Re-reading *Lord of the Rings*, I know it is a great deal unfair to it to declare it such, but still my ultimate summing-up of it is as sort of an *anti*-adventure. Frodo begins the adventure pretty much sick of hobbits and the Shire. He thought “the inhabitants too stupid and dull for words” (*Fellowship* 82), and hoped, maybe not entirely in jest, they’d be beset upon by legions of dragons or an earthquake. This attitude, in case you’re wondering, is very much akin to Saruman’s, who saw the like of another type of rural people, the Rohirrim, as brigands whose children go about the floor with their dogs, and who couldn’t care less if the ancient forests were destroyed for the advancement of the lacunae of industry. This dismissal, in my judgment, is similar to the type of dismissal made by adolescents, who in trying to shed the maternal world they’ve long been content with, might start expressing serious malcontent. It’s a step, maybe not absolutely required, but perhaps most often required, in order for the adolescent to cast away the nursery and feast on their own self-mission.

If a malevolent, jealous, angry party — the party being dismissed — wanted to nip this type of self-actualization in the bud, it would beset upon the young adolescent a kind of desperate need to cling back to what they had known for a sense of safety. I think that’s what a lot of *the Lord of the Rings* is, under cover of being an adventure into the outside world where people surely must grow and discover new aspects of themselves they had hardly known were there. Frodo and the other hobbits are barely out the door when they are beset upon by Middle Earth’s most dangerous and terrifying predators — members of the nine Nazgul. Frodo, in betraying an insufficient lack of will to not comply with that of their own, is just about to humiliate himself when suddenly a whole host of Elves appear — a race that is the oldest of the old in Middle Earth — and the Nazgul flee their might.

The Elves accept them, and surround them with joyous cheer — but they serve pretty much as if when just out the door, “mommy” had called the neighbourhood watch to keep an eye out for them, at the cost of the “children” thinking this outside world *cannot* be thought through on their own. They are encouraged to learn *this* lesson: If you further rebel against things you have been instructed to requit to,
they might not receive you so kindly when next time you are required to retreat for their support — *and then where will you be?* Whatever the Elves might want of you in future, you will heed it. If you sense something awry about them in any way, you’ll disown knowledge of it, for fear your suspicion might be sensed. Way back into your unconscious it will go, and kept firmly guarded.

Subsequently, the hobbits, in deciding on their own way best to traverse the country, find themselves in woods they prove powerless to negotiate their way through. The woods, with confidence, steers them into a trap, to the ancient and angry tree, Old Man Willow, who must revenge himself upon everything foreign that ventures near its grasp for so long seeing the world he is comfortable with being disrespected by the like of Saruman and Sauron. They’re entangled, and in the process of being smothered, when suddenly Tom Bombadil, a great Middle-earth deity, appears, and instantly intimidates the old angry tree away from further tormenting the hobbits. Tom Bombadil is another of the old order, akin to the Elves, and the hobbits in their desperate gratitude are neither ready to challenge him nor resist him in any way. Like the Elves, he doesn’t overtly do anything harmful to them at all—but he does de facto show them that who they mostly are are creatures so powerless and unequal to him, so unfit to the task of making their own choices in the world, that in return for a rescue they’d surrender to the rescuer anything he chose. Indeed, Tom Bombadil asks for nothing less from them than the Ring itself, and Frodo just hands it to him, without question. This is no minor sort of manhandling, as the hobbits show they understand by Merry’s remarking, “he came when he was told” (*The Two Towers* 576), after Gandalf draws a compliant return from Saruman when he had been withdrawing into his tower. They know a demonstration of total command when they see it.

The Elves were ultimately responsible for this rescue as well, for they had let Bombadil know the hobbits were about, and to look out for them. Their being submissive to the Elves paid off, and their perfect submission to Bombadil pays off as well. Immediately after leaving them they find themselves effortlessly captured by Barrow-wights, an ancient sort of fright, and, after experiencing a terrifyingly long moment of feeling entombed and set to be eaten by the dead, they sing the song Bombadil provided them to instantly draw his summons.

