C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tokien as I knew them (never well)

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ABSTRACT

I attended all the lectures C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien gave in 1948 to 1951. My own teaching of English Renaissance literature at Birmingham University was informed by Lewis's volume in the Oxford History of English Literature (1954), parts of which I had heard him give as lectures. At Birmingham we started a series of Medieval and Renaissance texts, and I wrote to Lewis and ask him if he would be our General Editor; he said, yes. He asked me to meet him, correspondence followed, and I quote from a long, witty, and wise letter about an edition of mine, and about another edition which Lewis disliked and I also quote from that sharper letter.

I knew Tolkien because, as an undergraduate I attended his weekly seminars. At that time he himself was greatly interested in *Ancrene Wisse* and the Katherine Group. He lectured on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Much later, in 1972, I met Tolkien again, at a book-launch party. I ventured to speak to him. I gave my name, and in his charming way he said he remembered me. I wondered at that, but took it as evidence of his kindness.

I begin with an apology to C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, who would have hated that they themselves are my subject. Both liked facts, and both loved literature, and both probably disliked talk of personalities. I said 'probably', because I do not know what they themselves talked about when they met, in my time not in the Eagle and Child, but across St Giles' in the Lamb and Flag, or in the Eastgate, near for Lewis in Magdalen and for Tolkien in Merton. They were great social beer-drinkers, never to excess, while Tolkien smoked his pipe.

I attended all the lectures Lewis and Tolkien gave in the academic years 1948 to 1951, about two thirds of a century ago when I was an undergraduate, and from Michaelmas Term 1949 onwards I attended Tolkien's seminar for graduate students and selected undergraduates, selected not because of any special gifts of those invited, but because we had chosen English courses i or ii, the courses in which literature was subordinated to language, course i ending about 1400, course ii ending with the age of Shakespeare. My tutor on the language side was Alistair Campbell, who in an interview with *The Times* (about abolishing compulsory Anglo-Saxon) was reported as having said, 'After 1400 there is no literature, just books', typical of his kind of joking, and typical of *The Times* that they took it seriously. I was very keen on literature, and had chosen to read the English course that ended with the end of the fourteenth century because I ignorantly thought that I needed no teaching to read post-medieval literature, but that help was needed for anything earlier, which I therefore had come to study at Oxford.

Lewis's volume *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* was published a few years after I began my first university appointment.[1] In the preface he says that he used 'this book, in an embryonic state, as the Clark Lectures (1944)' given at Trinity College, Cambridge.[2] He does not say that in 1948-1951 he gave some of the content of the book, especially of its introductory chapter, entitled characteristically 'New Learning and New Ignorance' in a brilliant series of lectures, 'Prolegomena to English Renaissance Literature' in the Oxford Examination Schools (the St Cross Building had not yet taken shape in all its understated ugliness).

There he was on the platform, rather badly dressed in the Oxford professorial tradition, in corduroy trousers, most of his

1 C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, The Oxford History of English Literature, III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

2 *Op. cit.*, p. iv. That this book is 'The Completion of The Clark Lectures' is stated also on the title-page.

person covered by his well-worn M.A. gown, his 'fuller figure', as advertisements for ladies' garments used to call it, protruding somewhat. His lectures were very much like his academic writing, fundamentally serious but often humorously expressed. The undergraduates, all wearing gowns of course (or the Clerk of the Schools would not have allowed us in), did not laugh out loud for fear of missing the next bit of the lecture.

After more than sixty years I can't remember any details, and will merely explain why I thought them then and think them still the best lectures I have ever heard, and I shall select some details from the Oxford History volume, cheating, as it may seem, because I can rely on what is in print, but not on what I might remember. Lewis's memory is what impressed one immediately. He had lecture notes, but they did not have everything written out, and he often added to what he had intended to say, adding long passages of poetry which he knew by heart. Lewis was not an actorly performer: texts mattered to him, the theatricality of their delivery did not. He was different in that respect from other good lecturers, whose lectures I attended though they lectured on later literature than English course i. Helen Gardner, for example, not yet Dame Helen, who was too often so involved that, like 'the mobled queene' of the play within the play, she could not but weep, rightly for the sorrowful scene, but rather too much of a good thing for her lecture. Nevill Coghill acted out long quotations from his modernized Canterbury Tales, a modernization to which no one who reads Chaucer in Middle English is likely to respond favourably, and of whose critical statements about the Canterbury Tales I was arrogantly dismissive.[3]

