

Part V
Critical Approaches

The Critical Response to Tolkien's Fiction

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For the purposes of this essay, "Tolkien scholarship" is used as a generic term for all critical studies whose subject is Tolkien's work. That scholarship comprises two parts. One, the main subject of this essay, is "Tolkien criticism," in which the overwhelming majority of professional literary and cultural critics commenting on Tolkien's work have made no specialized study of it. The other is "Tolkien studies," undertaken by relative experts on his work, who themselves divide into professional critics on the one hand and informed "fans" on the other, with some qualifying as both. Drout (2005) describes work by the latter group as "Middle-earth studies."

The distinction between Tolkien criticism and Tolkien studies is not clear-cut, however, insofar as a few critical experts on Tolkien have had sufficient impact, both scholarly and popular, to affect mainstream critical opinion. The leading instance is Tom Shippey; others include Verlyn Flieger, Brian Rosebury, Michael Drout, and John Garth. In discussing Tolkien criticism, their work will be included, along with that of a few critics who, conversely, are not primarily Tolkien scholars but have nonetheless made a significant contribution to the field. Also, we are only concerned with the response to Tolkien's fiction.

It is not enough simply to describe the critical reaction to Tolkien. It is our intellectual responsibility to reflect on and try to understand that reaction and the reasons for it, so space must also be made for that. Furthermore, one of the factors that makes the critical reaction to Tolkien worth considering is his immense popular appeal. It is the combination of that and elite critical rejection that gives this subject much of its abiding interest. Tolkien's popular reception therefore cannot be ignored when considering his critics.

Any attempt to survey Tolkien criticism in a disinterested manner must conclude that the weight of critical opinion has been, and largely remains, negative. Indeed, the greater part seems not an attempt to understand Tolkien and his readers but rather to disqualify and humiliate them. In this context, Daniel Timmons's assessment (2000, 1–10) is admirably irenic but misleading. True, for every critical attack on Tolkien one can find a positive opinion; but that means little without taking into account the relative status, perceived authority, and scholarly as well as public impact of the critics concerned. I therefore make no apology for concentrating overall on the critical hostility to Tolkien's fiction.¹

Finally, before we embark, it is vital to realize that we are all, public and professional critics alike, engaged in a common task, namely engaging with the meaning(s) of Tolkien's fiction. That is to say: the meanings resulting from how his books, as they are written, are taken up by readers. So there are two elements to any such process, analytically distinguishable but seamless in practice: production, or what went into his fiction, both the materials and his creative uses of them; and reception: what the results

signify to its readers. There is no escaping what Drout and Wynne (2000, 107) call “the vital epistemological fact that all texts must be interpreted”² and questions of reception – what Tolkien (*OFS*, 48) called “the effect produced *now* by these old things in the stories as they are” – are arguably still the more challenging and therefore neglected of the two. Shippey (2000a) is a model in taking an integrated approach.

The principal phases of critical response are these. *The Hobbit* was published in 1937 to some acclaim (see ch. 8), but Tolkien criticism started in earnest with publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, as a book for adults, in 1954–1955. It stepped up with the book’s spectacular success beginning in 1965, was given renewed impetus by the results of readers’ polls in 1996–1998, and again by Peter Jackson’s films in 2001–2003, and 2012–2013. Tolkien also received some critical notice with publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977.

First Wave: The 1950s and 1960s

In several ways, the initial critical response to *The Lord of the Rings* set precedents which have continued, with remarkable continuity, into the present. One was the observation by W. H. Auden, one of Tolkien’s staunchest defenders, that:

I rarely remember a book about which I have had such violent arguments. Nobody seems to have a moderate opinion; either, like myself, people find it a masterpiece of its genre or they cannot abide it, and among the hostile there are some, I must confess, for whose judgement I have great respect. (Auden 1956)

Auden added, shrewdly, “I can only suppose that some people object to Heroic Quests and Imaginary Worlds on principle.” Praise was also forthcoming from Richard Hughes, Naomi Mitchison, and, effusively but perhaps predictably, C. S. Lewis (1954, 1955), but others were less enthusiastic. Alfred Duggan (1954, 541), reviewing *The Lord of the Rings* anonymously in *The Times Literary Supplement*, opined that “This is not a work which many adults will read through more than once,” thus marking the start of a long series of patrician critical judgments on Tolkien subsequently perceptible as clearly wide of the mark. Similarly, Philip Toynbee, writing in *The Observer* on August 6, 1961 recorded his spectacularly premature relief that “today these books have passed into a merciful oblivion.”

In the second of three reviews in 1954–1955, Edwin Muir, just appointed Norton Professor of English at Harvard University, declared that *The Lord of the Rings* disappointed because “all the characters are boys masquerading as adult heroes” (1955). In other words, they are (1) immature, as signaled by what Muir curiously described as an uncomplicatedly happy ending; (2) one-dimensional, the good ones being thoroughly good and the bad utterly bad; and (3) problematically masculine and/or sexually immature. To anyone who knows the books, it is obvious that the first two points are wrong, and they have been refuted more than once (e.g., Le Guin 1989, 57–58; Shippey 2000b); the third is more complex (see Clark 1997; Green 1998; Curry 2005, 85–87; and see ch. 32). What is more significant, however, is the durability of the charges.

Probably the most influential single review from this period was by one of the leading American literary critics of his day, a Marxist modernist, Edmund Wilson (1956). Its significance is not so much its questionable judgments (the books show “poverty of invention” and their hero “has no serious temptations”) as its contemptuous mockery,

extending from the title, “Oo, Those Awful Orcs!”, to the dismissal of *The Lord of the Rings* as “juvenile trash.” That tone remained a constant throughout the next half-century. In a little-known rejoinder a few years later though, Donald Davie argued that Wilson’s attack “quite fails to account for the seriousness of the undertaking, for the pressure that drove the author through these thousand or more pages, as it has driven many readers (this reader among them) to follow through the same pages eagerly” (1969, 90).

