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## "The Fantasy Complex"

### Close Reading: *The Hobbit* & *The Lord of the Rings*

#### ABSTRACT

The current vogue of fantasy literature and its reverberations in the collective imagination could inspire us to talk about a potential "fantasy complex" which has an impact on behaviours, catalyses affects etc. The direction of expansion of the "fantasy complex" has been a positive one, since with many readers and viewers of fantasy film super-productions the effect is a therapeutic, healing one. The rediscovery of authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis or the impact in these last decades of the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling, has depended on this aspect. The pathogenic note of contemporary society has stimulated the development of a "fantasy complex", whose purpose became the unearthing, from the unconscious, of the apologies it created for a cure applied to routine, through programmatic imagination. This study is a close reading of two Tolkien novels: *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

#### KEYWORDS

J.R.R. Tolkien; *The Hobbit*; *The Lord of the Rings*; Fantasy Literature; "Fantasy Complex".

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#### Several conceptual clarifications<sup>1</sup>

If a complex, as defined by Jungian psychology, is "a collection of images and ideas, clustered round a core derived from one or more archetypes, and characterised by a common emotional tone"<sup>2</sup>, the current vogue of fantasy literature (at least through three renowned authors who, however, are not alike and whose influence is differently stratified culturally – they are J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling) and its reflection in the collective imagination could inspire us to talk (even if only in inverted commas) about a potential "fantasy complex" (in fantasy literature, in fact, but I am using deliberately the abridged suggested formula), which has an impact on behaviours, catalyses affects etc. We note that a junction point among Tolkien, Lewis and the much later Harry Potter phenomenon, created by Rowling, was *The Neverending Story* fantasy novel by Michael Ende (published in German in 1979), in which what I call "fantasy complex" is predicted by Michael Ende and voiced by some of his heroes. The character Bastian Balthazar Bux defines himself as marked by a fantasy symptom since he first appears in the book: "I think up stories. I invent names and words that don't exist"; Bastian expresses his supreme wish to read "A story that never



ended” that can be “The book of books”<sup>3</sup>. Bastian, however, dislikes books that approach common things about common people, which is why he empathizes only with elements (books, events) that concern a beyond-reality or even non-reality (reversed reality). Another *Neverending Story* character that phrases intuitively a possible “fantasy complex” of the human beings is Gmork, the monstrous wolf, servant of the Nothing, who intends to destroy Fantastica. The third key-character who captures the very birth and potential development of a “fantasy complex” is the Childlike Empress of Fantastica. I wouldn’t necessarily approach a fantasy pathology; the “fantasy complex” phrase relates instead to the cultural matrices that mark the human race’s spiritual evolution. Nevertheless, I cannot negate the ample web of the unconscious on which the “fantasy complex” transplants its components. If we credited it, the “fantasy complex” tells a story about both the individual and the collective psychological lives, via constellations of symbols and narratives whose objective is to coagulate a history of the growth of conscience and of the revelation of the collective unconscious. The direction of expansion of the “fantasy complex” has been a positive one, since with many readers (and spectators of fantasy film super-productions) the effect is a therapeutic, healing one.

The collective unconscious manifests itself in culture through “universal motifs with their own degree of attraction”<sup>4</sup> – this statement has its founding role. The “fantasy complex” I am discussing speculatively cannot ignore the *numinous* component contained in the constellations of symbols or the webs of narratives that make a fantasy epic, such as those authored by Tolkien, Lewis and Rowling. Fantasy epics are meant to heal the human psyche, but only after they see it through all the stages attached to

a clash with evil spells. This is a working hypothesis related to an endeavour in which therapy, at a great level, is attainable and real through art, respectively through the art of storytelling. In their way, fantasy epics are modern and postmodern temples of Asclepius: just like *Asclepeia*, *fantasy* epics too include epic nuclei that stir dreams, wistfulness, magic or various other rewarding and alternative elements, with the aim of obtaining a healed reader. This therapy is designed both collectively and individually, i.e. systematically.

I could not propose this phrase – “fantasy complex” unless it depended and would be transplanted on the pragmatism of current society. The rediscovery of authors such as Tolkien and Lewis, or the impact of the Harry Potter series in these last decades, has depended on this aspect. The pathogenic note of contemporary society, its vices included (extreme debunking of traditional values, corruption, reification, malformation etc.), has stimulated the development of a “fantasy complex”, whose purpose became the unearthing, from the unconscious, of the apologies it created for a cure applied to routine, through programmatic imagination. In its way, the “fantasy complex” ultimately attempts a recreation of a compensatory, ‘back-up’, a securing paradise, which, however, becomes and is (provisory and alternative) paradise only after the evils are punished and removed through a great and ample clash of structures, images, ideas and affects. Additionally, the “fantasy complex” acknowledges an idea and imaginary construct whose ramifications could acquire identity-related teleological meanings. Nevertheless, since the concept herein could be speculative in an arbitrarily pathological manner, I choose to keep it in inverted commas, in order to allow for a contraction of the risk, from a theoretical point of view.



### J.R.R. Tolkien – a justification of the *Faërie* world

In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien<sup>5</sup> uses several terms to capture the idea of attraction to a world different from the real one. Tolkien says there is a hunger, a desire, a yearning for mystery and for adventure; there is an open curiosity toward the unknown (an *appetite for marvel, longing, desire, wish*). In fact, all these terms are conducive to a state of grace, a frenzy, a fantasy excitement, a taste for the knowledge and experience of enchantment, against the disenchantment of the world; a joy, or state of enthusiasm close to the ancient Greek *enthusiasmos*, the only difference being that here the tone is no longer Dionysian. The notion of enthusiasm has been secularized by modern society, but Tolkien envisages it as a rediscovery of its archaic meaning (through the term *joy*), circumscribed to the fantasy field, relating to enthusiastic energy and enchantment at the character (and at the reader) who shows fascination with parallel and other worlds. These creatures are frenetic in their enchanted, charmed stasis, when they can access a world different from reality. This appetite is not present within everyone; it is contained only by some children and adults. In Tolkien's most important books (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*) mostly the adults are those who share this state of grace; this is an essential aspect, because these are adult witnesses of the fantasy system; they will defend, credit and, most of all, disseminate accounts of this world. This text will focus particularly on two of these characters: Bilbo Baggins and Sam Gamgee.

