On Being a 1960s Tolkien Reader

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The desire to interpret texts – the structured examination of their formal organization, patterned associations, intertextual constructions and, thence, organized cultural meanings – is a pretty ineluctable one. It is at its strongest when people sense that something is at stake, when the emergent meanings matter in some wider sense. And it was inevitable, with the astonishing resonance that *The Lord of the Rings* has created and sustained across its various embodiments, that a squadron of interpreters should home in on it. The risk is that we will come to love a resulting conflictual scene. A combination of the strong tendency among academics to compete for intellectual "novelty" of interpretation, well described by David Bordwell, with our own version of the Third Party Effect (divining a meaning/effect that will be true only of others, not of ourselves [see for instance Peloff "Third-Person Effect"]), will produce a rush of judgments on story, book, and film. Judging quickly will not only be unhelpful, it will be, I want to argue, untrue to a spirit which invested the early responses to Tolkien's world. For the caricature of the "1960s reader" who rang Tolkien late at night to ask about the Ents, wore a "Frodo Lives" badge, and was "into weed" misses some vital aspects of the story's early reception. I know, because I was there. This essay has to start with an account of a difficult personal experience engendered by the Jackson/New Line Cinema films.

On Discovering One's Ideal Interpretation

I had to see each part of the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* twice: once, to find out just what the makers had done with it; a second time, I hoped, to enjoy it for whatever it had turned out to be. This was not from some kind of literary purism, an a priori preference for books over films. There are many cases where I have been only too grateful for a film adaptation of a book that I just can't get through, or where a book has stayed cold and impenetrable to me until a film has made it come to life. Differently than that, I have had a longstanding affair with *The Lord of the Rings* and went to see the films in a state of some nervousness. It would be only by first coming to terms with the nature of the adaptation that I would be able, as I very much wanted, to let myself go with it. And it is as well that I did this. Along with the many moments of sheer happiness at seeing the story-world enacted in ways that just made me smile with pleasure, there are others – very important others – where I was seriously aghast. What surprises me, even now, is that I didn't know what they would be. Knowing now, I understand things about my involvement in Tolkien's world that I had not understood up to this point.

I first read the books in 1959, when I was thirteen. I can't remember any detail of what they meant to me then, but I know that I was seriously engrossed – sufficiently that when I was asked to write a story for a class by my genial elderly English teacher Mr Francombe, I wrote a full sequel. It took me all of about five pages to recount the history of the discovery, quest, and destruction of a second Ring. Moved by my efforts, Mr Francombe asked me what I thought of the books. I admitted my fascination. Then he asked me: did I think the story was an allegory? I don't remember my answer, but what I do remember is that I knew that I didn't know the meaning of the word. It prompted my first ever visit to a dictionary.

The books of *The Lord of the Rings* remained important to me thereafter. I re-read them regularly through the 1960s. I introduced them to Judith, whom I would marry (it is her copies that I have revisited regularly ever since). In the 1970s we discovered the extraordinary radio

adaptation of the BBC, and for years lived off our illicit recordings of them. We even rather liked Ralph Bakshi's half-adaptation. It was only in the moment of rejecting some very particular aspects of the first two parts of the film – more in fact than feeling strangely distanced from the third part – that I came to see *how* the books had mattered to me and even, in retrospect, made sense of an unease I had had about the radio adaptation but had never put into words. Since then, discussing the films with many friends and colleagues, I have realized that I seem to be almost alone in my "reading." And that interests me, almost as much as the understanding of what *The Lord of the Rings* has meant in my own life.