Also in 1969, amid *The Lord of the Rings*’ popular success, Columbia University Press published a full-length academic critique by Catherine Stimpson. She excoriated Tolkien as “an incorrigible nationalist” (1969, 8, 13), celebrating a “bourgeois pastoral idyll” with one-dimensional characters who are “irritatingly, blandly, traditionally masculine.” The (in)justice of these specific charges has been discussed in detail by Colebatch (2003, Chapter 6) as well as Curry (2005, 83–85), so they need not detain us. They will serve here to underline the predominantly Marxist, feminist, and literary-modernist provenance of these attacks.

The Silmarillion: The 1970s

Christopher Tolkien’s edited version of *The Silmarillion* was published in 1977. It was the first of Tolkien’s works of fiction to meet with public bafflement and disappointment (in which connection it may be relevant that it was published posthumously, i.e., without his approval). It was a response which largely coincided, for once, with the critical reception. John Gardner reviewed it sympathetically and insightfully, however, in *The New York Times Book Review* (October 12, 1977).

It is true, and by now almost a truism, that Tolkien studies must now include Tolkien’s legendarium in understanding his work as a whole (see Flieger and Hofstetter 2000; Hammond and Anderson 1993, 229–230). In terms of Tolkien criticism, however, that importance does not turn *The Silmarillion* into an accessible or even particularly readable text. It isn’t, which has naturally served to sharply limit its impact on common apprehensions of Tolkien’s fiction, and critics are under no obligation to pretend otherwise. Tolkien himself (*Letters* 333) noted one insuperable problem that *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* depended for their sense of depth and antiquity on “glimpses of a large history in the background,” which was not possible when presenting that background itself.

Tolkien’s Fiction in the 1980s

This decade began with two critiques of Tolkien in the mold of Stimpson but issuing from the new critical industries, recently ascendant within the academy, of structuralism and psychoanalysis respectively: Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), and Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981). Brooke-Rose, an eminent academic structuralist as well as author of “experimental” novels, turned the big guns of Theory on *The Lord of the Rings*, appropriating it as little more than grist to its preset mill (see Attebery 1992, 23–27; Curry 2005, 110–111). As with those of Wilson and Stimpson but even more so, Brooke-Rose’s account of Tolkien was littered with both spelling and factual mistakes, suggesting that the difficulty for these critics lay in reading Tolkien at all, let alone closely, and undermining confidence in her wider conclusions.

Jackson, a Marxist and psychoanalytic critic, argued that Tolkien's "sentimental" and "nostalgic" work functions as a conservative vehicle for repression supporting a ruling ideology. The remedy, in standard modernist (and crypto-Protestant) style, is demystification. Once again, as Attebery shows (1992, 20–23, 27, 31; see also Curry 2005, 106–108), Jackson was more concerned to dispose of Tolkien's work than to comprehend it.

Also in 1981, and again in 1983, Fred Inglis, a former student of F. R. Leavis, took Tolkien criticism to a new nadir, calling Tolkien a "fascist" (Inglis 1981, 197). I have discussed his critique elsewhere (Curry 2005, 104–106); here it is only needful to point out the same phenomenon that Shippey (2000a, 306–308) has noted of Toynbee and Edmund Wilson, namely gross inconsistency between their self-professed critical ideals and their practice when they encounter Tolkien. In Inglis's case (1983, 3, 31–32), this takes the form of criticizing the metropolitan "irony-stereotypewriter" while shamelessly patronizing a "typical" Tolkien reader as the retired head of art in a market-town grammar school, reading *The Lord of the Rings* to his young sons in a pine-paneled flat, and so on.

Inglis was the respectful biographer of Raymond Williams, the leading Marxist literary critic of his time and a major influence on the new academic discipline of cultural studies. In the course of a critique of pastoralism, Williams (1985, 258) casually counted Tolkien as a practitioner of "country-based fantasy" that is "suburban" and "half-educated." Again, the most significant point is not that these criticisms, left unqualified, are mistaken, which can easily be shown; Tolkien was no more halfeducated than he was a fascist. It is rather how *very* mistaken they are, and how consistently. That suggests that there is (as Marxists like to say) a structural or systematic bias at work.

Fortunately for Tolkien criticism, the early 1980s also saw publication of what is probably its most important single work, both in quality and (eventually) influence: Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth* (1982, with revised and expanded editions in 1993 and 2005). A year later, Verlyn Flieger's pioneering and insightful *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (revised edition, 2002) appeared. Together, these books revealed the profound linguistic, cultural, and metaphysical dimensions of Tolkien's work. It is doubtful that they significantly altered mainstream critical opinion upon publication, but less so that they have done so over time. Since space is severely limited, however, and both these books are still widely available as well as unmissable in both Tolkien studies and (it is to be hoped) criticism, I won't discuss them directly here.³

The Polls: 1996–1998

In 1996, *The Lord of the Rings* topped the UK poll by Waterstone's and Channel 4 (26,000 readers) of the greatest books of the century. Also that year, the Folio Society asked its members to decide upon their favorite books; in first place, with 10,000 votes, was *The Lord of the Rings*. The same finding emerged from follow-up polls in 1997 by the television program *Bookworm* (around 50,000 readers) and readers of the *Daily Telegraph*, and in 1999 by MORI, although in the last *The Lord of the Rings* was formally pushed into second place – by the Bible. That same year, *The Lord of the Rings* topped a poll conducted by Amazon.com as the book of the millennium. In several of these polls, Orwell was placed second, either directly or as the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: an interesting fact to which we shall return.

The critical response was explosively hostile. Auberon Waugh (editor of the *Literary Review*), Professor John Carey, and Mark Lawson (on the BBC *Today* program) all concurred that Tolkien fans had orchestrated the outcome. Tolkien, it seems, has “fans” rather than “readers.” This conspiracy theory was quietly dropped after the Folio Society poll. Susan Jeffreys, for *The Sunday Times* (January 26, 1997), recorded the dismay at the Waterstone’s/Channel 4 result “up and down the country wherever one or two literati gathered together.”⁴ *The Times Literary Supplement* (January 24, 1997) found it “horrifying” and Howard Jacobson opined that “It’s another black day for British culture” (see Pearce 1998, 2–3). Not to be outdone, Germaine Greer (1997, 4) described the result as a “nightmare,” adding that the books subsequently inspired by Tolkien “are more or less what you would expect; flight from reality is their dominating characteristic.” The charge of escapism, reiterating those of immaturity, nostalgia, and conservatism, is another hardy perennial to which we shall return.

