

Professor Tolkien Talking in W.H. Auden's Sleep

by Rod Jellema

A dominant poet and respected critic in his time, W.H. Auden in both these professions was a student of things medieval, especially of Anglo-Saxon language and literature. Throughout his career, he paid special tribute to the influence of Professor J.R.R. Tolkien, whose lectures he had attended in his student days at Oxford. Years later Auden was the first important critic to regard Tolkien's fiction as a major literary achievement. But Tolkien's influence cited by Auden is always of the philologist and linguist, never of the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. Strangely, Auden had received a mere third-class degree and was found in tears after the Old English examination paper. He remarked often that the deep influence came not from scholarly lectures ("I do not remember a word he said") but from hearing Tolkien reading *Beowulf* aloud. So there it is: The soundings, the reverberations, of ancient words remembered. Almost as in a dream.

These two giants of literary change share not only a passion for the language of Old English. In a skeptical age that makes their beliefs look nearly subversive, they also share deep commitments to historic Christianity. Yet their relations are filled with contradictions and complexities. Auden is a myth-infused but very modernist poet; Tolkien is a weaver of realist magic but an exacting medievalist philologist, an expert on ancient Finnish and the inventor of his own "*Faerie*" language. A grateful Tolkien bristles with some annoyance at Auden's assessments of *The Lord of the Rings*, especially with Auden's use of modern psychology as a tool. There is a fairly petty altercation between them in the late sixties about the looks of Tolkien's house. But they survive into a final quiet if nervous friendship before the deaths of each of them in 1973.

As Tolkien's second career as a novelist rose, sudden pop fame embarrassing him, Auden was there to hail it seriously in three reviews, a BBC talk, and a critical essay. He saw in Tolkien the resurgence of a deep and universal mythic unconscious, the recovery and

revitalizing of an alternative way of seeing what humans and history are. Auden saw *The Lord of the Rings* as a glorious triumph of human imagination while linking it to old traditions of the Quest Hero. But even so, Auden's personal thanks went to the scholar. In "A Short Ode to a Philologist," he noted that

*Dame Philology is our Queen still
Quick to comfort
Truth-loving hearts in their mother tongue
. . . [so] A poor commoner [can] arrive at
The Proper Name for his cat.*

A language is not immortal, Auden goes on, until it dies,

*But a lay of Beowulf's language too can be sung
Ignoble, maybe, to the young,
Having no monster and no gore
To speak of, yet not without its beauties.
. . . A lot of us are grateful for
What J.R.R. Tolkien has done
As bard to Anglo-Saxon.*

Still, even here, with the Rings trilogy laid aside, it is not the scholar's scholarship that means most to Auden. It is Professor Tolkien's making the old language sing.

Tolkien took very little notice of Auden's praises—little public notice, that is. There exists among his *Letters* a heavily belabored eight-page response to Auden's reviews. Remarkably, although Tolkien carefully revised the letter, it was never sent, apparently never shown to anyone. What it reveals is a distrustful scholar-turned-myth-maker feeling rankled by a modernist poet's sense of the word *imagination*. "I am historically minded. Middle-earth is not an imaginary world . . . but the historical period is imaginary." And so Tolkien lays out to himself a sense of tale-telling, journey, and quest which is far less "politically purposive" and allegorical, and far less psychological, and far less concerned with "our experience of social-historical realities," than Auden's. Obviously Tolkien sees Auden the poet, for all his fealty, as coming from some other orientation.

Tolkien's dislike of the word *imagination*, using it as though it means "merely imaginary," is unexpected. Should he not have equal distrust for the word *mythic*? Well, no; his young atheist colleague C.S. Lewis was converted by Tolkien's explanation that it

is precisely its myth, not its logic, that makes Christianity profoundly true. Myth strikes deeper than thought. Auden would agree. So how far is the stretch between myth-making and imagining?

In 1966, Auden signed up to write a 48-page monograph on Tolkien for a series I was editing called *Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective*. He himself had in fact suggested, over my proposal of T.S. Eliot, that Tolkien might be his subject. Sensitive to Tolkien's silence, he may have seen this as a chance to reconstruct and clarify his praise, this time enriched by a shared religious context. But Tolkien, in letters to the publisher and to Auden, asked that the project be scrapped, arguing to Auden that it would be a "premature impertinence" and to the publisher that, among other things, "he does not know me." Tolkien then cited to the publisher something Auden had reportedly said, quoted in *The New Yorker*, about Tolkien's house, calling it "a hideous house—I can't tell you how awful it is—with hideous pictures on the wall." Auden, who had reportedly been drinking heavily before making his impromptu pronouncement to a meeting for which he was almost two hours late, never explained it, but immediately withdrew ("If Professor Tolkien does not wish me to write it," he said to me, "I shall not write it"). He apparently destroyed the working draft of the manuscript. Thus the casual printing of one careless sentence and someone's sensitivity to it deprived the world of a book which would certainly have deepened our insights into each of these masters.

In less than a year the relationship, always an uneasy one for Tolkien, had become almost a friendship. Tolkien contributed a poem in Anglo-Saxon, "Frodo's Dreame," to a *festschrift* gathered for Auden's sixtieth birthday, in 1967. Upon Auden's death in 1973 at age 66, Tolkien, then 74, expressed in print his gratitude for Auden's support of his work and placed him "as one of my great friends."

Although Auden as critic was promoting Tolkien's literary achievement, indicating paths into it for serious readers, it was the sound of the professor reading *Beowulf* that remained the biggest influence. At almost the same time, Auden found his way into the poems of G.M. Hopkins, then still largely ignored, with their rich use of the sounds and cadences

of Anglo-Saxon poetry. From then on, those sounds surface in Auden's poetry (unforgettably, for example, "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea dingle").

Professor Tolkien, slightly suspicious of imagination and very suspicious of dream, may not have understood how meaningful the sounds of a voice would be to a student poet. But Auden may well have had his old Oxford professor in mind when he wrote, in his *Obiter Dicta*, "a professor is someone who talks in someone else's sleep."

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