Lewis translated foreign quotations, from Greek erotic epyllia, for example – I had never heard the word epyllion before – to trace the line of descent to *Hero and Leander* or *Venus and Adonis*,

3 Nevill Coghill, *The Canterbury Tales Translated into Modern English* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1951), and often reprinted. Before its publication this verse translation formed a series of very popular programmes of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

of which he thought less well than of *The Rape of Lucrece*. He was never reluctant to state his views on any work of literature, however famous the author. Lewis in effect asked, if it were not by Shakespeare who would read *Venus and Adonis* now? But then he was always ready, in his writings and in his lectures, to make what he liked greatly sound great, and what he liked less well, yet nevertheless part of what his memory carried, appear as if not to be entirely forgotten.

Lewis knew Greek and Latin literature, major and minor, early or late, medieval and Renaissance, too well to be much impressed by Marlowe's and Shakespeare's attempts to refashion ancient glory. When he uttered some particularly scathing remark about some text customarily admired in the little world of English studies he often added, 'Take it or leave it: that is my view.'

Perhaps some of the Magdalen undergraduates tutored by Lewis might have thought, if Shakespeare is treated to such discriminatory assessments, what chance do I stand? My friend Derek Brewer, whom I did not know till after I had left Oxford and we were colleagues in Birmingham, never felt at ease with his tutor, or to put it more crudely, never ceased to be afraid of him. He told me that when Lewis taught Old English grammar, he made them recite in chorus the declensional paradigms of article, adjective, and noun:

> se goda mann
> þone godan mann
> þæs godan mannes
> þæm godan menn
> etc.

It was like having a genius schoolmaster teaching elementary Latin. I never knew that side of Lewis: to me he was a genius who knew everything literary ever written. His book in the Oxford History, published when I began teaching post-medieval literature in

Birmingham, was a revelation, like his Prolegomena lectures that I had heard. He, who seemed to have read everything, was often scathing about the literary criticism advanced by academics. Writing of Machiavelli and his *Prince* (published in 1513), he says, 'The Elizabethans, I believe, understood him much better than the subtle moderns'.[4] This is characteristic of Lewis. The major writings of the age, in any language – *Il Principe*, for example – is required knowledge: what some academics call 'the background' to a written work is the foreground of our understanding of it; and the false subtleties of academics show them to be tone-deaf to the period – 'period' is their word – of which they are writing. C. S. Lewis himself did not call members of our profession 'academics', neither for praise nor for censure. He called academics 'scholars', or, with a touch of disdain, 'professional scholars': people who read works of literature barely worth reading, and who gave as their 'considered opinions' (another phrase he did not use) opinions that were distilled not from literature itself, but boiled down in a feeble saucepan from the writings of other professional scholars, expressing agreement or disagreement with them. It should be remembered that Oxford and other universities, among them Birmingham which I knew well, till about the 1950s included many 'professional scholars' in the Arts who were content to pass on knowledge of the subject as they had been taught it, successfully if the high degree they had attained in the Final Examination was proof of success, and a high degree was usually required for appointment to a university post. Many never published anything.

In the 1950s at Birmingham, I was encouraged to give tutorials on post-medieval English literature up to the middle of the nineteenth century, a subject about which I was enthusiastic but in which I had received no professional scholarly instruction. At Oxford I had attended good lectures on some of the authors I was now attempting to teach. For example I had heard J. B. Leishman

4 *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 51.

on the Metaphysical Poets.[5] It was a pleasure to read the works of literature themselves, and it was easier to read just the relatively small amount of criticism of or near to the age when the works were written, than to plough through recent criticism supplied in bulk. My tutorial students did well, not because I was an expert, but because their scripts had many references to the critical writings by literary figures contemporary with the major and minor post-medieval poets and prosists. The model was C. S. Lewis, but, of course, I lacked the breadth of erudition that shaped his secure grasp.