The same pattern persisted into the next decade. In 2003, *The Lord of the Rings* won the BBC’s *The Big Read* poll of readers’ favorite book, with 174,000 votes (23% of the total of nearly 750,000 readers): by now, surely an unsurprising result except, it seems, to the three critics live on TV on the night, two of whom had apparently been unable to read it beforehand. All in all, such instances, together with Tolkien’s critics’ repeated inability to get the details or narrative meaning of what they are attacking right, point to an irrational revulsion. This is not irrelevant; it throws a very interesting light on the dominant literary mindset and, as such, it should form part of any truly critical consideration thereof.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the public critics, an authoritative work edited by John Clute and John Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) offered a measured and reasoned assessment of Tolkien’s work, especially concerning both his literary influences and his own influence.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The 2000s

In Tolkien criticism, the new century and millennium opened with publication of Shippey’s *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2000a). Its quality combined with the backing of a major trade publisher, and Shippey’s eminence in both Tolkien studies and criticism, makes it central in both, and only points made therein which directly concern the remit of this essay will be mentioned.

Shippey defends the bold claim of his title on three grounds: democratic, generic, and qualitative (xvii–xx). These could be summarized by saying that for the last 50 years, Tolkien has found unignorable numbers of readers, many of whom have not only gone on to seek out similar works in the fantasy genre he unintentionally founded but “have been deeply and lastingly moved by Tolkien’s works, and even if one doesn’t share the feeling, one should be able to understand why.”

Shippey also makes a convincing case that Tolkien should be considered a modern writer, in the company of Orwell, Golding, Vonnegut and others, with a thoroughly twentieth-century concern for and treatment of power and evil (see ch. 28). There are two qualifications: Tolkien’s understanding of them was often at variance with his contemporaries’, and his work being modern in some respects does not preclude it from being nonmodern in others.

Finally, Shippey suggests (xxxiv) that “Very probably the reason for the dislike has a good deal to do with the reasons for the success. Tolkien has challenged the very authority of the literati, and this will never be forgiven.” In his “Afterword: The Followers and the Critics” (305–328), Shippey usefully considers the phenomenon of “intense critical hostility to Tolkien, the refusal to allow him to be even a part of ‘English literature’ ” (305).

Despite the insights offered by Shippey, Flieger, and others working in Tolkien studies, the various charges laid against *The Lord of the Rings* over several decades by his detractors in Tolkien criticism were prominently revived in 2001 in perhaps the leading organ of the British literary establishment, the *London Review of Books (LRB)*, in an article by one of its editors, Jenny Turner (for one of the few responses to Turner, see Galwey 2004). Entitled, with heavy irony, “Reasons for liking Tolkien,” Turner’s essay seeks not so much to understand Tolkien or his readers as to place them beyond serious consideration. Nonetheless, it is illuminating because of what it reveals about the gut reactions and critical mindset of Wilson, Muir, Stimpson, Jackson, and more recently Greer. It is thus invaluable as data.

Turner repeats some of her predecessors’ elementary mistakes, describing the Hobbits of the story as subordinate and powerless, and portraying the message of the book as one of reassuring safety resulting from a “cosy little universe.” There is also the familiar snobbery according to which *The Lord of the Rings* isn’t literature but “junk fiction,” in the same relation to “literature and learning” as “astrology is to physics,” written by someone who, if he hadn’t been an Oxford scholar, might have been obsessed with “a model railway, or a record collection, or military history, or maps.”

Turner’s principal subject, however, is her own reaction to the book. She writes as an apostate who once read it with “an intensity I now find scary.” She now finds it “silly and boring,” yet “it still locks with my psyche in a most alarming way. . . . It’s an infantile comfort that is also a black pit.”⁵ It seems *The Lord of the Rings* “has cubby-holes for all sorts of urges to hide in,” and “[a]ll sorts of visceral needs and desires are involved” which make it “not just anti-intellectual but a sort of anti-book” and even “a little sinister.” All Tolkien’s fans are “vulnerable people” smitten by “soggy, yearny nostalgia,” but “the swotty teenager” is particularly at risk.

Turner mentions Tolkien’s “dreadful prose style” in passing (cf. Drout 2004), and takes it as read that “[o]bviously there are problems to do with women, and race and racism,” not to mention “with the elves and so on” (recall in this connection Auden’s point from 1956). But what she helpfully identifies as “the central problem” is that:

It’s a whole world . . . You would expect elves to figure in Tolkien’s story – if they had to figure at all – as creatures within a sub-creation, characters in a story, fictions inside a frame. But actually, they are given much more credence, more constitutive importance, more ontological weight.

In consequence, “[y]ou find yourself thirsting for some nice sensible wipe-down concepts like ‘metaphor’ or ‘fiction.’ ”

Why is this a serious problem for Turner and like-minded critics? Certainly the metaphysical realism and rationalism that dominates so much of mainstream Western culture are obvious in her response; although to apply a little of her hero Freud, why do we need constant reminders that Elves, say, are not real? In any case, there is clearly a

program involved – in this case, rationalist, naturalist, and secularist – along the lines of what Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988, 179) has anatomized as the enduring effort “to identify the presumptively universally compelling Truth and Way and to compel it universally.” When the Truth is at stake in this way, living and letting live is not a critical option, and anyone claiming to sincerely love, say, the work of Tolkien, Proust, and George Eliot, must be either deluded or dissembling.

In more strictly literary terms, it seems that Turner – and given that she is on its editorial board, one wonders about the *LRB* too – fails to understand two of the most important things about art, literary or otherwise: that reality is (also) ineluctably fictional, and that fiction and its referents are (also) unavoidably real. Turner and her allies evidently want to keep reality and fiction on hermetically separate levels except for what they, the gatekeepers, will allow through.⁶ As for metaphor, Paul Ricoeur showed more than three decades ago that “There is no non-metaphorical standpoint. . . . metaphoricity is absolutely uncontrollable” (2003, 339). In other words, any critique of fiction has fiction at its heart, and any critique of metaphoricity can only draw upon metaphor. So much for a “sensible wipe-down.”