My refusals centre around three most symptomatic moments, one from each part of the film. Other disappointing aspects I tended to note, but was willing to let pass: for example, the casting. Pippin and Merry were just too leprechaunish for my taste, but I marginalized them in my mind, and that made them a topic of simple dislike, not part of my refusal. I forgave that the Shire was to me too clean and sentimentalized. Dropping Tom Bombadil was no problem. And so on. My first real unease came with the Council of Elrond. In the film, the emergent Company sits on a balcony with the Ring exposed in front of them, and under its baleful influence they begin to squabble, argue, even fight. That was to me utterly wrong. I cannot yield to the filmmakers' explanations of the need to trim the wordiness of the entire chapter that Tolkien devoted to the retold histories, slow assembling of understandings, detailed workings out. To me, the ratiocination of the Council was the nub of the story. Here, in space carved out of difficult times, the characters *reasoned*: what is the nature of Evil? It is not self-evident, it has needed research, discussion, a coming together of minds. How big is the threat? How could it possibly be combated, defeated? Do we have the strength ... the will ... the courage? Without that reasoning, the story was to me no more than an adventure story, a "fantasy."

The second problem was worse than the first, and this time lacked even the thin justification of saving screen time. In *The Two Towers*, Pippin and Merry meet up with the Ents after their escape from Saruman's Orcs. The Ents to me were well visualised, with excellent voices. But in Fangorn a debate arises – will the Ents go to war? In the

books we do not hear their debates – the two hobbits, whom we accompany, are left to await the outcome. But I always "imagined in" these discussions – building up to the decisive "Hoom" as the Ents broke their Entmoot and began their march on Isengard. As Treebeard says, they are almost certainly going to their doom. This will be the last march of the Ents. But this is right, and inevitable. The film disposes of this, without compunction. Jackson's Ents *refuse* to go to war, and have to be *tricked* into it. Led the wrong way by Pippin, Treebeard is shown the devastation of the forest wreaked by Saruman (as if he would not already know: he, the shepherd of the trees) and is enraged. The Ents, from being embodiments of long wisdom, became foolish, grumpy, diminished creatures. Instead of reasoning their way to a decision, and accepting the fate this imposed on them, they became servants to others' wills.

In the third film, the battle scenes were fantastical and fantastic. I regretted the manically chuckling King of the Dead, but could pass on. But I was deeply discomforted by what to others has seemed the tiniest thing – indeed, some to whom I have pointed it out have had to go back to check that I was right. After the Battle of Pelennor Fields, the Lords of the West gather in Council. What must be done next? This was just a pause, not a victory. In the books, Aragorn calls on Gandalf to guide them, as he has ever done. And Gandalf counsels them to draw Sauron's eyes away from his own land – they must take an army south and attack the Gates of Mordor, even though they cannot possibly win. In the film, these words are *transferred to Aragorn*. Gandalf has for a moment despaired – he does not know what to do – and Aragorn has to step in with the solution. This was to my ears impossibly wrong. Gandalf, who may have looked and sounded so right in the films, was here made weak. He would never, but never, be at such a loss. He might listen, research archives, travel to hear news and gather information. And then he would know. His wizardry lay not in his sword, but in his intellect. He was the philosophical opposition to evil embodied. In a sense that I could not have articulated at the time of my reading of the books, it was important to me that Gandalf was a source of reliable, generalized wisdom. Somehow he stood outside time, and embodied a principle of understanding and best course of action.

In conversations with friends afterwards, I realised that I had had a fourth refusal, but only in retrospect could I place it: the prologue. The films begin, as in fact did the BBC's radio adaptation, by retelling the history of the Ring. In one sense, everyone who has read the books knows that history. And of course having such a prologue tidily establishes the good/evil opposition; and saves much time from later retelling. But, the harm it does! The Prologue is simply incompatible with any notion that we, like the characters, *might not know* the nature of the threats and dangers. I had never until this point been able to name the unease I had felt at the opening to the radio adaptation, until I identified this much wider set of shifts in the films.

To me, there is a clear pattern linking these four refusals of mine. The chain that combines them is the certainty that for me *The Lord of the Rings* is a very particular fictional treatise on the nature of evil. Only a deeply reasoning assembly of peoples committed to its defeat could unmask its deceits, see past their own ignorance and uncertainties, and assemble the sheer will and courage to keep fighting, no matter what the cost. The story did not need to be as simple as an allegory (now that I know what that word means!). It was a sensibility. There was a structuring principle to the evils of the world – the Vietnam war, the Bomb, apartheid, and so on – but it hid itself. The principle behind evil in the world was huge, and dangerous, and could only be defeated by acts of unlikely will. But if there is no space for reason to operate, no Kantian moment when humans can rise above the first impulses and work out the principles of operation of Evil, there can be no Hope.