Tolkien criticises the fantasy world's inaccurate, exclusive assignment to childhood. *Fantasy* and *Faërie* do not necessarily depend on the child world; on the contrary,

they can grow even more vigorously in the adult world (even if not all the adults are included). Because the important aspect of this development is the configuration of a *Secondary World, Faërie*, organized as such (in a way similar to the *Primary World*, but as its reverse or parallel version), stirring amazement and enchantment, has in our view, a cathartic outcome. An equally intense importance is attached, of course, to the appetite, the taste, the yearning, the curiosity, the penchant, the frenzy, the excitement, the enchantment that make the state of grace necessary in order to enter *Faërie* and understand this realm. Tolkien specifies a defining equivalence for *Faërie*, going against the ordinary direction: “Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic – but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician.”<sup>6</sup> The linking mechanism between the primary (real) world and the secondary one (*Faërie*) is the taste for the unknown and a curiosity that, throughout the process of understanding *Faërie*, will become an ontological and cognitive state of enchantment. The *Faërie* world generates different forms of recovery, escape and spiritual healing or consolation also because, at systemic level, *Faërie* is the opposite of Tragedy, as speculated by Tolkien<sup>7</sup>; this is, in fact, why I have proposed before the cathartic effect the amazement, the charm, the enchantment have on the characters that enter the secondary world; in this world they are active and they later become its testifiers, when they return to the primary matrix.



### Opinions and approaches

This text does not focus on a definition of the fantasy genre; however, several ideas to back up the suggested formula (of “fantasy complex”) are welcome, because they complete (even if only partially) Tolkien’s definition, to the exclusive extent approached here: fantasy generates a Secondary World that has its independent reality and that opposes the common, ordinary Primary World.

In her book *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Kathryn Hume compiles a list of all the definitions of the term fantasy and creates maps for each of these definitions. Whereas they are too numerous to list, Hume’s approach is relevant. In her opinion, literature is the product of two impulses: 1. the mimetic impulse (the impulse to imitate reality) and 2. the fantasy impulse – the metamorphosis and alterity (more precisely, an impulse to alter – because this world indicates a process) of reality. In simple, precise and concise words, the fantasy field points to everything that departs from reality demonstratively and systematically: “By fantasy I mean the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal” and “Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality”<sup>8</sup>. Or, the “fantasy complex” incorporates and demonstrates precisely this: an existential andgnoseological impulse for forms of reality different from the ordinary one. Impulse, predilection, orientation, penchant, disposition, appetite, taste, curiosity – all the terms are valid in this case.

In *Modern Fantasy. Five Studies*, C.N. Manlove defines the fantasy field as the exponent of “another order of reality”<sup>9</sup>. This explanation ties together with Tolkien’s definition of Secondary World and

transformed, other reality. Manlove points to the *wonder* component in the content of a fantasy structure, be it emotional (human) wonder or, deeper and more powerful, a revelation of a *numinous*: “By *wonder* is meant anything from crude astonishment at the marvellous, to a sense of ‘meaning-in-the-mysterious’ or even of the numinous.”<sup>10</sup> *Wonder* is produced by the supernatural, the impossible and by mystery, as “a central feature”, if not even the most important as reaction to entering and accepting the fantasy world. This amply and profoundly appointed wonder can act as a relative form of catharsis, later embraced and announced by a formula such as the “fantasy complex”. This (potentially cathartic) wonder helps the spiritual healing and the purification meant by Tolkien when he talks about human recovery through the fantasy system and literature.

The conceptual formula I am proposing herein (the “fantasy complex”) is also in tune with W.R. Irwin’s approach in the book *The Game of the Impossible*. By fantasy, Irwin means a device of outperforming and breaching everything commonly accepted as possible, through, to and for the impossible: “a fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility”<sup>11</sup>. The fantasy realm claims “an acceptance of the not-real”, and, in the end, similar to what happens at Tolkien, fantasy becomes “a combined spirit, method, and expression”<sup>12</sup>. Manlove had noted that J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*) use the words *fantasy* and *fair-tale* almost interchangeably, which denotes more than their Inklings relation at Oxford (in 1930-1949), enthusiastically discussing the formation of fantasy-centred new prose; it also denotes their own human (spiritual) taste for secondary worlds. Irwin thinks that perhaps, particularly at Lewis, but also at Tolkien, the fantasy is similar to a psychic



phenomenon and only then to a literary phenomenon, because the mental act is the one that catalyses the subsequent literary action: “Lewis understood that fantasy is a psychic phenomenon and a literary manifestation and that the first can prepare for the second”<sup>13</sup>. Or, if the term fantasy is both literary and psychic (before it becomes literary), the “fantasy complex” formula is allowed to function, at least along several segments of the human spirit and mind.