At Birmingham University I was very fortunate in the head of department, Allardyce Nicoll, and my colleagues Geoffrey Shepherd and Derek Brewer, both of them in the first place medievalists, but both interested in and lecturing and publishing on post-medieval literature too. I had been appointed to teach Old and Middle English language and literature, and the history of the English language. I shared not at all secretly, though with less learning, their interest in literature of all periods and was encouraged to pursue it.

We became close friends. We decided that we should start a series of medieval and Renaissance texts, not blind to linguistic details but principally writings we thought worth reading. We were in our thirties, too unknown to get a publisher for our series: a General Editor was essential, and, if we were fortunate, our General Editor might now and again give us advice. We got a publisher, Thomas Nelson, Edinburgh, even before we had a General Editor. Our ideal General Editor would be, we thought, C. S. Lewis. Geoffrey Shepherd, by five years our Nestor, was a product of King's College, London, and he thought Oxford and Cambridge – Lewis had by then migrated to Magdalene College, Cambridge (though still attached to Magdalen College, Oxford) – were foreign institutions to anyone from London University. Derek Brewer had

5 Shortly afterwards published: J. B. Leishman, *The Monarch of Wit: An Analytical and Comparative Study of the Poetry of John Donne* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1951).

been tutored by Lewis at Magdalen, but, in spite of his own great talents, had always remained in awe of him, as I have said. He had been sufficiently exposed to Lewis's teaching, from Old English to 1830 (where the Oxford modern English course iii ended), to recognize his unrivalled erudition and judgement. Neither of them wished to write to Lewis, and asked me to write to him, and full of admiration for him I did.

Writing to Professor C. S. Lewis I sweated blood, and I remember some of the final version of the letter, to the wording of which Geoffrey and Derek had agreed. I knew how much Lewis would have hated any flattering words, however true the praise. The letter explained what the aims of the series were, and then it came to the point. 'We are tuft-hunting, but we hope that the tuft we are hunting may conceal a head. Will you be our General Editor?' The letter added that what we were seeking was his name as General Editor, but that we would of course be happy with any advice he might be willing to give if we submitted the editions to him in draft when he allowed us to do so. He replied fairly quickly, I think on a postcard, but I regret to say that I make a habit of throwing away the letters and cards I receive, including those from Lewis and Tolkien. What he said was first, 'Yes', and then, that if he were General Editor he would not be that without reading the editions. That is when I first got to know C. S. Lewis personally.

As requested I sent him my edition of *The Owl and the Nightingale* in draft. I got back a handwritten letter several pages long improving, both in general (my introduction, to be redone) and in particular (my notes on the text). He didn't know me, but if I were willing to see him in Oxford, we could meet in the Eastgate for beer and sandwiches. Of course I at once agreed to come. I got there early, and may have been drinking when he came in, apologizing even before he had sat down that he had made me come from Birmingham and to a pub near to Magdalen that I wouldn't know. I said that I knew it well; I had been an undergraduate at Univ (University College, Oxford, a few feet west of the Eastgate). He

stretched out his hand, and said loudly, 'Bruder', the greeting to each other of members of German student fraternities, *Bruderschaften* (or when they went in for duelling *Burschenschaften*) of his generation. He had been an undergraduate at Univ too.

I certainly did not often get a chance to meet him, but on one of the rare subsequent occasions in the Eastgate, we talked about *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I knew of course that Lewis and Tolkien were friends, and I was careful to speak well of these books. I praised *The Hobbit*, saying that it was the right length for fantasy, and that I had read it to our daughter, and that I had done the same a little later with *The Lord of the Rings*, but that when I explained possible connections with Old English or other literatures, I was stopped in my annotations with the words, 'Please, Daddy, stop explaining it, just read it.' Lewis, to my surprise, said that it had been difficult to stop Tolkien from making his notes to *The Lord of the Rings* even longer.