Modernism

This review of the dominant critical reception of Tolkien’s fiction consistently shows two characteristics which seem especially significant: a visceral hostility and emotional animus, and a plethora of mistakes showing that the books had not been read closely (or in a few cases, at all). Taking these together suggests that the inability to really engage resulted from the loathing, although without inhibiting the same critics from pronouncing anathema. As the critic J. P. Stern once observed, contempt is a poor guide. We must go beyond that conclusion, however, in search of an explanation. Why such contempt for these particular books?

Shippey (2000a, 316) argues that “at the heart of the critical rage, and fear, which Tolkien immediately and ever after provoked” is the fact that he “threatened the authority of the arbiters of taste, the critics, the educationalists, the literati. He was as educated as they were but in a different school.” Furthermore, *The Lord of the Rings* “showed an improper ambition, as if it had ideas above the proper station of popular trash.” The critics’ assumption is often actually that simple: it’s popular, so it must be trash. Shippey adds, “It was the combination that could not be forgiven”.

This explanation undoubtedly goes far towards explaining the unusual critical response, but as it stands, it is an excellent summary that awaits more elaboration. This essay will attempt just that under the umbrella term (to be explained) of “modernism.” First, however, we need briefly to review other relevant factors which are not captured by even a broad definition of modernism, although they may well overlap with it.

One is that *The Lord of the Rings* will never have universal appeal (properly so-called). That hardly marks it out from any other book, but in terms of content, you wouldn’t go to it, for example, for subtle insights into relationships between the sexes. Furthermore, there remain stubborn issues, potentially problematic, with the way it treats race and politics as well as sex-gender.⁷ Regarding style, Tolkien’s tone (not unlike that of Dickens) is sometimes sentimental, and its occasional archaic and “high” style will never be to some readers’ tastes. It is perfectly understandable that some would prefer other work (which differs from deploring anyone at all reading it).⁸

To some extent, a negative response to Tolkien's fiction may be simply a function of personal disaffinity. Temperaments, even to the extent they are a matter of nurture as well as nature, vary widely, and with them, tastes: *de gustibus non est disputandum*. But taste alone won't carry all the weight of the emotive reactions; alternatively, there must be more to "mere taste" than meets the eye.

In this connection, another potential stumbling-block has been thoroughly explored by Shippey (2000a, 2005; see also Honegger 2005): the problems posed, perhaps particularly for intellectuals, by a literary artefact suffused with a philological concern for words and a particular understanding of language (strongly influenced by Owen Barfield: see Flieger 2002) as rooted in and indicative of corresponding worlds/mentalities, past and present. That understanding has almost vanished from the contemporary intellectual world. As a result, as Shippey (2005, 332) says, "there is an enormous 'culture-gap' between him and his critics" – admirers, often, as much as detractors. Among critics, Harold Bloom (2000) falls in this category; he evinces more bafflement than hatred.⁹ As a sign of this problem for literary critics, see the ongoing struggle to place *The Lord of the Rings* in a category: it is clearly not a novel, so is it a romance, an epic, mythopoeic fiction, or simply junk fiction? It has often proved easier to simply opine that whatever it is, to quote Humphrey Carpenter, it "doesn't really belong to literature" (*BBC Bookshelf*, November 22, 1991; see Simonson 2008).

Another consideration is simple snobbery, itself fed by fear (see Carey 1992). The power of this attitude, contributing to and fed by membership in a critical elite, particularly when institutionalized in an academic or media forum, should not be underestimated – particularly where popular success is also part of the mix. Auberon Waugh's contempt for Tolkien was primarily a function of snobbery, and no doubt it also figured strongly in that of Wilson, Greer, Turner, and others.

Nonetheless, more still seems needed to account for the sheer animus. For that, we need to invoke something like a worldview, ideology or set of values, relatively coherent and strongly held (if not necessarily consciously so). Such values are ultimate in two senses: they cannot be further grounded or justified, yet they are also what their bearer feels (more than thinks) is fundamental. They are therefore often defended with quasi-religious or, in the case of values which entail denying religion, crypto-religious fervor. They can change, of course, but any major shift amounts to a conversion experience. It is at this level, respecting the critical response to Tolkien's fiction, that modernism enters the picture.

What do we mean by "modernism"? In answering that question, we first need a working definition of "modernity" and "modern" (see also ch. 24). These embrace a sensibility and set of values which include, prominently:

- A belief in the "right" and ability, in principle, of humanity to determine its own fate (rather than, say, God or nature), usually through science and technology.
- Secularism and materialism.
- Considerable confidence, if not indeed faith, in reason, and relatedly in modern science, conceived as the "highest" version of reason, along with efficient administration as its practical expression.
- All of which coalesces into a narrative ideology of Progress and its enemies (chief among them, "superstition", a.k.a. "tradition") that bears a significant but unacknowledged debt to Christian eschatology.

Modernity is also an historical period, albeit necessarily broadly construed, in which that sensibility and set of values finds dominant or preeminent expression and influence (the best single guide here is Toulmin 1990, but see also Latour 1993). “Modernism” and “modernist” refer to the valorization and advocacy of modern values – that is, the chief values of modernity – whether in politics, culture, literature, architecture, music, etc. They do not necessarily describe a particular school or movement within art, architecture, literature, etc. Thus, literary modernists need no longer hold up Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf as exemplars, although they may do so.

As Veldman perceptively notes: “Not all the reviewers who stood outside Narnia and Middle-earth did so because they misunderstood what Lewis and Tolkien were about. Many did so precisely because they perceived the protest at the heart of these works” (1994, 107).¹⁰ It is my contention that the dominant ideology of the literati, as self-appointed guardians of literature, is modernism and that those most aggrieved by Tolkien are or were, personally as well as professionally, modernists. Given Tolkien’s uncompromising, erudite, and popularly received rejection of modernism, this makes sense not only of the most consistent charges – infantilism, nostalgia, escapism – but also of the casual vehemence with which they have been made.¹¹ As Tolkien himself realized, his chief crime was not even “the Escape of the Prisoner”; it was encouraging “the Flight of the Deserter” (*MC* 148). In this connection, it makes perfect sense that the most frequent runners-up in the polls of readers were Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: an author and a book equally agonized over pathological modernity, although from a socialist rather than conservative perspective.