The Concept of Interpretive Community

Mine was, I am sure, a 1960s reading, in the sense that it was definitely forged in that period, and in that it played a role in the emergence of my political views and engagements. Yet it is hard to find any sign of this in the quite copious writings which have told the story of that first phase of Tolkien fandom. As *facts*, the standard story may be right, but I believe it gets the situation wrong in several important ways. Yet it raises a

problem: implicit in the various writings about 1960s readers is an account of their interpretive strategies – how they made the books meaningful to themselves. These readers – among whom I count myself – are presented, in effect, as a troublesome interpretive community, with whom Tolkien himself felt uncomfortable. Not only do I sense that this account misses much that is important about 1960s readers, I sense that it hangs upon a use of the concept of "interpretive community" that I want to question.

Consider this excerpt from an interview with a young woman, part of our International *Lord of the Rings* Reception project; she had been selected because she exemplified one tendency we had identified. Her hesitations indicate that the conclusion she arrives at was almost a *discovery* she made about her own reactions in the course of being interviewed:

> I just liked his character, and also afterwards, after they see him and they go out and get lost on those mountains those, they're like kind of weird ghost things come in and kind of *get* them and he comes and saves them, and I just quite liked that bit of the story ... and I thought that was quite a big, well not a big *part*, but like for me I really liked that character and I liked his wife, she was like magical and mystical and she sounded really nice but it kind of made it seem like the journey in the film, it made me feel like the journey from the Shire to the *Prancing Pony*, it's made it seem quite a lot shorter distance than I think it was in the actual *book* ... quite a lot easier to get to and I kind of think they could've maybe put something in there. I know two of the hobbits get stuck in a tree or something ... and it kind of tells how *little* they *know* about the Middle Earth." (viewer interview)

The concept of "interpretive community" has become the most widely used expression to indicate a range of features attending how audiences read, listen, and watch. Its obvious first intent is to stress the group nature of such activities. When we read a book, the way we read is a function not just of our private self but of how we have learned to look at a book of this kind. Why we read it, what we seek in it, how we interpret characters, follow narratives, forge analogies with the world beyond the book are all in part shared with others. But what kind of thing is the "community" that results? Easiest to understand are local groups who meet, discuss, share ideas, and reinforce tendencies in each other – even

through disagreement. Jenny Hartley's *Reading Groups* draws attention to one such widespread phenomenon. Janice Radway's well-known study of one more informal group delved deeply into the shared practices of a group of women romance readers.

But not all uses of "interpretive community" presume such intimate connections among members. As Kim Schrøder ["Audience Semiotics"] has pointed out, many writers are content to use the expression to describe people who have never met or communicated, but who somehow are thought to share the same mentality. In what sense are they a "community," then? More importantly, to me, there is a striking contrast between the frequency of use of the expression in works of theory and textual interpretation and a scarcity of close empirical studies of actual communities. We find ourselves in the cleft of a problem, therefore. The concept is very valuable, but uses of it are preventing that value being realized.

The great potential strength of the "interpretive community" concept lies in its necessary Janus nature: it points simultaneously in two directions, towards the ways people understand themselves and the ways people understand texts: how they invest their sense of self in being kinds of people and in belonging; and how they thread together elements within circulating cultural texts to form meaningful wholes, centering on some components, marginalizing – or disputing – others, and thus attaching significance to them. It is surely this double potential that has made so many scholars turn to the concept. The quotation above brings such a process strikingly into view. "Sasha" discovers in her own responses an organizing principle that provides her with criteria for judging the rightness and effectiveness of the film's presentation of the story, which is also the ground of her pleasure and participation. It is important to her that the hobbits do not know the extent of their danger, or the Enemy's power, when they set out. They have to learn as they go, and thus in supporting each other discover the strength to continue. She does not watch the film, she evaluates it from the requirements of this standpoint – even though it is very unlikely that, until the circumstances of the interview, she had ever expressed the commitment even to herself in so

many words. What she thus finds is a *principle of the importance of true friendship*. In that sense, of course, she is very like me.