At our first meeting, or even before, he had told me to call him Lewis, not Professor Lewis. We were usually in contact by correspondence, frequent, elaborate, and helpful, at first about *The Owl and the Nightingale*. It was not part of how he viewed his function to bestow praise or dispraise, or more probably I did not deserve praise. In my introduction to the poem I had generalized to suggest that it is wrong to feel romantic joy, because no bookish source has been found for the poet's line that the hen behaves oddly in the snow (line 413), that he must have drawn his line about that behaviour, not from some written source, unidentified, but had got it from nature. I said that personal observation and book-learning are not mutually exclusive: what the poet has read in books he observes in nature, what he has observed in nature he may find confirmed in books.[6] I had obviously not expressed it well. Lewis

6 Cf. E. G. Stanley (ed.), *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Nelson's Medieval and Renaissance Library (London and Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960), pp. 31-2, for comments on lines 412-13, as improved after Lewis's adverse criticism of the introduction in draft.

thought my idea was right, but my expression of it was poor. I rewrote it and resubmitted it to him, and got back a postcard saying, 'Now tip-top'. I was very proud of that.

Lewis did not often comment on linguistic points, and his comment is exceptional on line 236, a pseudo-Alfredian proverb: *He schunet þat hine vvl wot*; literally, 'He shuns who knows him(self) foul.' J. W. H. Atkins, in the copious edition of the poem, translates the line, 'a man (he) shuns that which knows him to be foul.'[7] I can't remember how I translated this proverb – probably by quoting Atkins and commenting on the uncertainty of that interpretation, with some pedantic remark that it wasn't clear to me why the poet said of the proverb (line 233), that *hit ho unclene* 'it is unclean', and that *schunien* is not elsewhere intransitive in Middle English. In the long and truly helpful letter with comments on my edition in draft (and I have kept that letter), C. S. Lewis wrote on the line:

> It wd. be nice if you cd. find any authority for *schunien* intrans (*latitare*, to be furtive, keep out of the way) "He keeps out of the way who knows himself to be foul." I fancy the proverb is *unclene* because the original reference is to a child that has shat his pants & doesn't want it to be known?

Many years later, on the completion of the *Middle English Dictionary*, I was invited by the University of Ann Arbor, who had supported *MED* over its long period of prepublication and publication, to celebrate that its last and distinguished Editor-in-Chief, Robert E. Lewis, had brought it to conclusion. In *MED* the intransitive use in this poem is quoted, though not quite as in C. S. Lewis's translation, but 'to keep to oneself, avoid company'.[8] C. S. Lewis could not be

7 J. W. H. Atkins (ed.), *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 23.

8 *Middle English Dictionary,* S–SL, fascicle S.6 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), pp. 744-6 s.v. *shonen*, at p. 245 sense 2. (c). I have told this story of C. S. Lewis's contribution to Middle English Lexicography in the volume devoted to the completion of the *Middle English Dictionary*, E. G. Stanley, 'Celebrating the *Middle English Dictionary*', in *Dictionaries: Journal of The Dictionary Society of North America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, The

acknowledged as the explicator of the crux. When the time came that my edition went off to the publishers, I wrote to Lewis, saying that of course I wished to thank him for the enormous help he had given me, in general and in detail, but I didn't think it appropriate to mention his particular contribution to Middle English lexicography on the shitten child in explication of the verb *schunien*. I got back a postcard (I wish I had kept it), 'Thank me as you will, shitten child or no. C. S. Lewis'.

When some years later I was the Extern Examiner for Old and Middle English in the National University of Ireland, I got to know Father T. P. Dunning well. He was Professor of Old and Middle English at University College, Dublin, and one of the most loveable academics I have known, and a wise scholar too. At some time I told him how much I admired C. S. Lewis, and he, who had been a graduate student at Magdalen College, Oxford, said that Lewis was too Irish Protestant ever to regard Dunning other than with disfavour. I explained that C. S. Lewis was not at all bigoted, and what was Tom's evidence for the view that he was hostile to Roman Catholics? He told me that even after several meetings Lewis could not remember Tom's name. I said immediately that I remembered the names of some of my earlier students, but later I remembered the names of fewer and fewer students. I defended Lewis further, strongly, because I believed that Tom Dunning had formed a wrong impression of him, and because I liked Dunning, whom I knew fairly well, and Lewis, whom I knew less well, but well enough to think that such bigotry was wholly unlikely and should not remain without an attempt to refute it.