As evidence and elucidation of this contention, let us examine the issues, as they appear in the critical texts, of modernism itself and of irony. Starting with modernism, one can second Shippey’s firm placing of *The Lord of the Rings* as a work with characteristically modern concerns, particularly respecting power (see Shippey 2000a, 312– 318, for an analysis of “Tolkien and modernity”; Weinreich and Honegger 2006; and ch. 24). At the same time, one can also agree with Turner (2001) that “In form, in content, in everything about it, *The Lord of the Rings* is the most anti-Modernist of novels.” Andrew O’Hehir makes the same point: “the crux of the matter . . . lies in Tolkien’s wholehearted rejection of modernity and modernism. This is what so powerfully attracts some readers, and just as powerfully repels others” (2001).

Anthony Lane (2001) sees the same dynamic in Tolkien’s “high” style: “Hardly anyone had used it unironically since Tennyson’s ‘Idylls of the King,’ and to revert to it with a straight face in the nineteen-fifties was to mount a head-on challenge to modernity.” Finally, as argued elsewhere (Curry 2004), it is *The Lord of the Rings*’ nonmodernism, presenting “a Europe that has not been ‘Europeanized’” (Luling 1995, 53), that has powerfully attracted many readers.

There are no contradictions here if we recall the distinction between modernism and modernity. First, Tolkien himself was definitely anti-modernist; his deep reservations about advanced technology and industrialism, representative democracy and bureaucracy are well documented. It would be simple-minded, however, to assume that his *books* are therefore straightforwardly anti-modernist. Second, Tolkien’s fiction is certainly modern, but it is far from purely so. Both Shippey (2000) and Flieger (especially 1997) have enabled us to analytically disentangle the modern and nonmodern ingredients in the cauldron of Tolkien’s story. Third, that story is not *modernist*; no advocacy of modernity

is present. In short, *The Lord of the Rings* is a modern book, much of the import of which is also nonmodern, written by an anti-modernist.

Rosebury (2003, 149–154) also concludes that it “could not plausibly be called a modernist work, because it lacks a crucial quality universal within modernism: irony” (154). That brings us to our second key consideration. Preeminently, modernist irony functions as a signal that the writer subscribes to what Latour calls the Modern Constitution:

1st: . . . even though we construct Nature, Nature is as if we did not construct it. 2nd: even though we do not construct Society, Society is as if we did construct it. 3rd: Nature and Society must remain absolutely distinct. (1993, 22)

“Being ironic, especially about what one is writing oneself, says: being intelligent and highly educated, I know that what I am doing (cultural construction) isn’t real (natural) – even, indeed especially, if I am writing about nature – and that the two are completely different.” And anyone whose art is unselfconscious, thus ignoring (or disrespecting?) this convention, becomes fair game for mockery and contempt.

Like Rosebury, Drout too (2007, 653) notes Tolkien’s failure, or refusal, to meet “the modernist expectation of pervasive irony.” Attebery (1992, 39) concurs that “The course of twentieth-century literature can be viewed as the gradual spread of irony into every phase of storytelling.” Moorcock, one of Tolkien’s bitterest critics (1987, Chapter 5, “Epic Pooh”), inadvertently confirms the point: “I think my own dislike of J. R. R. Tolkien lies primarily in the fact that in all those hundreds of pages, full of high ideals, sinister evil and noble deeds, there is scarcely a hint of irony anywhere” (1987, 107). (For a recent unconvincing attempt to enlist Tolkien as a “theorist of the ironic imagination” see Saler 2012.)

Ironies abound *within The Lord of the Rings*, of course, not least that it turns out to be not Frodo or Sam who finally destroy the Ring, nor any of the great and good, but Gollum. But Tolkien is not ironic *about The Lord of the Rings*; nor does he offer the slightest opening or invitation to readers to be so. He and his readers are, so to say, post-ironic. That is not something that will endear them to critics who pride themselves on being the critical avant-garde and can’t stop using irony to signal it, or checking what they are reading for such signals. Infuriatingly for some, post-ironists – which, in Tolkien’s case, evidently comprise the majority of readers – simply don’t care.

Taking Turner (2001) again as an unusually articulate but otherwise representative critic of Tolkien, recall, in this connection, what she identifies as “the central problem”: the “ontological weight” given by Tolkien to fictional creatures like Elves (as Shippey 2005, 286 points out, “Most novels are about ‘people who never existed,’ ” but let that pass). Turner’s cosmopolitan sophistication vanishes when realism, rationalism, and secularism are at stake. The only alternative, it seems, is “the vague warm surges of feeling associated with religion and religion substitutes.” Indeed, in a kind of modernist evocation of cold showers and mittens at night, she warns that “[t]hese responses can be touched off with a dangerous ease – every self-aware person finds that he has to train himself from adolescence in withstanding them.” As Galwey (2004, 10) comments, “Perhaps if one had staked one’s all on modernity, one would feel like that.”

Turner writes, “When I was young . . . I really did believe that the world inside the book had taken over the world outside,” and such literature “plays on the reader’s desire

to believe that the world Tolkien is writing about is in some way real.” When you grow up, however, “You know too much about how the world works to be so easily taken in.” Notice how she resorts to classical epistemology in order to disqualify and domesticate others’ as well as her own ontological experience of, and as, reality: they (“fans”; it used to be “natives”) *believe*, but we literati *know*. From there it is a short step to associate such “realism” with maturity, growing up, and Muir’s and Wilson’s anxious concern to be the Adult in the room. But that is pure rhetoric, not logic or universal experience; and swollen into an ideology of Progress, on both an individual and collective level, it encourages an all too familiar obligation to chastise heretics, apostates, backsliders, and “escapists.”