But Sasha's resonant account at the same time reveals a key problem. She is doing this alone. Although the bones of a reading strategy are emerging, it is not clear in what ways this will count as connecting her to any identifiable interpretive community. We could label it as such, but that would be essentially gestural. And that points towards a more general problem. In their overview of the field of reception research, within which the concept of "interpretive community" has found its happiest home, Machor and Goldstein note that by 2000 the MLA database had recorded more 3,900 pieces of published work [*Reception Study*, xv]. The volume is impressive, but the greatest proportion of these has consisted of essentially theoretical enquiries. There has been very little address to the question: how to investigate empirically the formation, operation, and functions of real interpretive communities.

Let me briefly consider just some of the questions that ought to be asked about interpretive communities if the concept is really to become an active tool for research, instead of a convenient labelling device, offering rhetorical closure:

What are the conditions for the formation of different kinds of interpretive community? It might seem obvious that a reading group coming together and agreeing to read *Lord of The Rings* would thereby constitute an interpretive community. But that is to presume that its members give themselves over to its shared practices, rather than reserving other reading styles for other situations. Could we say when and under what circumstances people may tend to give themselves over wholeheartedly to a new way of using texts?

What happens when the practices of different interpretive communities come into conflict? A simple illustrative example: suppose someone watches the *Lord of The Rings* films first with friends (who share an emphasis on its action elements), then with family (where an older member of the family is "passing on" the story to her children), then in the context of having visited Internet sites and discussed the films online (this is based on real examples). When will their responses and assessments of the film be simply an *assemblage* of these circumstances

and potential interpretive communities, or how might conflicts express themselves? When will conflict result in refusal, rejection, withdrawal, loss of pleasure?

How long do interpretive communities have to operate to become effective? An evening out with casual friends will often result in pub conversations afterwards, and a very temporary community will be formed – but it is arguable that the very institution of visiting the pub after the cinema, and wider conventions for using cinema in this way, constitute the grounds of the kinds of conversation that will ensue, and constitute this as an interpretive community.

For the more fugitive kinds – the categorial memberships (for example, being a woman reader) or imputed memberships (for example, feeling myself to be a "1960s reader" although I have hardly ever discussed the book with my co-members!) – what kinds of knowledge and involvement are necessary for these to become operative? For instance, a woman watching the films may well find herself uneasy at the marginal position of women in the story. But this could crystallize in more than one direction. Involvement with certain kinds of feminist formation may take it in the direction of a naming of *Lord of The Rings* as a "male" story, and thus make pleasure in the film much harder to achieve. But another kind of sense of female community could celebrate a "modernizing" tendency in the film – as contrasted with the book – and thus take pleasure in the struggle to introduce what would be seen from the first perspective to be marginal components.

How do people leave interpretive communities? For instance, someone who has had contact with the Tolkien Society and experienced its ways of "reading" the books (for their literary and ethical value), but subsequently withdraws (as some have, calling it puritanical): does s/he automatically shed that reading style as part of the act of withdrawing? What happens to their capacity to enjoy and find meaning in the books/films as a result?

What conditions might we be able to determine for the real strength and longevity in reading styles and strategies? It may be obvious that such elements as a formal organization, regular communication with other members, perhaps publications that consolidate responses would all

serve to bolster a common reading strategy. Equally, they could generate factionalism, and fissiparousness. I would pose the possibility that reading styles may operate and survive most strongly when they are part of wider common projects, be they cultural, intellectual, spiritual, or political in all the senses of these words. This proposition runs counter to many tenets of postmodern thinking which tends to seek and celebrate diversity in people's identities and involvements. I wish it to be an empirical question

Finally, how may we as researchers best gather and analyze the information, symptoms, and evidence necessary to identify and fully account for the way interpretive communities operate?