Tom Dunning was a most effusively generous man. When walking with him through the streets of Dublin, or into restaurants, people, waitresses in his favourite restaurants, rushed up to him, and some embraced him, 'How lovely to see you, Father Dunning!' C. S. Lewis seemed reserved. Any show of emotion towards Magdalen graduate students was not for him. I was not successful

Dictionary Society of North America), 23 (2002), pp. 23-47, at pp. 31-2.

in convincing Tom Dunning that Lewis was not a rabid anti-Catholic. I am sure I was right, and in this paper I tell this minor, gossipy point only to illustrate how I thought C. S. Lewis should be appreciated, as wholly committed to literature and careless of minor personal sensitivities.

It is usually said of such people that they are very private persons. That cannot be true of Lewis, who wrote an autobiography (which I have not read; he may have written it to protect his posthumous reputation, unconnected with his professional relations). This is a matter of generational etiquette. Lewis was born in 1898, Tom Dunning, I think, was born just before the First World War. He was roughly contemporary with J. A. W. Bennett, born 1911. There was greater warmth in relations between members of the same college in the 1940s, unlike the coolth there had been in the early 1920s. The school habit of addressing one another by surname had not yet been relaxed. Even when I began teaching in the 1950s, I would not have dreamt of addressing any student in my class by Christian name. It would have seemed unprofessional familiarity.

I did not know C. S. Lewis well enough to know his feelings about persons. His lectures and his academic writings were not concerned with the personalities of scholars. His letters to me, though their subject concerned editions in the series 'Medieval and Renaissance Library' of which he was the General Editor, were often surprisingly witty on our editors. While Alan J. Bliss, the editor of Thomas Chestre's Sir Launfal, was ill in Turkey I had to deal with the edition, and sent the draft to Lewis.[9] The covering letter, dated 13 July 1959, followed by several pages of comments on a text and an edition he did not like, contained the following:

> We must make the best of a bad job. He [A. J. Bliss] is one of those to whom texts are a closed system wholly dependent on one another. No connection either with any human "maker" or hearer or with the real world ever comes before

9 A. J. Bliss (ed.), *Thomas Chestre: Sir Launfal*, Nelson's Medieval and Renaissance Library (London and Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960).

> his mind. Mr. Pickwick probably had breakfast because Chaucer's Franklin had a sop in wine when he got up, or Dickens' omission of the wine detail (or *motif*) is hard to account for except on the hypothesis of a lost intermediate version, see Balderdasch PMLA CXXI 3.
>
> Yours
> C. S. Lewis

I kept that letter together with Lewis's notes so that, when Alan Bliss recovered, as he soon did, I could quote Lewis's authority for some of the changes I had introduced into 'Bliss's MS (*cacata carta*)', as Lewis had described it in the opening sentence of the letter. All this is characteristic of Lewis: the suddenness of the switch from one century to an other, the condemnation of the systematic illogicality of the source-hunter, whose nonsensical pomposity is learnedly derived from the authority of Professor Balderdasch, spelt <sch> because he is of German descent, writing in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, a periodical that (around that time) thunderously announced that it would change its editorial policy, from being a learned journal of voluminous vacuity with occasional lapses into scholarship, to be more popular, nothing specialist, but now intolerant of such erudite lapses as had disgraced its pages heretofore, and appealing therefore to the broad masses of the Modern Language Association in what Vice-President Henry A. Wallace called 'the century of the common man'.

I myself did not come out of my correspondence with Lewis unscathed. In his letter, dated 25 June 1958, about my edition of *The Owl and the Nightingale* in draft, he was highly critical, but he liked the poem. This is what he said about my introduction in the covering letter to his notes:

> If you have time and opportunity I believe you could, in a happy hour, re-write the Introduction with advantage. Very often, when one's mind has been completely off a bit of work for several months, one finds old difficulties have solved themselves and wonders how one missed the

obvious ways of doing things. My criticism of the present Introduction are:

1. It is not a triumph of lucidity. I had difficulty over more than one sentence. Rembember that readers *always* misunderstand if you give them the least chance. Writing is like driving sheep: they will turn in at any gate that has been left open.
2. There is a certain amount of repetition. This may or may not be avoidable. That's one of those things that often solves itself at a re-writing.
3. I'm not sure the same level of "popularity" is kept throughout.
4. See my note on p. 27 [Lewis wanted essential liturgiological information I had failed to supply, in my ignorance].

With many apologies for my delay and villainous handwriting, which I can't improve.

