

(A draft of a review that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 5698, 15 June 2012)

Michael Saler

AS IF

Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality

283pp. Oxford University Press. £60 (hb), £17.99 (pb)

978-0-19-534316-8 (hb) / 978-0-19-534317-5 (pb)

PATRICK CURRY

As If is an engaging and adventurous literary history. Saler begins with a distinction between realist imagined worlds (citing Balzac, Zola and Powell) and fantastic imaginary worlds, whose origins he locates in the late nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle. He is adept in navigating the complex waters where elite and popular cultures mingle, including work from Flaubert and Borges to Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling, as well as fans' magazines.

The book's middle chapters are devoted to three imaginary worlds that Saler rightly identifies as central to this literary phenomenon: H.P. Lovecraft's 'Cthulhu Mythos', Arthur Conan Doyle's 221B Baker Street and its famous resident, and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth. There are deep differences between them, of course. Lovecraft's neo-mythic world is a surreal amalgam of materialism and supernaturalism. Conan Doyle was almost eclipsed by his own creation – he was portrayed by some as merely Holmes's literary agent – and in a poignant twist, he abandoned his sleuth's uncompromising rationalism for fairies in the garden. Tolkien's mythic elves were a still different matter, less literal but (partly for that reason) more convincing. Nonetheless, Saler brings out the structural imaginative parallels uniting these worlds where readers love to live.

At the other end of the chronological arc, his account terminates with imaginary worlds transformed, through 'persistent and communal habitation', into the virtual worlds of video games and the internet, now with hundreds of millions of participants. All in all it's quite a story, and Saler tells it well.

This book's larger purposes are more complex. One can only applaud the intention to open up new areas of popular literature to critical appreciation – or, better, to increase critical appreciation of literature that has suffered badly from reflex snobbery. Contempt, as J.P. Stern once observed, is a poor guide.

Saler has another project, however, which is to make enchantment safe for modernity. He refers repeatedly, sometimes as desiderata and other times as accomplished facts, to securing marvels ‘while remaining true to rationality and secularism’, and ‘a specifically modern enchantment’ which offers ‘delight without delusion’: in short, a ‘disenchanted enchantment’. There are serious problems here, and they extend beyond the obvious semantic ones of square circles, dark light and safe danger, or the temptation to add, ‘And they all lived happily ever after’.

According to Saler, you can ‘safely’ occupy imaginary worlds – safety is another recurrent concern, almost amounting to an obsession – because the distinction between fantasy (which he equates with delusion) and reality (which he equates with rational and empirical truth) is secured by ‘the distancing power of irony’. By accepting what is in effect a positivistic account of reality, and limiting enchantment to the imagination, adults can engage in the ‘pretence’ that its marvels are real without running any risk of mistaking one for the other.

What this amounts to is a crippling refusal to recognize secondary imaginary worlds and enchantment as fully real, something in and of the primary world, plus a corresponding refusal to recognize the extent to which the primary world is itself imagined and narrated. Imagination, in this account, is not something that really enchants; it merely entertains, and it does so in a way that is fully compatible with the commercial logic of modernity.

The price for ‘safety’, then, is a stiff one. Ironically, it is precisely – in Max Weber’s famous words, quoting Schiller – the disenchantment of the world. But Saler is willing to pay that price because he is on the modernist’s mythic quest to save truth and reason from the forces of delusion. (His nods to a postmodern pluralism of ‘provisional fictions’ add nothing in this respect.)

Saler describes Tolkien as ‘the premier theorist of the ironic imagination’. He is right about Tolkien’s importance in this context, which stems in large part from his manifesto ‘On Fairy-Stories’. In trying to enlist him as a fellow-modernist, however, Saler goes badly astray. Tolkien stated flatly that ‘Middle-earth is not an imaginary world’, and that ‘The theatre of my tale is this Earth, the one in which we now live’. He also firmly rejected irony inside his ‘perfectly sincere, perfectly impossible’ world (in the words of a surer guide, Brian Attebery). Indeed, the absence of knowing irony, which Saler cannot fully admit, was one reason for its enormous popular success. Nor did Tolkien share Saler’s fear of being fooled. He accepted that the danger of delusion

was part of the price of being open to enchantment, which, he insisted, was ‘perilous’. You don’t have to be a hobbit to find this more plausible and even attractive than the anodyne safety of Saler’s ‘disenchanted enchantment’.

Instead, what worried Tolkien most was untrammelled power, which he termed ‘Magic’ and personified in his fiction as Sauron, the most powerful (and technologically advanced) figure in Middle-earth. Furthermore, while Tolkien keenly respected reason, he was openly hostile to the scientific rationalism that Saler extols, along with the other great engines of modernity, capital and the nation-state. Somehow, judging by his book, one doesn’t feel they keep Saler awake at night.

In short, this lively and intelligent work is weakened by a philosophical failure of nerve that prevents it from serving its subject as well as it might. But it will significantly enlarge and add to the discussion, and might well inspire others more daring to go where it cannot. It is also encouraging that a distinguished academic press has published such a book on such a subject. The debate seems to have moved on since *Private Eye* offered the opinion, widely shared among the literati, that Tolkien appeals most to those with ‘the mental age of a child – computer programmers, hippies and most Americans’. Unfortunately, though, the hideous cover, a badly drawn cartoon, suggests that someone at Oxford University Press still agrees.