Preparing and writing this account of 1960s readings has been the impulse to clarifying these questions to myself. And in one crucial respect I want to extend the range of kinds of interpretive community about which we may talk. Schrøder distinguishes *actual* communities (ranging from living communities of family and friends to the more momentary ones of an interview group) from *categorial* ones (genders, ethnicities, classes). Others distinguish live from virtual communities, and so on. All these are ways of discovering and labelling actual, already-achieved communities. I want to propose the notion of a *projected* community – that people may conceive of a set of shared values, even of sorts of people with whom they would want to form a kind of community, but so far only in their heads, or partially, or fragmentarily. That conception might become the stimulus to action, to finding others who share it. And of course, because that finding would inevitably be accompanied by talk, and by sharing of ideas, the project would develop and unfold and take clearer shape.[1] I want to argue that 1960s Tolkien fandom can best be understood as a very particular kind of projecting towards an interpretive community.

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[1] This is, in my view, exactly what E. P. Thompson was describing in his *Making of the English Working Class*, a point which Marc Steinberg has reminded us of in a wonderful revisiting and extension of Thompson's ideas, in his *Fighting Words*.

The Story of 1960s Tolkien Fandom

Writing in 1969, one of the early academics to pick up the Tolkien flag introduced a book of "readings" with this caution:

> Usually, when initial critical reception has been so warm that it has contributed to great popular success ... the resultant popular success has apparently occasioned critical second-thoughts, with revaluations downwards. But this recurrent phenomenon has not really had any effect on Tolkien's reputation. One difference is that Tolkien's mass popularity was not fostered by the mass media; it grew from the excellences and appeals of the work itself and was simply reported in the media. There was never any promotional bandwagon for Tolkien. But the major difference is that there never was a critical bandwagon either. (Isaacs and Zimbardo *Essays*, 1)

This is salutary, given the common tendency to over-represent the few critical voices (such as Edmund Wilson and Philip Toynbee) who assaulted *The Lord of the Rings* when it first came out. This problem displays itself in the generally useful essay by Bruce Beatie ("Tolkien Phenomenon"), who uses as his source material almost entirely the resources of "official" publications: reviews, academic sources, and the Tolkien Society. From this he constructs a tripartite periodization of the books' reception – but one which has almost nothing to say about its spread through vernacular cultures. Actually, Tolkien fandom grew out of widespread acceptance and celebration of the books (especially in America) among some very particular groups. There, it took its place among the formative manifestos of science fiction fandom. But this was to be an interest in science fiction which could fuse it with alternative religiosities, with a celebration of "play" that would sow the seeds for the rise of role-play gaming (Gary Gygax, creator of *Dungeons and Dragons*, was inspired by the Rings to give up an insurance job to develop his idea), the Apple Mac, and the Free Internet movements (and in a way that could readily be linked with the playground attitudes to culture and wealth evinced by George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and others). And this pot pourri could bring in other weird elements:

> Tolkien fandom exploded in the 1960s, when badges like FRODO LIVES and GANDALF FOR PRESIDENT popped up on college campuses and the nascent Tolkien Society started serving *mushrooms* and cider at costumed "hobbit picnics" up and down the West Coast. Hippies in particular *grokked* the woodland mysticism of Tolkien's elves, not to mention their fashion sense. But *Lord of the Rings* influenced technologists as well. By the mid-'70s, the printer at SAIL, Stanford's *AI* lab, was outfitted with fonts for Tolkien's Tengwar alphabet. (fusionanomaly.net)

Speake ("Power") retells this story well. Riding in large part on the back of Ace Books' unauthorized paperback edition, Tolkien took American campuses by storm at just the time when Marvel Comics were taking off again, the seeds of political activism were spreading beyond the Civil Rights movement, and a generalized critique of American economy and culture was emerging. Through early fanzines, through local happenings that grew into area conventions, through the distribution, exchange, and networking possibilities opened by the rise of shops and dealers in and around comic books, gradually there emerged a particularly self-aware and indeed self-celebrating fandom, with some academics willingly joining in that celebration (see for instance Jenkins *Textual Poachers*).