### ***The Hobbit. A Close Reading***

In the beginning, Bilbo Baggins is a good-natured hobbit who will rely, on a wave of exploits and will enter the story, later becoming a scrivener of the fairy tales, legends, anecdotes, ballads etc.; in fact, he becomes the main character of the story he had rejected initially and which will bear his name: *The Hobbit* novel<sup>14</sup>. Although a non-adventurous character (given the nature of his father Bungo), Bilbo Baggins also inherits the Tooks’ taste for odd things (through his mother, Beladonna). Therefore, he is a hybrid. Traditionally, hobbit’s magic is known as minor, including only spontaneous disappearances, when the hobbits were invaded by non-hobbits.

Bilbo Baggins’s part is a theoretical one from the beginning: precisely because he is initially a non-adventurous figure, he will grow to be the key-witness of the *Faërie* world. When Gandalf the wizard first shows up and invites him to adventures (Gandalf is created demonstratively, as accepted by almost all exegetes, in the line of Merlin, crossed with a Christian and warrior angel prototype), Bilbo is reluctant, because an adventure is a “nasty thing” that disturbs, bothers, destroys habits and is tiresome. In the hobbit world, an adventure is anti-domestic and anti-taboo. This incipit is essential, because it will stimulate Bilbo’s

*Faërie* “metanoia”; at the end of the *Hobbit* adventure, Bilbo becomes the *de facto* scribe of the secondary world he wants to share. Who could be more credible in the dissemination of a story if not the witness who, initially, was exclusively inactive (although not necessarily anti-epic)?

Gandalf the wizard is recalled (in the Took-clan old accounts) as a storyteller and pyro-technician who acts and knows how to tempt young spirits in adventures. Gandalf is the one who defends the category of the interesting in life, dazing the ordinary people, removing them (even forcefully, as with Bilbo) from their routine and apathy. Gandalf is the one who turns the world upside down, upsets it, but only with the exclusive purpose of enchanting it and of finding witnesses of the enchantment. Bilbo Baggins secretly admires Gandalf, but he is not yet able to acknowledge his taste for and attraction to the unknown (“I don’t want any adventures, thank you. Not today.”<sup>15</sup> – he avers, for the time being).

The guests Gandalf introduces gradually to Bilbo are meant to initiate and tempt the hobbit (via stories and songs), by stirring his imagination, by catalysing his wish to start an adventure, by triggering a life decision. The trickster-wizard writes “many adventures’ on Bilbo’s door, as bait for the warrior dwarves and as a *mark* on the hobbit, a mark of recognition as a valid story and expedition companion. Gandalf suggests to the dwarves that Bilbo Baggins is a *chosen* of destiny in the adventures to occur, the more that this means a violation of the hobbit regulations: interference in an adventure from which return is not guaranteed (as he is informed). This information leads to Bilbo Baggins’s fainting, with meaning, however: the hobbit’s frailty is meant to catalyse the character’s mutation and the undertaking of the initiation journey. Step by step, the hobbit allows himself to carry out



the dwarves' journey, embracing his Took vanity. As he grows more and more aware of the span of the adventure, the hobbit becomes impatient and restless, the first symptom of a "fantasy complex" that will be a defining aspect for him and, much later, for his epic successors in *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee and Frodo Baggins.

We note that, after he accepts to join the audacious group, Bilbo wants to know the theoretical and practical details of the adventure: obstacles, time span, expense, reward and, last but not least, stories about the dragon Smaug. In other words, the narrative stake is critical to the hobbit, even if Gandalf is constantly the one who will urge the release of his will and his acute involvement in the story and exploits. Of course, likewise predictably, the hobbit will experience regret relating to his departure from Hobbiton, a space marked by routine (the house, the armchair, the teapot, the pipe, the landscape) and by comfortable and peaceful states of mind, contrary to the elements he will have to face ritually, from all points of view (physically, spiritually, mentally). Nevertheless, beyond these fits, otherwise plausible in the course of the story, Bilbo will self-impose decisively that adventures play their own fateful part precisely because they are from another value system, which dislocates passivity, tediousness, indifference and which can establish a *hero*. No matter how inherently passive and lazy he were, Bilbo is renowned as a master of riddle telling (hence, showing a predilection for narrative and enigmas), not just at cooking and games. It is not in vain that the hobbit will be assigned by the dwarves the role of journey *stalker* (particularly when Gandalf is absent): Bilbo will always be the one sent out to investigate the new territory within the initiation journey and to find solutions to escape the crises of the expedition.

When the dwarves and the hobbit reach Rivendell, the elves already have knowledge of Bilbo's existence and particularly choice in the adventure; thus, they engage in an epic communion dialogue. The hobbit shows empathy with the elven songs and stories and wishes to recount them his adventure, since he is interested in the elves' viewpoint. Tolkien can be guessed in this key-scene, and the author's voice adds an essential detail: stories and good (positive) histories are easy to tell and end quickly (when they are told), whereas dark stories take up a lot of time (orally); usually, these are the stories that represent the feast of narrative ceremonies, this story included<sup>16</sup>. This is how Tolkien offers, inside his own novel, the definition of a *fantasy* literature: it is required to include a dark, sombre epic thread, because it allows the occurrence of many exploits and deeds that, in a beneficial account would be contracted, with succinct, perhaps even irrelevant epic ceremonies.

Another key-element through which Bilbo will develop his "fantasy complex" is the magic ring lost by Gollum and found by the hobbit. Bilbo had found out from tales about the magic rings, but he had never thought he would get the chance to hold such a ring. In *The Lord of the Rings*, finding the ring is not accidental, because the ring itself chooses its holders, hence Bilbo, too. At any rate, the ring reinforces the hobbit's appetite for adventure and tales, as well as his taste for becoming a hero, given that the ring becomes a bridge between the visible and the invisible worlds, as magic ancestral object, attesting even Bilbo's condition of *stalker* for the dwarves and their saviour in dramatic circumstances. It is the ring that determines the *choice* of the hobbit's entry in the tale. The dwarves' history couldn't have unfolded unless Gandalf had chosen Bilbo and unless Bilbo himself had already been chosen by the ring (as its subsequent holder, after Gollum), while not



even Gandalf could have guessed it. The hobbit is aware of the fact that, through the ring that makes him invisible, he enters a new world he can manipulate and which, at the same time, manipulates him. The secrecy of the ring depends not only on the power the dark object exerts on any of his holders, but also on Bilbo's desire to not miss his becoming a hero and a saviour.