Yours
C. S. Lewis

His villainous handwriting meant that it took me quite a long time to decipher 'villainous', but I am pretty sure I got that right; I am not so sure that I deciphered the word 'can't' correctly. Of course, I rewrote the Introduction. Lewis's criticism led me to make great improvements. I treated his detailed criticisms as he wished me to treat all that he had written, 'take it or leave it'; I took most of it to correct the edition, but I left some of it because I thought him wrong. There was every reason why I should have been in awe of him; indeed I was, but I never feared him, always recognizing that he wrote to help me to improve the edition of a poem he was interested in. Even his wish to make me rewrite the Introduction was a kind wish.

There are in these letters, as in all his writings, many unexpected revelations, casually introduced as it may wrongly seem. Professional scholars annotating may urge their readers to accept that wholly irrelevant supposed parallels illumine a text; the mention of wine, invented by Lewis, in a late Middle English Breton Lay can

be shown to indicate that this was at breakfast, an undiscovered *motif* in English literature, used also by Chaucer and Dickens, as the authoritative study of Professor Balderdasch has shown so 'insightfully'.[10] One must recognize that readers behave like sheep, and writing is therefore like driving sheep. 'Therefore, since Brevitie is the Soule of Wit', C. S. Lewis is brief when he is witty.

In writing criticism he sometimes leaves gates open for some poor mutt of a reader to misunderstand him, as when in his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* he attaches the labels 'drab' and 'golden' to authors, without 'drab' being derogatory in Lewis's use.[11] Often he places words side by side unusually and startlingly, so that a work is understood as if for the first time. Thus 'the tranquil beauty of the old philosophy' (in connection with Richard Hooker).[12] Not infrequently he rises to golden heights (on Spenser's *Four Hymns*),[13] 'You cannot carry a reader beyond the flaming bounds of space and time simply by sincerity and conscientious workmanship.' As in the lectures that I heard, the series 'Prolegomena to Medieval Literature' and the series 'Prolegomena to Renaissance Literature', when I read such revealing incongruities or rhetorical flowers of tone and substance, I recognize a mastery unparalleled in the criticism of 'professional scholars'. His joyous seriousness carries

10 This adverb is not recorded in OED before 1932, and I am sure that Lewis would have despised any use of it, though he might have liked my mocking its use in connection with Professor Balderdasch.

11 Near the beginning of his chapter 'Drab Age Verse' (*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 222-71 at p. 222), he explains that it is insufficient to judge verse away from the music that belongs with it, and with characteristic generosity he names the person who has taught him that, at least for one poem:

> [W]e are reading songs; richness and deliciousness would be supplied by the air and the lute and are therefore not wanted in the words. When they are read merely as poems it produces results which were probably unforeseen by the authors. It makes some pieces seem flat and dull; others, admirably fresh and ingenuous. But those which make dull poems need not have made dull songs. One that I had thought very dry and colourless came dancing into life as soon as a learned pupil (Mr. Norman Bradshaw) played me the air on his recorder.

12 *Op. cit.*, p. 449.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 377.

me 'beyond the flaming bounds of space and time'.

I do not claim close personal acquaintance with C. S. Lewis. I knew J. R. R. Tolkien better, though again not really well. I attended his weekly seminars for four or five terms. We were less than a dozen, I think, including an earnest Norwegian graduate student, and an even more earnest German graduate student. Our papers, read out to the seminar, were not supposed to go on for longer than 15 or at most 20 minutes on the subject Tolkien had chosen. His patience was not infinite. The German graduate student went on and on, exemplifying *ad nauseam* some point of grammar, syntax I think. After about half an hour, it may have been more – it seemed endless to me – Tolkien stopped him, saying something like, 'Thank you very much. Now what conclusion have you arrived at?' There was no conclusion, and after the session, for which Tolkien may even have dispensed beer in glass tankards of questionable cleanliness, as he did from time to time, the serious German graduate student complained bitterly to some of our group as we walked down the Merton stairs from Tolkien's set, that the Professor had not allowed him to present his evidence.