Other writers have placed the stress elsewhere. Andrew Blake's excellent introduction to Tolkien's work puts the emphasis on an emergent ecological consciousness:

> The generation that came to regard *The Lord of the Rings* as great literature was the first to become aware of the environmental problems associated with industrial development and human population growth. The peaceful Shire seemed a perfect antidote to these threats. Ironically, Tolkien's work then became part of the modern popular culture which he held in suspicion. Poster designers, rock bands and night clubs began to use Tolkien's iconography. Pink Floyd, whose first album *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* was named after an episode in Kenneth Grahame's children's fantasy *The Wind in the Willows*, played at a club in West London called "Middle Earth." Heavy metal band Marillion was named after *The Silmarillion*. Clothing company Rohan – named after the Riders of Rohan in *The Lord of the Rings* – made outdoor wear for people who wanted to escape from the cares of urban life to the freedom of the "will." (*Guide*, 14).

It is not surprising therefore that this "movement" has had its history well recorded, and in particularly collaborative fashion. See for instance the emerging web history of such fandoms at *www.jophan.org*, which

documents, event by event, and convention by fanzine, the assemblage of Tolkien among other fandoms in that period. Arguably, the current round of pop philosophical "takes" on Tolkien, such as *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy* (2003) should be seen as attempts to reabsorb all this into the American intellectual landscape without critical digestion. And so, the image of Tolkien's radical 1960s readership has been almost entirely colonized by an image of American hippies wearing "Frodo Lives" badges, eating (magic?) mushrooms, and pretending to be hobbits.

What is singularly missing from these accounts is any sense of how people read the books. Speake recycles some of the easy explanations of Tolkien fandom, from hostile versions (ranging from "escapist entertainment" to drug-fuelled fantasies) to more welcoming ones (from early ecological tendencies to simple morality versus the cynical Watergate age [on this see also Birzer "Myth"]). But at best these only imply how people read the books. What were the important elements in them? I made an attempt to reach some members of that early generation of fans, to ask them about their memories of talking about the books. What was discussed, argued over, valued, invested in, in those early readings of Tolkien? None of those whom I managed to contact could really answer my questions – whether because memories have faded or because the questions were not particularly meaningful to them.[2] What is evident from these communications is the sense of fans going on collaborative journeys to find precedents, to share pleasures. Recruiting new fans was a significant part of the pleasure. In short, it was a very particular kind of interpretive community. Let me explain the significance of this by pointing to a puzzling situation. In preparation for writing this essay, I have read many accounts and communicated with many people about the ways in which Tolkien's popularity grew in the 1960s. All agree that Tolkien appealed then, and still appeals now, to a very wide range of people. To take a couple of examples:

> First and foremost, the *Lord of the Rings* is a myth for the modern world, and
> like all genuine myths it has a sort of elasticity that allows readers to find in it

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[2] Thanks in particular to Ed Meskys, Joyce Worley Katz, Earl Kemp, and Cuyler Brooks for their friendly and interesting communications.

whatever messages they are looking for. It resonates with Tories and Greens, software designers and Luddites, monarchists and anarchists, devout Christians and tree-worshippers. (angelfire.com)

Part of the trouble for some of Tolkien's more jaundiced critics is the political culture that surrounds him. Certain detractors, like Grer, cannot forget the 1960s, when "Frodo Lives!" graffiti and T-shirts abounded. Despite Tolkien's conservative – some would say reactionary – Catholic politics, *The Lord of the Rings* became required reading for counter-culturists during the Vietnam era. In the wizard Gandalf's counsel that the powerful but corrupting Ring be destroyed, rather than used as a weapon against Sauron, antiwar activists saw a clear allusion to the scourge of nuclear weapons. Environmentalists, meanwhile, pointed to Tolkien's beloved Ents, the ruminative tree-creatures who are "roused" to protect their forest of Fangorn from the axe-loving wizard Saruman – who, with his "mind of metal and wheels ... does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment." And then there are the hobbits' frequent time-outs to enjoy mushrooms and "pipe weed." Pot smokers felt they knew exactly what Tolkien was driving at. (Mooney, "Kicking").