But the hobbit has additional hero virtues beyond the assistance of this secret object. In the encounter with the trolls, Bilbo had already begun to adapt to his warrior condition. The courage he shows in Mirkwood, in the confrontation with the spiders (assisted by Sting), and later his skill in saving the dwarves determine a self-assessment (“there really was something of a bold adventurer about himself after all”<sup>17</sup>), while the dwarves see in him something miraculous; he is credited as hero and real leader of the adventure. When he reaches the space held by Smaug, Bilbo is already a different Bilbo, proven as warrior and as knowledgeable *trickster*, necessary in a radical war against evil. His dependence on tales and on fame contributes to the status he earned and intends to keep. The splendour of the dragon's treasure (surrounded by the halo of olden tales) enables the hobbit's ability in and adjustment to the adventure in a primarily and defining manner: Bilbo continues to be captivated and marked by significant tales and, for this reason, he wants to become a tale himself.

In front of Smaug, the hobbit makes his self-portrait (in charades and riddles) through the adventures he has known; in fact, he makes his own identification within the narrative that established him as a hero, in the following manner: “I am he that walks unseen”; “I am the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly. I was chosen for the lucky number”; “I am he that buries his friends alive and drowns them and draws them alive again from the water”; “I am the

friend of bears and the guest of eagles. I am Ringwinner and Luckwearer; and I am Barrel-rider”<sup>18</sup>. His rant and simultaneous metaphoric camouflage (similar to Ulysses in front of Polyphemus) are mechanisms of the undertaking of a “fantasy complex”. The new Bilbo Baggins (who will become a narrator himself, once the adventure is completed) already outlines the frame of the tales that include him and whose witness and player he has been. Like the dragon on which he had once heard stories, the hobbit will become the central feature of later (post-Smaug) tales. The dragon, however, warns Bilbo, like a literary theorist (here Tolkien is skilfully ironic), that fame and the projection of a so-called hero in a tale (or in a number of tales) can be only imagination, a project, but not necessarily a thing of reality and of materiality: “don't let your imagination run away with you”<sup>19</sup>. The auctorial voice interferes in order to indicate to the reader that such an exchange is creditable in a tale validated by tricks, exploits, pretence through which (ethically) opposing characters interact and clash: “This of course is the way to talk to dragons, if you don't want to reveal your proper name (which is wise), and don't want to infuriate them by a flat refusal (which is also very wise). No dragon can resist the fascination of riddling talk and of wasting time trying to understand it. There was a lot which Smaug did not understand at all (though I expect you do, since you know all about Bilbo's adventures to which he was referring), but he thought he understood enough /.../”<sup>20</sup>.

In other words, Tolkien points to a series of construction and language techniques specific to fantasy literature, just as he writes such a history, turning his book into a draft for a small booklet of narrative strategies. Later, once Bilbo saves himself from death by Smaug's fire, the hobbit shouts self-reprovingly and cautiously from



then on in relation to the continuation of the story, suggesting that, until a tale is ended and the hero is victorious, it is risky to show irony to negative characters who, in their turn, make (perforce) the good course of a narrative history: “Never laugh at live dragons, Bilbo you fool! /.../ You aren’t nearly through this adventure yet!”<sup>21</sup>.

Moreover, Bilbo is established as a hero by other objects of power he had received as tokens of appreciation: *mithril* – the coat of mail (made by the elves), the belt of pearls and crystals, as well as the helm with gems received from the dwarves’ leader (Thorin Oakenshield). This is how the hobbit joins the ranges of heroes who bring home, from their adventures faraway, concrete proof of the fact they contributed to and in the tale. But apart from his proven heroism, Bilbo is a negotiator and peacemaker (among the various factions of the tale), despite the fact that, ephemerally and erroneously, he is considered a traitor. On his death bed, however, Thorin Oakenshield will reconsider the hobbit’s part in the adventure and will reinvest him with the stable condition of hero. After the final battle against the goblins, the hobbit will be officially confirmed as friend of the elves, nicknamed “Bilbo the Magnificent”<sup>22</sup>.

The ending is interesting in relation to the “fantasy complex” matters which become fewer demonstratively, precisely because the tale (the adventure) has ended (has been indexed), and the dark plot has been solved and overcome. At the end, Bilbo willingly removes the heroic aspects of his exploits; the hobbit is weary of the adventure precisely because the dragon (the core of the tale) is dead and, for the time being, the history does not have a continuation. This is why he feels the need to return to the old Bilbo (Baggins, not Took) and his old habits, the habits before the initiation journey, casting a deliberate shadow on his

adventurous nature. Back to Elrond’s, in the realm of the elves, where he had been enthusiastic and excited in the line of fantasy, the hobbit is exhausted and silent; he does not want to tell tales, because they have already been lived and concluded. The narrator of these tales in front of the elves will be Gandalf, deemed “storyteller”, who tells both Bilbo’s adventure and some additional details he had found out from the hobbit himself, as witness and player. Additional to the central stories, Gandalf will add older ones and tales of “no time at all”, because he has become the registrar of several kinds of stories he can manage. Bilbo’s drowsiness, exhaustion and somnolence will disappear partially only as the distance between “the foreign parts” and the Shire decreases, invigorating the hobbit. His verdict, however, is accurate and concise: “But our back is to legends and we are coming home. I suppose this is a first taste of it.”<sup>23</sup>. The epic door is closed, the gate to (and from) the adventure is sealed.