It is hardly surprising, then, that “Tolkien’s perfectly sincere, perfectly impossible narrative” (Attebery 1992, 46) so provokes. As the Irish writer Nuala O’Faolain once remarked:

The language of highbrow criticism can only cope with a certain kind of fiction. It has no vocabulary with which to discuss a world where neither the individual nor the society is self-conscious, and the author pretends not to be either. . . . The ordinary reader is far ahead of the critics in ease with such a world. (*The Irish Times*, November 7, 1992)

In another genuine irony, it was one of the heroes of modernism, Walter Benjamin (1969, 83, 102), who remarked on modern “embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed” and added approvingly that “[t]he first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales.” As Tolkien wrote in 1955, “the ‘fairy-story’ is really an adult genre” – that is, a genre for the ordinary reader – “and one for which a starving audience exists” (*Letters* 209).

The Lord of the Rings is thus fundamentally not one but several things: a story told by a master storyteller; a story inspired by philology; a story suffused with Catholic values; and a mythic (or mythopoeic) story with a North European pagan inflection. It is also a story that enables the contemporary reader to imaginatively inhabit a nonmodern world, one that throws into question some central modern values and assumptions.

There remains one important point to discuss in this connection. Le Guin has pointed to “a deep puritanical distrust of fantasy.” To such critics, fantasy “is escapism. . . . They confuse fantasy, which in the psychological sense is a universal and essential faculty of the human mind, with infantilism and pathological regression” (and not always by sincere error, one would add) “as if evil were a problem, something that can be solved, that has an answer.” “*That*” she adds, “is escapism” (Le Guin 1989, 58–59; emphasis in original).

Laura Miller (2008, 101) recounts a conversation in which Tolkien asked Lewis rhetorically, “What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?” The answer, of course, is jailers (*OFS* 69). Miéville (2002) has cited Moorcock to the effect that “this is precisely untrue. Jailers love escapism. What they hate is escape.” But that rejoinder turns on whether you think imaginatively inhabiting an essentially nonmodern world is already a form of escape, rather than mere escapism. Of course, any literature, or indeed art, *could* constitute escapism. Given the phenomenon of radical nostalgia, however (Curry 2004, 15–16) – which I take to be empirically confirmed in Tolkien’s case by *The Lord of the Rings*’ influence in various movements of political and environmental resistance – his fiction is certainly not necessarily escapist or even quietist, sometimes proving rather to be activist.

From Tolkien Studies

This section is intended to bring attention to contributions to Tolkien scholarship from Tolkien studies, in addition to those already mentioned by Shippey, which have also figured in, and affected, Tolkien criticism. One can assume without discussion the importance of Douglas A. Anderson's annotated edition of *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 2002a), the biography by Humphrey Carpenter (1977), Tolkien's *Letters* and essays (*MC*), the posthumous *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (*UT*), and the 12 volumes of the History of Middle-earth series (1983–1996). To these should be added two collections from major conferences, edited by Reynolds and GoodKnight (1995) and Wells (2008), and at least two edited collections: Salu and Farrell (1979) and Clark and Timmons (2000).

First mention must be of the work of Verlyn Flieger (1997, 2002, 2005), and its sensitive analysis of the metaphysical and theological dimensions (which are vast and intricate) of Tolkien's work, both fiction and nonfiction. In addition, Flieger has provided definitive editions of *Smith of Wootton Major* (Tolkien 2005), the landmark essay *On Fairy-stories* (Tolkien 2008b, with Douglas A. Anderson), and a collection of essays on *The Silmarillion* (2000, with Carl F. Hostetter). She is also the best guide to the vital place of Faërie or enchantment in Tolkien's work.

Brian Rosebury (1992) pioneered the first good study of Tolkien's work as a cultural phenomenon, and the later edition (2003) is still more useful and insightful. For other recent work of good quality on Tolkien's fiction in the light of contemporary literature and especially cultural studies, see Hughes (2004), Eaglestone (2005), and Fimi (2009).¹² Also in 1992, Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* set the bar high for such studies. Starting from the premiss that "the task of literary theory is to provide a framework capable of accounting for the story's success on its own terms, rather than denying that its aims are achievable or worth the attempt" (17), his discussion of Tolkien draws upon the unjustly neglected approach of Meeker (1974) and subsequently Elgin (1985) to show convincingly that Tolkien's epic is life affirmingly "comic" and ecological, as opposed to despairingly "tragic" and Promethean. As such, it is:

neither nostalgic nor transcendental. Tolkien draws on the ancient magical worldview and the comic narrative structure because they offer something to the present. . . . an affirmative, integrative worldview, which is not necessarily naïve, escapist, or reactionary. (1992, 34)

The failure to follow through this insight is the biggest single lapse to date in Tolkien studies and criticism alike.

Michael Drout is a critic and scholar in Tolkien studies whose comprehensive and acute metacritical essays (2005 and, with Wynne, 2000) should also be read by anyone engaged in Tolkien criticism. He has also edited a Tolkien encyclopedia (2007). His bibliography with Wynne and Higgins (2000) is another major resource, along with those of Johnson (1986), Hammond (1993, with Douglas A. Anderson), and West (1981, 2004; see also Wynne 2007, and Lobdell 2007).

John Garth's exemplary biography of the first part of Tolkien's life (2003) overlaps both Tolkien studies and criticism, and it has been deservedly praised. One can only hope Garth will one day be able to give similar treatment to Tolkien's entire life, superseding Humphrey Carpenter's earlier and useful but flawed biography of 1977.¹³ Finally,

mention must be made of the excellent series of books produced by Walking Tree Publishers, founded in 1997, under the direction of Thomas Honegger, and of the annual refereed journal *Tolkien Studies*, established in 2004.

Others

This concluding section will mention contributions by writers not Tolkien scholars as such, nor all literary critics, which have nonetheless enriched Tolkien criticism. Pride of place here, on account of her unimpeachable status as both writer and critic and her close relationship, equally personal and professional, with Tolkien's fiction, goes to Ursula Le Guin. Her reflections in the collection of her essays from 1989 on the vexed questions of fantasy and escapism, the complexity of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, and its treatment of the nature of evil, remain evergreen.

The historian Ronald Hutton (2003, 2011) treats the pagan dimension of Tolkien's work, an important but neglected topic, with originality and insight. The result throws an interesting light in turn on its Christian dimension, which has received considerably more (and sometimes uncritical) attention.