Tolkien was usually very patient, very encouraging, very polite, very friendly, except when some fundamental philological mistake had, in his eyes, ruined some student's paper. One of our number, fortunately not me, did not distinguish an Old English weak verb of class I with medial /r/ resulting in the retention of unsyllabic /i/, *herian herede* for example, from a weak verb of class II, *lufian lufode* for example. Metrically it makes a great deal of difference. Tolkien was interested in metre and prose rhythm, as well as in meaning. When that fundamental error was uttered by the student, Tolkien was sharp, and said he wished to hear no more of the paper. Tolkien treated philology not as an end in itself but as the handmaid of literature. Literature is what he knew, Old English and Middle English, Old Icelandic, the medieval literatures in the Celtic languages, and of course he knew Greek and Latin from his days as a schoolboy at King Edward VI School in Edgbaston, Birmingham,

and from reading for 'Honour Mods' at the beginning of his time as an undergraduate.

Tolkien did not usually need to prepare his seminars. To provide evidence for views he expressed, he pulled down books from his well-stocked shelves in Merton; he was the Merton Professor of Medieval English Literature. He did not often publish his views, but when he did – for example, on *Beowulf* in a celebrated British Academy lecture, on 'Chaucer as a Philologist', and on the language of a group of West Midland texts, as well as in his and E. V. Gordon's edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – his contributions were at once recognized as brilliant, because they were wholly original and right.[14] Some of his ideas were published, with acknowledgement, by graduate students of his, especially Simonne d'Ardenne, a gracious Belgian lady, who became a well-known professor of English at Liège.[15]

For years I quoted in my teaching, always with full acknowledgement, various philological ideas I got from Tolkien. I will give only one example. Why do we pronounce in Modern English the noun *wind* differently from the verb spelt identically? None of the students I have known in over sixty years has ever given Tolkien's correct answer to this question: in Middle English the noun is more often monosyllabic, and lengthening of the vowel before final /nd/ is not always observed; but the verb is more usually disyllabic, *win-den* and in that syllabicity lengthening before intervocalic /n-d/ is the rule.

14 Three significant studies, in order of date, show his range as well as his brilliance, and of course this is not a bibliography of his scholarly writings: '*Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meiðhad*', Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association, XIV (1929), pp. 104-26; 'Chaucer as a Philologist', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1934, pp. 1-70; 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', Sir Israel Gollancz Lecture, 1936, read 25 November 1936, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXII (for 1936), pp. 245-95.

15 S. T. R. O. [for S. R. T. O.] d'Ardenne (ed.), *An Edition of þe Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Iuliene*, Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liége, LXIV (1936); reprinted as Early English Text Society, original series 248 (1961).

Nobody ever denied Tolkien's brilliance, but perhaps he did not always fulfil what his contract as professor of the University of Oxford required. For more than a year he gave no lectures, not, I gathered, because he availed himself of the professorial right to confine all his lecturing, prescribed by contract, into one term of the academic year, but because, for some of his leave, he claimed some kind of sick-leave when he acquired false teeth. I was too low a form of life to know the exact details of why and how Professor Tolkien failed to fulfil his obligation to lecture, but I remember telling him when I saw him by chance, and he was always very friendly, that we had had no lectures from anybody on two Middle English texts written in interesting dialects that we had to study for the paper compulsory for English courses i and ii, 'Middle English Philology'. He said that he was coming back next term and would lecture on the Kentish Sermons.[16] Next term he came, and began his lecture to the small group of undergraduates taking courses i and ii, pronouncing the words of his opening sentence memorably with *sh* for s and the like: 'You shee you can't do shound shangezh with porshelain.' He always pronounced words indistinctly, but he had never pronounced sibilants like that before.

Tolkien was not a good lecturer, and he did not regularly revise his lectures. I was told that when he lectured on the Old English *Exodus* in the 1950s and even later, he gave the lectures (eventually published by Joan Turville-Petre) more or less as he had given them in the 1920s or '30s.[17] When he lectured on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* he was full of interesting, highly original ideas, and no mention of Courtly Love, at that time a fashionable doctrine in the universities. He came to the seating arrangements in King Arthur's court at Christmas, (line 109) *There gode Gawan watz grayped Gwenore*

16 'Kentish Sermons', in Joseph Hall (ed.), *Selections from Early Middle English 1130–1250*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), I, 214-22; notes II, 657-75.