Of course, it isn’t an entirely humiliating situation for Frodo himself. The narrative tells us it was in a sense flattering, in that he possessed enough spirit to wake himself out of the wight-induced slumber and make a call to a rescuer. But
this sort of acclaim, these pro-offered bits — “grit,” “fortitude,” “resolve,” “stamina,” “spirit” — always strikes one as something ascribed to the hobbits for them to take solace on, just after being denied the ability to grasp at some greater acclaim, something more profoundly flattering that others are granted and enjoy, and what they themselves are intended to be forever denied. There are great people in this world, people of great wisdom and great might, and the hobbits will never come close to that.

When Frodo arrives at Rivendale and is amongst the Council, he’s pretty much at the point where he’ll do whatever authorities most familiar to him would bid he do. They want him to destroy the Ring — so that’ll be his course. He had suffered a kind of deep humbling here in being grafted so firmly to Gandalf, the chief guardian of the old world, that no new voice has a chance to disentangle him from it. Boromir’s that voice at the council, instructing everyone that another course does exist, that the Ring could be and should be used. This is not even an enticing idea for Frodo, brought forward again in a new context where others other than Gandalf have authority, to spur on at least some re-consideration of it. And shouldn’t it be at the very least, enticing, to the young hobbits? For the idea not only represents a more unabashed way of taking care of Sauron, but of an individual making an impact on the world that no one had accounted possible — what every young person would at least leave themselves open to, we would hope. Frodo’s at the point where he balks back away from any idea that might beacon self-discovery; and for this horrible sacrifice, is kept within the envelope of Gandalf’s warm gratitude.

This sort of balm is frequently offered the hobbits subsequently. Every time they provide some indication they feel as if the adventure had been one long lesson on why you should not actually ever venture out beyond your door — if venturing out your door” means exploring new ideas and new possibilities — and rather just capitulate to the known, for otherwise a mean old angry ancient forest or its like will immediately show up before your path, Gandalf, especially, seems to provide them with a soother after just having stopped their efforts cold. Indicate, like Merry and Pippen do, that they probably have just amounted to riffraff tagging along passively, start acting out wildly, like Pippen seems to be doing when he grabs the palantir out of the water and later when he steals it from out of Gandalf’s tight possession in unconsciously motivated retaliation for being kept so tightly bound, he — or maybe just the narrative — but really seemingly be, makes sure that in the next place you visit everyone will mistake them as the like of grandiose hobbit princes.
And doesn’t that feel nice, young hobbits? If you discount that it is mistaken praise, doesn’t it still feel quite nice to be thought of as belonging to the Middle-earth-wide fellowship of princes and lords, even if representing its least grand people? Be passive acquaintances of the Ents, doing nothing but be carried around as baggage they can banter with as they make all their own decisions, uninfluenced, and you get later accounted as the tumbling pebbles that nevertheless in their wake brought about a whole landslide! Bear a humiliating examination by an Elf-queen, where she, Galadriel, explores every crevice of your mind, in no less an invasive fashion than how Sauron explores his own subjects’, and with no warning, with no permission asked or granted, you get to bite back a bit if you have the power to do so, as Galadriel suggests Frodo, the Ring-bearer, does — “Gently are you revenged for my testing of your heart” (Fellowship 480). But mostly you have to learn to redirect the shame so that it can be expressed not in anger but in displaced form — in the last instance, for example, with furious expressions of gratitude, as she follows it with resplendent gift-giving. You transfer irksome agitation into an acceptable form very quickly, else risk expressing forthright, and thereby bear an angry turn against you won’t be able to handle.