Once back home, Bilbo Baggins assumes the extravagant status of friend of the elves, companion of dwarves and wizard, as projected by the community of which he is a member. Since his hero (and warrior) strength is consumed, he is left with uncovering another energy, i.e. scribe and narrator in his memories. But this is already another Bilbo Baggins whose status will be justified in *The Lord of the Rings*, as link between the finding of the fatal ring and the messianic adventure prescribed for Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee.

To return to *The Hobbit*, I will add that, at a point in the story, there is another character that shows almost instinctually the desire to listen to (and to tell) tales, marked by a decisive and defining “fantasy complex”: this is Beorn, the skin-changer or the bear-man, who hosts Gandalf, the dwarves and Bilbo Baggins in his home (protecting them from the goblins and the Wargs),





particularly because he wants to listen to the tale of their adventure. Once he hears the tales, to which he gives his narrative appreciation (which is indicative of the fact his preferences are trained and that he can distinguish among narratives), Beorn makes a confession symptomatic of our topic herein, i.e. “the fantasy complex” and the narrative rituals: the bear-man says he would be less savage if he could hear more often clever stories like those told by Gandalf and by the other members of the group. Then, Beorn himself skilfully tells humorous tales, in an official narrative exchange – a sign that he is, in fact, a storyteller. It is understood, naturally, that this is an unofficial and secondary, if not even marginal narrator, external to the central plot. He is, however, a professional storyteller who, unlike Bilbo, will never write down the narratives he knows.

This episode of the bear-man’s passion for tales is captivatingly inserted in the novel, precisely because, via Beorn, Tolkien suggests various degrees of narrative occurrence inside the “fantasy complex”. Furthermore, through Beorn, the author sets a ceremony of tale-telling, in line with the pattern of the established ritual, through Scheherazade, in the well-known *One Thousand and One Nights*. Gandalf introduces strategically, gradually, the hobbit and the dwarves in Beorn’s house, to stir progressively the bear-man’s curiosity (as audience) and to counter his potential aggressiveness. The skin-changer can only be tamed by epic structures; this is his weakness as a listener and as a storyteller at the same time.<sup>24</sup> By choosing to fragment the account of his adventures, Gandalf instils at Beorn an archaic ceremonial of tales, where the wizard’s case is special, i.e. that almost anyone, even a savage man, can be tamed through tales or even “saved” by them<sup>25</sup>. But Beorn is not as primitive as we may think at first: he is, in fact, a professed tale connoisseur.

This analysis does not focus on Gandalf’s character, because his involvement as player in the fantasy world is logical and intrinsic, thus requiring no other demonstration. The fantasy system works natively in Gandalf, which contains him and in which he is contained. He is a *stalker*. His fate is tailored archetypally by Tolkien who, though symbolical death, will transform Gandalf the Grey in Gandalf the White, in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

### ***The Lord of the Rings: A Close Reading***

In *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>26</sup>, the “fantasy complex” is maximally represented by Sam Gamgee, a character who demonstrates a propensity to listening to tales and of inventing tales, in a compulsive-beneficial manner. Though Sam, Tolkien was also interested in the theoretical, background component, for the purpose of which he created this character, with a special functionality, much more developed than Bilbo’s in *The Hobbit*. Sam is Bilbo’s theoretical successor (through the “fantasy complex” component), but he is a descendant who surpasses visibly and in a more toned manner his “ancestor”. Tolkien’s isolated suggestion, briefly inserted in the first part of the trilogy – *The Fellowship of the Ring* –, is that the hobbits could be small “shamans” (or forgotten shamanic reminiscences) who consume a hallucinogen-like plant (pipe-weed or leaf) that predisposes them (although only some of them) to dreaming, inventions, fantasy etc. This suggestion is minimal and isolated in the ample painting of the trilogy, lacking later development.

Since the beginning, Sam Gamgee is described as obsessed by tales of long ago, which means that he is obviously inclined to the *Faërie* world. His initiator and first master is Bilbo Baggins, the second is



Frodo (in his turn, a skilful storyteller). A while before the beginning of the adventure as a companion of the fatal ring bearer, Sam is described as a character trained, in theory, to be a defender of the *Faërie* world, in open and clever speeches. In the second chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, “The Shadow of the Past,” Sam talks with another hobbit, Ted Sandyman. Their talk has its theoretical and practical meaning, because the topic is the questioning of the credibility (authenticity) of magic things coming to reality; more specifically, the tale fragments that appear and grow out from reality. In Ted Sandyman’s opinion, these are inventions or, at best, exaggerations; instead, in Sam Gamgee’s opinion, these are odd things that make him credit the concrete existence of other worlds, different from the hobbits’, but equally possible and even tangible. Sam asks an essential question: who invented the stories? He tones his question, indicating dragon stories. Or, in this episode, Sam is the main registrar to whom Bilbo Baggins communicated the adventure with and about the dragon Smaug. This is how Sam tells precisely the device and the alchemy through which stories are born (origin, epic treatment, dissemination): once Bilbo had been in a tale with a dragon, which he later recounted to Sam Gamgee, who later spread the story, defending it in front of the hobbit audience. Continuing the debate with Ted Sandyman, Sam acknowledges his belief in the world of Tree-men and elves, adding that these worlds disturb him, but mostly stimulate and enchant him. In a special way, the elven realm is the one in front of which he shows a passionate symptom of faith, respectively of enthusiasm, *enchantment*, (as detailed by Tolkien in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*) and “fantasy complex”: “He believed he had once seen an Elf in the woods, and still hoped to see more one day. Of all the legends that he had heard in his

early years such fragments of tales and half-remembered stories about the Elves as the hobbits knew, had always moved him most deeply.”<sup>27</sup>