I don't doubt at all that this is right, but it raises two puzzles: (1) apparently "everyone knows" how these different groups found their meanings in the text, yet (2) this can't be on the basis of position-taking because *there is no record of any arguments over the meanings of the books*.

A "Reading" of 1960s Readers

This is my proposition: many 1960s readers, and especially those who would in different degrees and manners constitute the emergent fandom around the books in that period, read as part of a seeking for a *new mode of imagining*. This meant that the differences in interpretation mattered far less, if at all, than exploring the new possibilities for conceiving that the books offered. It also meant that the books could be arrayed alongside others that, in parallel fashion, opened new imaginative doors. Thus, the field of operation of reading Tolkien was an opposition to enclosure, a challenge to perceived fuddy-duddiness, a refusal not to imagine. This required what I would term a "generosity of imaginative inclusiveness." Books and other materials that within ten years would be reclassified, in

another context, into acceptable or unacceptable fantasies, would be re-read for their failures to represent, for example, women, or black people, or political systems in politically allowable ways.[3] We can see this in the relations, noted earlier, between responses to Tolkien and responses to the writings of a man now considered to have been in important senses fascistic: Robert Heinlein. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* was another book I recall reading in that period, and celebrating for its exploration of something which it knew, and I knew, was hitherto highly censored: forms of sexual desire. The fact that its proposed alternative is now one which many would challenge was nowhere near as important as the fact that it *proposed an alternative*. The same can be said of the SF writer John Norman. Nowadays condemned as a virtual pornographer for his fantastical S&M Slave-Girl novels, he was then appreciated for the thrill of considering the illicit.[4] This inclusiveness makes sense of the way in which, in this period, Tolkien's work could sit within the gateways to science fiction, fantasy, utopian writing, gaming, and a number of other emergent fan communities – without significant tensions.

What this proposition does, is to suggest a new, and perhaps central and transformative strand in the concept of an interpretive community: the idea of a *project-based* community, one which is finding, drawing together, and inventing uses for cultural materials as the means to conceive a project for itself. People in general did not argue over the books, rather, they talked together about possible expansions of their meanings. The pleasure was in the unlimited new possibilities, rather than specific achieved meanings. The story could not just be private property, for important reasons. In America, this sense of it being especially a public domain was assisted by its circulation in that near-illegal Ace Books version – this was something defying privatization. The slogan that arrived from the French May Events captured this expansiveness: "Be realistic, demand the impossible." It is easy to sneer at this as simplistic utopianism. The sensibility which underpinned it was without doubt a

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[3] I consciously avoid the expression "politically correct' since it now comes so freighted with unhelpful meanings.
[4] See his *Chronicles of Gor* series of novels.

significant energizer of the political and cultural movements which came to dominate the latter half of the decade.

Yet at the exact time this generosity of imaginative inclusiveness was taking shape, a converse pattern was emerging. Within politics, in the student movements, in the anti-Vietnam war movements, in the various associated or independent movements such as Civil Rights, in industrial campaigns and so on, a greater and greater tendency to position-taking was occurring. The movements of the 1960s are simultaneously famous for their slogans about imagination, and for their factionalism and sectarianism. To understand what may have been at work in this, we need a wider context. Some years ago Adrian Mellor published an essay on a sea change that took place in science fiction in the late 1960s which can helpfully be seen to be one of the points when these opposite tendencies struck against each other ("Crisis"). Mellor explored the motive forces which led to a series of interrelated shifts: from technologically-optimistic to pessimistic narratives; and from a readership primarily based in the technically-trained middle class to one more inclusive of humanities and social science-based readers. Mellor ascribes this to a fundamental shift in the character of the (especially American) middle class, from being and seeing itself as upwardly mobile, managerial, and hopeful of participating in the "goods" provided by capitalism to a more proletarianized, alienated social position.

Mellor calls upon the work of Lucien Goldmann to establish the connections. Goldmann was the author, most famously, of *The Hidden God* (1964), a study of political Jansenism and its parallel expressions in the works of Pascal and Racine, exploring how the divided loyalties and possibilities of the *noblesse de robe* generated a "tragic world vision." This vision was centred on the impossibility of a rational choice or hope, because of which all that a person could do was to make a "wager" on the future. Mellor adopts this approach not only for its method, but also for its substantive content: the same pessimism, he argues, the same "loss of social hope, abandonment of science and rationality, its historical passivity" ("Crisis," 39) all characterized the situation of 1960s science fiction.