What is especially grating is that one sometimes get this sense that others are allowed to disclose a certain humiliating truth about being servile so to further guarantee that the hobbits who overhear it ensure that much harder they don’t ever find themselves in any of the speakers’ doghouses — because then, they know, there will be no further agreed upon cloaking of a full accounting of their relationship with one-another. There is a lot of abuse handed out to those who are mere dogs at the feet of masters — Wormtongue, especially, suffers a lot of this. And if you are a hobbit listening to Gandalf scold the pathetically weak-willed, those who have been cowed into always complying, you know what kind of damage he could inflict upon “you,” what kind of truth he land upon “you,” if you should ever really disobey him in a way that didn’t just indicate your momentarily acting out but rather your permanently stepping away from full subservience to his wishes. He’s like all the human warriors in the book who come to so ostensibly appreciate hobbits, but who also make sure the hobbits keep in the back of their minds that this approval could be instantly removed — for haven’t the hobbits enjoyed the entirely of their ample, carefree, insouciant way of living, owing to their ongoing being secretly protected by the efforts, marginal living, and sacrifices of men? Isn’t there something absolutely false, something of an ignominy — a crime — about their entire ongoing existence?
It’s also grating that much of the growth they are allowed to participate in is thin, and sometimes, wholly false. Frodo is ostensibly the wisest hobbit — and be is wise, in that he, for example, knows to apply caution to what he says so that it can be shaped for best reception, as Captain Faramir says of him when deciding what ultimately to make of the discovery of his and Sam’s presence. But the wisest thing he says and does is actually something inverse to this, for it’s in knowing to trust Aragorn when he meets him because what firmly trusts that it is good can lapse sometimes in its effort to always appear good. But this turns out to be a shallowly learned lesson, for the ugliest thing is shameful action, and it is so to avoid that — shame; how others would see him — that has him decide not to retreat back to Rivendale when further progress seemed blocked (Fellowship 387). And it is to avoid that that he does not give Boromir a fair listen to when alone with him at the end of Fellowship. To be beholden to others’ opinion of you is the ugliest thing imaginable, for it means you are not self-rulled, that you are a slave, but he is everywhere so obsequious to its stirrings. For him it is forever, what would Gandalf think of me if I decided thus?, followed by capitulation to Gandalf’s anticipated preferences. When Boromir encourages Frodo to choose to go his way, to take the Ring to Gondor and make use of it, he quickly shifts from being friendly to being insulting and aggressive. Even if there is some at first, there is no long-sustained suavity in how he goes about making his case. He bluntly asserts that all of Frodo’s heroes are timid, are frauds, which is the best way to automatically make yourself ugly to whomever you’re speaking to, and therefore the first thing people avoid doing when of the mind — for lacking confidence in their plea as really so self-evidently for the other’s benefit — that acquiring an ear will depend on art. He admits how fabulous he thinks wearing and using the Ring would be, refusing to conceal how it would be terrific fun to use it to act upon the world with such influence. And Frodo does not say, I would normally be averse to trusting you Boromir, but you so little mask what you know I have been taught to see as ugly while presenting your case, I will actually give further thought to it… Perhaps you’re right. Maybe those I’ve been listening to are merely timid, and I actually kind of knew it but had been encouraged away from admitting this openly to myself to avoid their reprisal, a requirement they in fact installed in me by being so ready to let me think of them as the only rescue I’ve got from a world I’d otherwise a hundred times fall victim to. I’ve been set up, and it’s about time I admitted this to myself. Boromir, yes, you and I will take the Ring to Gondor. He does not say this, but rather dutifully goes about his appointed task and takes what is actually the easy way out, out of everyone
who matters to him being on the lookout for him taking the harder one — namely, being open to all courses of action, even those that’d have your friends decide you’d turned against them. He’s ostensibly alone in Mordor, its great bleak landscape, accompanied only by Sam — but this is only in one sense being alone, and it’s far away in unbearableness from the most horrid type, being forlorn of everyone’s good opinion of you. And Frodo’s sad choice, born out of deference, means he doesn’t neglect himself that pleasure one bit.

But how now this mature man wishes for the young adolescent me, the stirring young adult in me, reading *Lord of the Rings* when he was newly factoring how much venturing he should do away from home, that he had. I would have loved to have some voice sink into my head early, sink into me, then, telling me, with an alien and exciting power, a power outside one I’d known, that the true way to growth might mean having to bear the shame of appearing ugly to those you’ve thus far depended on. Not just “the Shire” but an “old world” representative as grand as Gandalf, may well think you’re the lowest sort for what you’ve done. And you’ll be documented thereafter as akin in disappointment to Gollum or to Wormtongue. But nevertheless you’ll be happier in being able to bear it, for there are other, more worthy friends, to match your arising self, and from which to form a more genuine and supplying fellowship.