Sam, the theorist is seconded by a child on whom the fantasy world has a concrete impact where metamorphoses are concerned, for example. When teased by Gandalf (because he had spied on the discussion about the ring’s evil power), Sam is afraid the wizard will turn him into a non-hobbit. Why is Sam afraid? He knows Gandalf is a wizard and a *talker*, and, if he fears him, he does so because his belief in his powers is unconditional. Sam’s faith in fantasy is almost genetic, we may say. Knowing this faith (which he, too, had instilled in Sam, together with Bilbo), Frodo playfully threatens him that he will be changed in a toad, unless he keeps the secret of the magic ring. Sam does not doubt the potential transformation he could suffer: he is a believer from the beginning, who does not hesitate and who, for this reason, will become the *missionary par excellence* of the fantasy world.

When he is granted the right to start in on an adventure, Sam is effusive and frenetic: “Me go and see Elves and all! Hooray!” he shouts, and then burst into tears.”<sup>28</sup>. Why is Sam crying? Any fundamentalist believer – and Sam is one – needs concrete access to his idols; or Sam Gamgee’s idols are the elves. Frodo is aware of Sam’s mysticism and generously wants to materialise it, in the initial journey. As a bearer of the ring, he relies on the meeting with the elves and on the fact that they will become tangible. The contact with Lothlórien is the key point that will turn Sam into the main missionary of the fantasy world. In the beginning, he is shy at the chance offered to him, but then he is invaded by the enthusiasm and the enchantment that will also give him strength to complete the messianic adventure with Frodo. Throughout the journey, Sam sings and recites verses, tells tales and stories he



recollects from Bilbo or even invents some. Elves are the peak of his imaginary: once he arrives in their realm, Sam guesses he is in a hub, a space of absolute magic, a space ruled by lady Galadriel, who is omnipotent and fully gifted.

The realm of the elves is where Sam feels “at home”, even if, at the same time, he is aware of the dazzling alterity of this land. The magic (ambiguously prophetic) mirror of the elf Lady Galadriel stirs his obvious lucidity relating to his own “fantasy complex”. Galadriel shows him (demonstratively) things that may occur, but which are not necessarily bound to happen. Everything depends on the subsequent course of action of the beholders, because the mirror works like quicksand: it is not the traditional foreteller of future, it only tells of a version of the future that depends on the “fantasy complex” of the mirror looker as well as on the same viewer’s “reality complex”<sup>29</sup>. An essential aspect is that, when they part, Galadriel gives Sam soil from the elven garden; thus, the hobbit should be able to sow the Shire, symbolically transferring the elven realm to the hobbit land. This is how Galadriel delegates Sam as the missionary of paradise, respectively the new founder of paradise on earth, in the Shire, the emissary and the representative of Eden in the hobbit realm (particularly if the Shire is to be found in ruin, which will happen).

Together with Gimli the dwarf (who tries to persuade the sceptic Éomer of Rohan of lady Galadriel’s real elvish powers), Sam becomes a minstrel of lady Galadriel and her knight, praising her with enchantment (as established by Tolkien in the essay *On Fairy-Stories*) to the sceptic Faramir of Gondor. Éomer of Rohan is irked by the renown of elven magic and particularly by Galadriel’s powers, but in front of Aragorn (as Isildur’s heir) he admits that his scepticism relates to his resistance to the idea of spontaneous magic (i.e. miracle), rejecting

the way in which “dreams and legends spring to life out of the grass”<sup>30</sup>.

All the gifts from the elves are deemed divine by Sam Gamgee, frenetically contaminating the hobbit with magic. His “fantasy complex” is so penetrating that elven objects are perceived as totems. His faith attains leitmotif powers and it becomes recurrent: in some scenes, Sam attempts to convince even a creature like Gollum that some tale animals (at the risk of being fantastic) are in fact, real, or could be so, which would confirm the hyperbolic accounts about them – here he refers to *oliphaunts*. His speech about the *oliphaunts* is enthusiastic; Sam talks in verse for Gollum, as if he were in front of an audience that required persuasion. Even if he himself doubts the absolute credibility of the *oliphaunts*, Sam Gamgee allows himself to believe in any elements that may be in contact with the fantasy world. He memorizes the tales and histories of these other worlds (owing to Bilbo Baggins, his first mentor) and he is willing to spread the stories and the myths, as hyperbolic as they may be. When Sam finally sees a real *oliphaunt*, his first thought is that the Shire hobbits to whom he might recount his adventures will not believe him. However, he is even more capable to be, in fact, the missionary rather than just the beholder of the recently seen worlds.

Frodo’s revelation as to the elven realm bears a different tone and has a different sharpness than Sam’s naïve and frenetic-enthusiastic approach. Frodo is a cultured character who is able to guess in Lothlórien that precise accomplishment, because he is a *connoisseur*. The perfection, the harmony and the beauty of the elven land enrapture and mark him through a consistent and acute music of the spheres: enchanted, Frodo reacts as if he had been (mystically) raptured. Frodo’s revelation is



mystical-sounding: the musical structure of Lothlórien is flawless<sup>31</sup>; and the harmonious resonance does not emerge from music alone; it also comes from the elven tongue and the creatures as such. This resonance itself has the power to grant to space and time a perfection that spreads beneficially to everything contained in the elven realm. The following citation is ample, but necessarily illustrative of Frodo's growing and celestial musical perception: "At first the beauty of the melodies and of the interwoven words in elven-tongues, even though he understood them little, held him in a spell, as soon as he began to attend to them. It almost seems that the words took shape, and visions of far lands and bright things that he had never yet imagined opened out before him; and the firelit hall became like a golden mist above seas of foam that sighed upon the margins of the world. Then the enchantment became more and more dream-like, until he felt that an endless river of swelling gold and silver was flowing over him, too multitudinous for its pattern to be comprehended; it became part of the throbbing air about him, and it drenched and drowned him. Swiftly he sank under its shining weight into a deep realm of sleep."<sup>32</sup>

