handing on the torch to humankind, she's challenging the viewers to say what are you going to do with the Earth, we've had this paradise, so now you men—you humankind—have the responsibility of the Earth."

The Two Towers, the second part of *The Lord of the Rings*, is due out in theaters around the world in December. Anyone who recalls the story will remember that it is here that we are introduced to the Ent known as Treebeard and his army of vengeful trees. Tolkien loved trees, and he was upset with their destruction most of all: "The savage sound of the electric saw is never silent wherever trees are still found growing. Every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate. In all my works, "I take the part of trees as against all their enemies."

Indeed, it would seem that this would be a good time for activists in the service of trees to make themselves known. Earth First!ers discussed this very idea at this year's Organizers' Conference. Be on the look out for Middle Earth First!ers defending a

forest near you. Harnessing Treebeard's popularity for saving wilderness is something that would have most assuredly made Tolkien smile.

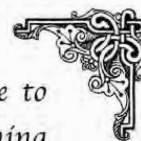
As Tolkien saw it—it's the trees and the rest of us versus the machines. "All this stuff is mainly concerned with the fall, mortality and the machine. By the machine, I intend all use of external devices or even the use of inherent inner powers, with the corrupted motive of dominating and bulldozing the real world. The machine is our more obvious modern form. The enemy in successive forms is always concerned with sheer domination, and so the Lord of Machines... As the servants of the machines are becoming a privileged class, the machines are going to be enormously more powerful. What's their next move?"

James Bell is a writer for Sustain, www.sustain.info, a nonprofit environmental communications firm. He recently launched www.LastWizards.com, where one can find essays and interviews on eco-defense, culture jamming and occult philosophy.



My political opinions lean more and more to anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs)... There is only one bright spot and that is the growing habit of disgruntled men of dynamiting factories and power stations.

—J.R.R. Tolkien



The Ted K Archive

James Bell
Lord of Machines
Into Middle Earth with J.R.R. Tolkien
21 June 2002

Earth First! Journal 22, no. 6. Edited by Dug, Samantha, Sprig, and Turtle.
Digitized in cooperation with the Bayerische
Staatsbibliothek. <www.environmentandsociety.org/node/7069>

www.thetedkarchive.com