Another social and cultural historian, Meredith Veldman, wrote an early consideration of Tolkien's social and environmental commitments and influence that stands up very well and should be better known. She was the first to note that:

Decades before the Greens, he denounced the exaltation of mechanization and the narrow definition of economic progress that resulted in the degradation of the natural environment, and he did so in romantic terms: in Tolkien's Middle-earth, nature expressed a reality beyond human comprehension and worthy of human respect. (1994, 90)

In this context, *The Lord of the Rings* "could serve as a text of not only withdrawal but also engagement" (108), and the elective affinity between it and the countercultural movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s was far from an anomaly.

Turning to other literature and literary criticism, we should be grateful to a critic for *The Guardian* (April 3, 2010), Nicholas Lezard, for finally admitting in print that "of all the means for professional suicide that are available to the writer, expressing affection for Tolkien is one of the most effective." It is depressing (if you think Tolkien deserves better) that this should still be the case in 2010. On the other hand, there are signs that the wind is changing. Among the newer generations of contemporary writers, a few are evidently unafraid to include casual and favorable references to Tolkien in their own work. These include Junot Díaz, Michael Chabon, and, among literary critics, Anthony Lane (2001) in *The New Yorkerr*, Andrew O'Hehir (2001) in the online *Salon*, and another writer for *Salon*, Laura Miller (2008).

China Miéville is an accomplished fantasy/science fiction writer himself. In 2002 he published a sharp critique of Tolkien in the *Socialist Review*, an internet journal, but followed this up with a lighter and more tolerant treatment in 2009, giving "Five Reasons Tolkien Rocks," which is recommended. Among the acute and amusing points he makes is one that breaks through just the modernist barrier erected by Turner and others, which they see as Tolkien's "central problem":

Tolkien refused the notion that a work of fiction is, in some reductive way, primarily, solely, or really "about" something else, narrowly and precisely. . . . his "cordial dislike"

[of allegory] is utterly key for the project of creating a fantastic fiction that both means and is vividly and irreducibly itself, and is thereby fiction worthy of the name. (2009)

Miéville, Lane, O’Hehir, and Miller show that it is perfectly possible to subject Tolkien’s work to serious criticism and even poke fun at it while still recognizing its virtues, respecting its strengths and retaining affection for the old monster, as it were. In support of the best of the Tolkien criticism and studies discussed above, they offer hope for Tolkien scholarship continuing to put flesh on the bones of perhaps the most pithy and accurate critical judgment ever delivered on *The Lord of the Rings*, by its first publisher Rayner Unwin (quoted in Carpenter 1977, 210): “a very great book in its own curious way.”

Postscript

In the six years which have elapsed since writing this essay, a couple of new points merit a mention. One concerns the exhibition of ‘Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth’ at the Bodleian Library in Oxford (2018) and The Morgan Library and Museum in New York (2019), and ‘Tolkien, Journey to Middle-earth’ at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (2019-20). All were extremely well-attended, which underlines the perennial popular appeal of Tolkien’s work, regardless of its critical status. The exhibition in Oxford was the Bodleian’s highest attended exhibition ever, despite the restriction of timed, pre-booked tickets; visitors averaged 926 a day. Those taking place in New York and Paris were equally successful (Catherine McIllwaine, pers. comm.).

The second matter, more weighty, is a renewed focus on both Tolkien and his work in relation to issues of ‘difference’, especially race and racism. There is a welcome new chapter in this edition on that topic, but insofar as it bears on the ongoing critical response to Tolkien’s work perhaps I could add a few remarks. They are not intended to be a full review of the literature.

The first thing to say is that hastiness is unhelpful, especially in an intellectual, cultural and (not least) technological atmosphere which promotes it. Real social evils, both past and present, need to be weighed against the temptation of a simplistic rush to rectitude. An attempt to give the former their full stretch without succumbing to the latter is therefore a prerequisite for any critical judgment which deserves to be taken seriously.

Second, close attention needs to be given to disentangling questions of Tolkien’s own beliefs – chiefly of interest to biographers and their readers – from those concerning the nature of his writings, which surely should be the principal focus of literary critics and their readers. Of course, one may fall into both camps, but that does not make them identical. (See Fini, 2008, 2012.)

Tolkien’s own hostility to Nazism, to anti-Semitism, to ‘Nordic’ as a racially-tainted term, to the idea that the North is a ‘sacred direction’, to apartheid and to imperialism, especially British, are a matter of record. But as he himself writes (2012a, xxii), ‘An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous.’ And that truth cuts both ways, so it still leaves the question: to what extent can Tolkien’s work be rightly described as condoning or encouraging racial prejudice?

One starting-point is to remind ourselves that his stories are just that – fiction – and fiction should not be treated as if it were a tract, argument, or direct assertion. It is unimaginable, for example, without characters who believe, assert and do things with which neither the author nor perhaps any of their readers agree or support. Furthermore, storytellers must be free to imagine what and who they like. (Thankfully, there is little chance of Tolkien being accused of ‘appropriating’ Elvish culture.)

By the same token, subjects in stories should, in the absence of strong evidence to the contrary, be assumed to be there primarily because the story being told demands it. And Tolkien in particular wrote in the first and most basic instance not as a religionist, nor a linguist, nor a patriot and so on, but as an artist – a storyteller – and he specifically denies and disparages allegorical interpretations whereby the Ring ‘is’ the Bomb, etc.

(2012a,xxi)

The alternative would be to attack Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, say, as imperialist and racist because it is populated with imperialists and racists, or because it presents imperialism and racism in action. What could be more absurd, and all the more so since what it shows is just the horrors thereof? (But that did not prevent Chinua Achebe from denouncing it as such, and influentially so.)