With Frodo, however, there is another element or character that stirs his enchantment, equally or even more than the elves' world. Tom Bombadil's (and his lady Goldberry's) ephemeral but decisive arrival in the hobbits' life is another point of reference for the "fantasy complex", but functional only to Frodo Baggins. While Sam is elementally enchanted by elves and dragons, Frodo is captivated, from an initiation viewpoint, by the Master of wood and water. Tom Bombadil is the registrar of all the stories, including those from before the elves or Gandalf's existence; this is why, as a Dionysus reinvented in a Celtic approach,

he produces for the hobbits a summary of all the possible plant stories (in *The Fellowship of the Ring*). Bombadil knows the cosmic stories, because he is a Pan-like deity from before the elves and other immortal entities, *id est*, his plant histories exist before the elven, hobbit etc. ones. For that matter, Tom Bombadil is the only one able to see Frodo even when he wears the ring that makes him invisible, which means that Tom Bombadil's cosmic-divine functionality dates back to the origin of the stories, myths, legends.

The second part of the trilogy, *The Two Towers*, in the chapter "The Stairs of Cirith Ungol", contains a comprehensive theoretical exchange between Sam and Frodo relating to the structure and dissemination (respectively validity) of olden stories and songs and of their resident heroes. The two hobbits and friends discuss the heroes' status in stories, and debate (particularly Sam Gamgee) how heroes are able to complete a quest, despite obstacles. Sam approaches the matter incisively: heroes in stories could have chosen to halt their exploits (by turning back), but they refused to do so precisely in order to be established as heroes. If they had returned, they would have been forgotten and, in fact, they wouldn't have become heroes. Within his epic missionary quest true to fantasy, Sam is aware of the story being written (and being told/read) via the exploit that involves him and Frodo: "I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into."<sup>33</sup> Frodo, however, thinks that knowing the kind of tale one is in is neither critical nor healthy, from the viewpoint of the action and of the account. A fantasy vocation may be helpful, while a fantasy awareness of the story ending may not be necessarily so. Stories have two types of endings (happy or sad endings), but this ending is to be known from the beginning neither by the heroes (characters), nor by the readers (or listeners).



When recounting the story of Beren and the Silmaril, Sam thinks that he and Frodo (as potential heroes) are in *the same story* (or legend) and asks an essential question: “Don’t great tales never end?”<sup>34</sup>. Or, Frodo’s reply is a summarizing one and has the simultaneous appearance of a verdict and a syndrome: the histories of the world are relentlessly continuous; they are mediated by links represented by their heroes, each of them holding their role. Once the role has ended, the hero disappears, but a new story is resumed invigoratingly: “‘No, they never end as tales,’ said Frodo. ‘But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later – or sooner.’”<sup>35</sup>. The object of Sam’s central inquiry is the following: will Frodo and Sam be placed in a story that will be disseminated? Will they become heroes (could they already be heroes)? Will they continue the story of others who, in its turn, will be followed by the story of others more, perpetually? And if this is how things are, couldn’t it be that the story itself takes places for the first time with heroes who are aware of its here-and-now occurrence? Why do they hold this particular awareness? Because both Frodo and Sam have an instinct and an (almost innate) vocation for fantasy, they are tailored to stories that, in their turn, are tailored to them.

Sam’s questions are relatively rhetorical, because he knows he is and operates in a story, owning the awareness of both the immediate and the perpetual. His epic and fantasy instinct was trained by Bilbo Baggins who had initiated him most of all in the elves’ stories. On the background of this dialogue is Tolkien’s pondering of some core literary theory matters (who the creators and disseminators of stories are) he launches, tactically, through his own characters: “Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We’re in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the

fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards.”<sup>36</sup> Tolkien’s endeavor is extremely sophisticated: he envisages Frodo and Sam’s journey as a ramification of ancient stories, representative of the fact that the two hobbits’ (and the others’) exploit is part of an archaic and established archetypal undertaking.

Frodo is aware of his *quest*, but he does not possess Sam’s missionary penchant and frenzy; this is why, he treasures his page and friend’s problematizing activism: “‘Why, Sam’, he said, ‘to hear you somehow makes me as merry as if the story was already written.’”<sup>37</sup> Sam’s passion for stories, his appetite and enthusiasm are rooted in his intuition that an archetypal story (like those of the olden times) is in the making. Frodo is not captivated by the background of this exploit; he is absorbed only by his personal *questa* (*as pursuit*) (an individual quest that has a collective outcome – the official destruction of the evil ring). For this reason, Sam is the one to whom the role of fantasy mystic is assigned (additional to the one of fantasy missionary). His faith in the elves’ world and power is so firm that he manages to defeat Shelob the evil spider, by invoking Galadriel’s name, while he himself talks the Elven tongue (although he does not know the language – but in the battle against Shelob, Sam acts like a shrewd crusader) and injures the monster with the light of Eärendil’s star.

