1

The Lord of the Rings: (1) Conception

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the work of his prime (it was begun in 1937, his forty-sixth year, and published in 1954–5), Tolkien realised for the first and only time the full potential of his creative imagination. The realisation was possible for two reasons: firstly because he constructed here a uniquely expansive form, which allowed the fullest embodiment to imaginative conceptions of (as it proved) great aesthetic and emotional potency; and secondly because he arrived in this work, after a twenty-year apprenticeship with many false starts, at a style, or range of styles, and an expertise in narrative, sufficient for the those conceptions to be made transparent. Chapter 2 will be largely devoted to examining the execution of the narrative and its styles; the present one to the form, and to the conceptions and their potency. But the distinction is, of course, unsustainable at the highest level of aesthetic coherence, and this will, I hope, become apparent by the time the analysis is complete.

*The Lord of the Rings*, not a ‘trilogy’ but a unified work of some 600,000 words presented in three separately-titled volumes, is set in a world called Middle-earth, of which the regions we encounter are broadly similar, in climate, geology and vegetation, as well as in scale, to Europe. It is, for the most part, a pre-industrial world, sparsely populated, and highly localised: trade is limited, and travellers are few. Men, gathered in communities of varying sizes, share Middle-earth with a variety of other ‘speaking-peoples’ (*RK*, 405), of whom Elves, Dwarves, Orcs and (half-Man-sized) Hobbits are the most common. Interaction among these peoples is rare (the very existence of Hobbits is unknown to distant communities) and often characterised by mutual suspicion. Nevertheless, Men, Elves,
Dwarves and Hobbits are actual or potential allies, and primarily benign though variously corruptible. Orcs are the barbarous militia of the malign spirit or fallen angel Sauron, the Dark Lord, who has re-arisen in Middle-earth after a long age of oblivion. Sauron never appears in visible and speaking form, but his malevolent will, acting at a distance, is felt increasingly throughout the narrative, as he attempts to conquer or devastate the western regions of Middle-earth from his stronghold in the south-east, Mordor. He will succeed in doing so if he can recover the One Ring of Power, taken from him in an earlier epoch and invested with much of his own malevolent strength: its power cannot effectively be used against him, since it is intrinsically evil and its use corrupts the user. The Ring has come into possession of the Hobbit, Frodo Baggins, and Sauron’s servants are pursuing him. Salvation for Middle-earth depends on Frodo’s destroying the Ring (resisting the corrupting temptation to claim and use it himself) by throwing it into the fire of Orodruin, Mount Doom in the heart of Mordor itself, where it was forged. Eventually this quest is accomplished and Middle-earth is duly saved.

Anyone who knows the work will recognise that this brief account omits innumerable complexities: it makes, for example, no reference to several major characters whose acts and attributes are of considerable importance to the overall sense of the work. Nevertheless, something of the appeal of The Lord of the Rings is, I hope, apparent from this bare synopsis. In part it is the appeal of an essentially simple, and exciting, plot: to that extent the work has affinities, as has often been noted, with a variety of story-telling traditions: with fairy-tales, quest narratives, and novels of adventure. But in part the appeal is attributable to the features described in the first half of the above account (without which, indeed, the narrative sketched in the second half would scarcely be intelligible). The circumstantial expansiveness of Middle-earth itself is central to the work’s aesthetic power: once this is grasped, many other aspects of the work fall into place.

They hastened up the last slope . . . and looked out from the hill-top over lands under the morning. It was now as clear and far-seen as it had been veiled and misty when they stood upon the knoll in the Forest, which could now be seen rising pale and green out of the dark trees in the West. In that direction, the land rose in wooded ridges, green, yellow, russet under the sun, beyond which lay hidden the valley of the Brandywine. To