Granted all this, it might become possible to tease out any respects in which Tolkien’s work could justifiably be said to be racist. But let me add a few more cautionary notes. (1) Hobbits were not necessarily white-skinned. Indeed, Sam – ‘the chief hero’ of *The Lord of the Rings* (2006, 161) – is twice described as having brown hands (Tolkien 2012b, 714 and 2012c, 915), and the Harfoots, probably Sam’s ancestors, are described as ‘browner of skin’ than the other two kinds (2012a, 3). (2) Although the Haradrim are certainly dark-skinned, we don’t know whether the Easterlings were or not. (3) Inter-racial marriages and friendships play a strong role in *The Lord of the Rings*: between Aragorn and Arwen, Gimli and Legolas, and even (given the history of strife between the Dwarves and the Rohirrim) Gimli and Eomer. (4) White is not always positive, *viz.* Saruman the White, of the White Hand. And (5) the various heroes are far from uniformly white or even human, being strikingly multiracial and indeed multicultural.

Finally, Tolkien’s famous tale is set in North-West Europe (2006, 239), in an ancient time. As such, the story naturally draws upon centuries of its historical experience in which, for most by far of its inhabitants, lands to the South were a rumour of heat and deserts and from the East came fearsome militant invaders (the Huns, then Mongols, then Turks), while the West was a direction of spiritual mystery, including whatever lay over the Sea.

The best candidate for an intractable problem regarding racism remains the Orcs. With all the other races in Middle-earth, individual difference finally trumps group characteristics. Even when the latter are in play, how they are manifested varies widely between individuals (see Chism 2007). But Orcs are apparently irredeemable as a *whole*, simply as such.

Are they, though? It might have been possible to sustain their generic evil as a metaphysical or theological abstraction, but in *The Lord of the Rings* they unavoidably become more individual, arguing with each other, expressing fear and revulsion of the Nazgûl, and engaging in blokey camaraderie (‘the lads’). And that individuality surely makes Orcs more like the other races. Nor are they even uniformly black. Some were – the Uruks of Mordor – but Tolkien describes Orcs generally as ‘sallow-skinned’, which

Chambers Dictionary defines as ‘of a pale-yellowish colour’. Add Tolkien’s deliberate and principled rejection of simple-minded allegory, whereby the Orcs ‘are’ or are ‘like’ blacks, and we might wonder what the problem really is.

Yet it is impossible not be struck by Gandalf the (truly) White, the dazzling white light of the Galadriel’s phial, the White Lady of Rohan and so on, as against the Black Land, the Black Speech, the Black Riders and so on. There is certainly a pattern at work, and maybe a problem, which includes colour although not necessarily race.

Rather, it is part of a deeply problematic overarching moral valuation, deeply rooted in ‘Western’ culture, which comprises intensely value-laden hierarchical polarities, notably light vs dark, high vs low, inner vs outer, culture vs nature, and male vs female (see Plumwood 1993). The toxic effect of these valuations on race, gender, class and beyond have been, and remain, considerable. Given their ubiquity and antiquity, however – at least since Plato, and amplified a thousand-fold by Christian theology – it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for Tolkien not to use them. And if readers accept them uncritically, then there could indeed be a problem with Tolkien’s moral cosmology. But that is a risk, not an ineluctable result, and I personally feel that in this case, the risk is a price worth paying. For otherwise, there would have been no story.

NOTES

- 1 Many of the critical attacks on *The Lord of the Rings*, up to 2000, are discussed in Shippey (2005, Chapter 1), and in Shippey (2000a, especially the “Afterword”); these should definitely be consulted. See also Hammond and Anderson (1993); Pearce (1998, 1–10); Curry (2004, Chapter 2, and 2005); and Lobdell (2007).
- 2 It is therefore odd that later in the same paper, they refer to the “intrinsic quality” of Tolkien’s fiction. “Intrinsic” here is an empty signifier which, to use William James’s blunt metaphor, can never be cashed in as such. There are only ever interpretations, better and worse, and any qualities are a function of the work *plus* its readers, including critics, which interface is therefore where the real work of criticism must take place. It follows that any good critical practice must include reflexive awareness (which is why *ex cathedra* denunciations are always a bad sign).
- 3 Also in 1981, Isaacs and Zimbardo published another collection of critical essays, *Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives*, which failed to add very much to their earlier and innovative one of 1968, *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings*.
- 4 Leading unavoidably to the thought, as Shippey (2000a, xxi) observes, that the literati sometimes talk to themselves.
- 5 I am vividly reminded of an incident in Vienna in 1910 when Sigmund Freud asked Carl Jung to promise that he would “never abandon the sexual theory.” When Jung asked why, Freud hesitated before replying that they had to make it a “dogma,” an “unshakeable bulwark” against the “black tide of mud, of occultism.” Interestingly, Turner makes it clear that Freud is exemplary for her, and she too finds in his particular theory of sexual maturity a bulwark, one against the “black pit” of Tolkien’s fiction.
- 6 Behind nearly all such efforts stands the ghost of Plato, that great advocate of a single and universal truth, and enemy of popular unlicensed fictions; and, at no

- great distance, Saint Paul. In terms of their *mode*, this applies to most modern Western secularists as much as to theists.
- 7 On the last, see the references already supplied when discussing Muir's charges. On race and racism, see Luling (1995); Fimi (2009); and in general, Eaglestone (2005).
 - 8 Respecting any defense of Tolkien here, however, Drout and Wynne (2000, 123) identify as "[t]he biggest failing in Tolkien criticism . . . its lack of discussion of Tolkien's style, his sentence-level writing, his word choice and syntax."
 - 9 It is amusing to imagine Bloom trying to find any "anxiety of influence" in Tolkien. But did it never occur to him that Joyce's *Ulysses* is a much better candidate than *The Lord of the Rings* for a work "fated to become only an intricate Period Piece" (Bloom 2000, 2)?
 - 10 Lumping Tolkien and Lewis together should be done with care, as it can be quite misleading.
 - 11 Although he doesn't discuss Tolkien specifically, Fredric Jameson, who dismisses all contemporary "magical narratives" as "archaic nostalgia" (1975, 61), will serve as a paradigmatic example of a dogmatic modernist literary and cultural critic.
 - 12 For an interesting collection on *The Lord of the Rings* by philosophers, see Bassham and Bronson (2003). It is marred, however, by an annoyingly arch tone which seems to indicate a need to show that they are not taking Tolkien *too* seriously.
 - 13 For interesting reflections on the relatively neglected topic of Tolkien and World War II, see also Manni and Bonechi (2008) and ch. 31.

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