Sam’s obsession with and for tales materialises precisely owing to the fact that he is or becomes a fantasy “fanatic”, even though a constructive one: his faith is therapeutic and redeeming rather than burdensome and restrictive. Sam wants to become a tale told time after time, as a mystic, a missionary and favouring witness of the fantasy world: “I wonder if any song will ever mention it”<sup>38</sup>. Once the fatal ring is



destroyed, Sam launches, in a leitmotif manner, the question/ possibility of acting as character in a famous story. He is a compulsive agent of the fantasy world he continuously wants recounted, while at the same time he never feels satiated: “‘What a tale we have been in, Mr Frodo, haven’t we?’ he said. ‘I wish I could hear it told! Do you think they’ll say: Now comes the story of Nine-fingered Frodo and the Ring of Doom?’”<sup>39</sup>. His wish will come true, given that, when Aragorn is crowned (as King Elessar in Gondor), he will hear a minstrel sing in the Elven-tongue and in the tongue of the West (for the audience that included various races) the story of Frodo of the Nine Fingers and Master Samwise. This is where the befallen (unfolded) story meets the told and (officially) recounted story of the time’s collection of histories. While Sam Gamgee was the compulsive and oral dimension of the “fantasy complex”, the one who will materialize it, as lucid (applied) scribe, is Frodo (extending the undertaking of Bilbo Baggins). Thus, the roles are refined at the end. Merry and Pippin, the other two hobbits of the exploit, will also become storytellers in the Shire, playing a supporting role in the transfer of the epic legacy preserved both individually and collectively.

The tale of the hobbits, of Gandalf, of the dwarves and of all the other was told and later transcribed, in stages, by various characters whose storytelling gift circulated from one to another. Tolkien meant to show us that the story wrote itself under our gaze only because our gaze had a disposition and hunger for these stories and storytellers. In this manner, the author chose us, as readers of fantasy literature, just as he had chosen Sam Gamgee to become a mystic and a missionary of fantasy literature.

In fact, we are Sam Gamgee.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay is a detailed and applied development and completion (in a *close reading* approach) of ideas outlined in a succinct text published in the review *Steaua*, issue 9, 2011, under the interrogative title “Complexul fantasy?” (“The Fantasy Complex?”).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Samuels, Bani Shorter, Fred Plaut, *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis*, Routledge & Keagan Paul, London and New York, 1986, s. v. Complex, p. 34.



- <sup>3</sup> Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*, translated in Romanian by Yvette Davidescu, afterword by Iordan Chimet, Bucharest, Editura Univers, 1995, p. 10, 12.
- <sup>4</sup> Andrew Samuels, Bani Shorter, Fred Plaut, *op. cit.*, s.v. Unconscious, p. 156.
- <sup>5</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, <http://public.callutheran.edu/~brint/Arts/Tolkien.pdf>, accessed on February 7, 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.
- <sup>8</sup> Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis. Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, New York & London, Methuen, 1984, p. Xii, 20, 21.
- <sup>9</sup> C.N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy. Five Studies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.
- <sup>11</sup> W. R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible. A Rhetoric of Fantasy*, Urbana & Chicago & London, University of Illinois Press, 1976, p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 41, 43.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.
- <sup>14</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1965.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 59-60.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 213.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 217.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 277.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 282.
- <sup>24</sup> This interpretation that invokes Scheherazade's model is also present in György Györfi-Deák's essay, "Regele Urs", in Virgil Nemoianu and Robert Lazu (eds.), *J.R.R. Tolkien: Credință și imaginație*, Arad, Editura Hartmann, 2005, pp. 157-158.
- <sup>25</sup> As a matter of fact, this is one of my beliefs, which I defend in the collective *Poveștile Duniazadei, ale sclavei sale Rașazada și ale regelui Șahzaman* (Bucharest, Editura Tracus Arte, 2012), which I coordinated and put together with eighteen storytellers who attended an ambitious workshop of creative prose writing (in 2008-2009), in line with the epic ceremonies of *One Thousand and One Nights*, but in their extension. Here are their names: Marius Conkan, Suzana Lungu, Bogdan Odăgescu, Valentin Moldovan, Cristina Vidruțiu, Lavinia Rogojină, Alexandru Istudor, Oana Furdea, Cezara Alexis, Florin Balotescu, Bogdan Papacostea, Maria Juca, Raluca Ferentinos, Alexandra Ghejan, Valerica Mărginean, Sonia Andraș, Simina Rațiu, Mihaela Prodan.
- <sup>26</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, trilogy including *The Fellowship of the Ring* (I), *The Two Towers* (II), *The Return of the King* (III), London, George Allen and Unwin, 1968.
- <sup>27</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 58.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 77.
- <sup>29</sup> I am using theoretically, only marginally, this "reality complex", as an opposition to the "fantasy complex"; otherwise, the "reality complex" will no longer appear in this essay. If, however, I were to define it concisely, I would say that, opposed to the "fantasy complex", the "reality complex" concerns the hunger for reality (a reality that discards fantasy ingredients); this is an inner penchant that rejects the interference of the unreal, of the fantasy, of the fantastic, of the miraculous, of the supernatural and of the impossible, whose existence is negated ostentatiously. At Sam Gamgee, the corresponding "reality complex" is not so drastic or extreme, because, in the scene regarding Galadriel's mirror, Sam is suggested he must have lucid will. This means that Sam



must let himself marked and (partially) contained by a “reality complex” in such a way that he becomes aware and keeps lucid in the dangerous adventure he is to live with Frodo, all risks attached.

<sup>30</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, p. 454.

<sup>31</sup> An analysis of Elven musicality and of its accomplished structure is provided by Michael Waldstein in his scholarly essay “Tolkien and St. Thomas on Beauty”, in the volume coordinated by Virgil Nemoianu and Robert Lazu, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Credință și*

*imaginație*, Arad, Editura Hartmann, 2005, p. 39-45.

<sup>32</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 249-250.

<sup>33</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, p. 739.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 763.

<sup>39</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, p. 986-987.