17 Joan Turville-Petre (ed.), *The Old English* Exodus. *Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

bisyde 'There the good Gawain was placed next to Guenever', and (line 112) *Bischop Bawdewyn abof biginez þe table* 'Bishop Baldwin high up has the seat of honour at the table', a line which Tolkien had explained wrongly in his and E. V. Gordon's edition of 1925.[18] In his lecture, when he came to line 112, he mumbled, chuckling while he said it, something to the effect that 'old Gollancz', that is Sir Israel Gollancz, had pointed out in his (posthumous) edition of 1940, if not earlier, that Tolkien and Gordon were wrong, though to Tolkien it hardly seemed worth correcting the 1925 edition.[19] Tolkien lectured in Merton hall, and in my memory *Sir Gawain* and Tolkien's lectures on that poem have retained a whiff of boiled cabbage, no doubt in preparation for the young gentlemen's luncheon fare. Tolkien was not interested in much of the pedantry of literary scholarship. His understanding of great poetry, like *Exodus*, *Beowulf*, and *Sir Gawain* was on a higher plain, sensitive, witty, imaginative, philologically brilliant, and occasionally wrong.

Tolkien was always friendly and the undergraduates were treated kindly. I gather, but of course did not experience in my low status, that he was a very warm friend to his friends. My tutor, Stefanyja Olszewska (Mrs Alan S. C. Ross), recognized in the Oxford English Faculty (within which she never held a post) as an excellent tutor to be farmed out to, had been an undergraduate in English Studies at Leeds in the early 1920s, then a small university department, with Tolkien an inspiring young professor. She spoke of him with great affection and she, herself a marvellously sensitive and learned reader of medieval literature, Old and Middle English and especially

18 J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (eds), *Sir Gawain & The Green Knight* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), pp. 4, 141 (in the text and glossary yogh is printed for final <z>). The glossary, s.v. *bigyn(n)e* the phrase *biginez þe table* is glossed 'sits at the head of the table'.

19 Sir Israel Gollancz (ed.) with introductory essays by Mabel Day and Mary S. Serjeantson, *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, Early English Text Society, original series 210 (1940), p. 99. Norman Davis revised the edition by Tolkien and Gordon, and corrected the error in the glossary, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, edited by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 166, '*biginez þe table*, has the place of honour'.

Old Icelandic, adjured me not to miss any opportunity to hear him or be taught by him. She had been personally spellbound by his teaching at Leeds.

I felt Tolkien's great charm and warmth personally on an occasion more than two decades after I had last seen him when I was an undergraduate. In 1972 he was a guest at a party to celebrate the completion of Burchfield's *Supplement* to the *OED*, on which I had laboured diligently.[20] Tolkien had been Bob Burchfield's supervisor on the *Ormulum*. He was then, a year before his death, at the height of his great international fame. As is not unusual at academic occasions in England, nobody was talking to him: none of those present wanted to appear as if seeking an opportunity to show off that they knew Tolkien, and that Tolkien knew them. He was standing all alone in the hall of St Peter's College. I went up to him, saying, 'You won't remember me, Professor Tolkien, but ages ago I attended your seminar', and I gave my name. 'I know,' he said in reply, 'and read you too.' I knew well that he was not much inclined to read the kind of stuff on Old and Middle English that I had written, and thought how kind that to give me pleasure he told me what was possibly a white lie. I think he was pleased that I called him 'Professor Tolkien', that at an academic occasion I did not mention *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*, and instead mentioned how at Birmingham University and at Queen Mary College, London, my lectures and tutorials on Old and Middle English language and literature included ideas I had derived from his lectures and seminars, among them the reason why we pronounce the two parts of speech written *wind* differently; and that I always acknowledged him as the scholar from whom I derived such brilliant ideas. Because I was bold enough at that party to tell Tolkien himself that I used his explanation of the two pronunciations, I remember that minor item of philological lore to this day, more than forty years later. We talked to each other for

20 R. W. Burchfield (ed.), *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972-1986).

perhaps ten minutes, perhaps more. I shall not forget his warmth, his kindness, and his charm at that party, and when others talk of J. R. R. Tolkien, the renowned author of fantasy fiction, I think of Professor Tolkien, the brilliant philologist.