Mellor may have been right about science fiction, pure and simple. But in this period, of course, the boundaries of the genre were blurring and shifting with the rise of fantasy – energized by Tolkien's vision. And the tropes of fantasy were anything but pessimistic. One might say that the problem with science fiction was its too close inscription with capital, with labour technologies, and with structural conditions. To achieve optimism, it was necessary to move further off, in order to return with alert critical faculties and hopes for different conditions. This is what I believe Tolkien offered to me, at any rate: the exact opposite of Mellor's "loss of social hope." Even, I would argue, science and rationality could be maintained in my reading of Tolkien, because it was now about reasoning out the nature of evil.

In one other, final way, Mellor's turn to Goldmann is of importance. For Goldmann's is a theory of the possibilities for social consciousness of definite social groups. Although Goldmann arguably blinkered himself by looking only for fully developed, coherent, and highly articulated "world-views," in principle his conception of cultural formations can be used more widely. It lends itself to the study of communities in formation, emergent projects for judging and changing the world. What is distinctive about it is its focus on the notion of the wager, the project, the possibilities for action inherent in conceptions of the world. That sense of a project is just what I found in Tolkien. It is the cornerstone of my investment in his fantasy. It is what was so nearly lost in Jackson's films, whatever their other qualities.

The Return of the Four Refusals

At the beginning of this essay, I explained my "four refusals" in response to Peter Jackson's films of *The Lord of the Rings*. What more can be said about them, once they are set within the contexts I have proposed here? It is important to reiterate that until I saw the films I simply had not realized the depth of my attachment to a way of participating in the story. I can however be sure that this was formed in most ways during the 1960s. This was the period when I re-read them many times; during the 1970s I

was too busy with my first job, with family and children, and with political work, to do much reading; and it was in 1981, when the BBC radio adaptation was first broadcast, that I first felt that inarticulate discomfort at the inclusion of a prologue. So what intersection of forces and practices might help explain my refusals?

During the 1960s I became intensely involved in radical politics, learning fast during the process about the causes and impacts of exploitation and oppression, but also – being on the Far Left – being engaged in debates, arguments, and faction fights. But this was coupled with an intense interest in ways of thinking how society might be reconstituted: discussions of the overcoming of alienation, and encounters with Karl Marx's early writings on human species-being combined with a fascination with Immanuel Kant's notion of reason as a necessary human task. Kant, as I learned about him, was the philosopher of human possibilities *par excellence*; he was interested to ask about the directions of human history, and what a fully rational society might be like. At the same time, I was caught up in the radical poetry movement in Liverpool, where I studied. This produced in me a driving interest in the notion that through the arousal of emotion by formal mechanisms, new conceptions and understandings of the world might emerge. It was worth the wager, anyway.

I do not doubt that there could be many others who would recognize chunks of my response to the films, or close parallels to those, without being either 1960s readers, or without the attached political investments. Sasha, almost two generations younger than me, catches some elements – albeit with a different emphasis. My aim is not to argue some hermetic separation of responses by decades. I am also conscious that, because of its particular self-awareness, American fandom's history has been told to an extent far outstripping any other country's. Even so, I believe it is unarguable that in these senses mine was a "1960s reading" of *The Lord of the Rings*. There was and is a will in me to find a secular exploration of the motive forces of evil, coupled with a wish to find imaginative resources to keep me committed to acting against its manifestations. There was always a sense that there were "others out there," whom I would mostly never meet, but with whom I felt that I

would be sharing a common project; we would recognize each other, at need, through shared references and a common imaginative utopia. I also somehow felt that, despite himself, Tolkien had somehow done this for our benefit. Now, on the basis of a stronger understanding of the sociology of culture and of authorship processes, I would not bother with the last. For me, the other two still constitute an odd but decisive combination of beliefs and hopes.