

Remarks for Tolkien event at the Weston Bodleian Library (29.10.15)

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I would like to start by mentioning that in the recent Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to Tolkien*, I have a longish paper on the critical response to Tolkien's fiction, which I'm not going to try to summarize in a few minutes. So if you want a full and proper sense of it, or chapter and verse, I would ask you to please start there.¹

I will say that the problem in evaluating Tolkien's work has always been, as Tom Shippey says, that he was as educated as anyone else (usually more so) 'but in a different school.'² In a way, the hippies were right: Tolkien was genuinely counter-cultural. His primary commitments to historical philology, Catholicism but also 'Northern' pagan courage, enchantment as opposed to power-magic, and the literary primacy of story, remain deeply unfashionable in nearly all contemporary critical contexts. At the same time, his enormous popular success has confirmed the existence of an almost unassuageable hunger among readers for exactly what Tolkien created out of those elements. (Which provides another reason not to forgive him, of course.)

This situation is slowly changing. Five years ago, one of *The Guardian's* chief reviewers stated that 'of all the means for professional suicide that are available to the writer, expressing affection for Tolkien is one of the most effective.'³ (I'm grateful to him for being so open about it.) Since then, however, a newer generation has come into its own of writers and critics who grew up with the books, retain an affectionate if not uncritical respect for them, and are not afraid to say so.

Even the older gatekeepers, although still mounting a rearguard action, have had to adapt their tactics. Thus John Mullan, professor of English at University College London, recently admitted that *The Lord of the Rings* has been enormously influential, but not because it is in any way a great book.⁴ (Ironically, where to approve of Tolkien was once considered reactionary, now the fear is that to entirely *disapprove* might appear so.)

So let's approach the critical reception of Tolkien's work through this question, which has always haunted it: is *The Lord of the Rings*, as so many readers have maintained and so many critics denied, a great book?

I am sure of one thing: even after the hermeneutics of suspicion have done their worst, it remains a legitimate question to ask, of this or any other book. And although flawed, Tolkien's has at least a plausible case in its favour. It deals with profoundly important issues. At least three present themselves:

- our relationship with the living natural world, this Middle-earth, now between the retreating ice and the advancing fires;
- power and what certainly seems to be evil, its entwinement with technoscience, and the nature of resistance;
- and mortality, both death and the consequences of the quest for deathlessness.

¹ Patrick Curry, 'The Critical Response to Tolkien's Fiction', pp. 369-388 in Stuart D. Lee (ed.), *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

² Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000): 316.

³ Nicholas Lezard, in *The Guardian* (03.04.10).

⁴ John Mullan, 'The triumph of fantasy fiction', *The Guardian* (3.4.15).

True, you wouldn't go to *The Lord of the Rings* for insights into issues of sex-gender, but that doesn't seem to pose problems for admirers of *Moby-Dick*. And there is no sex at all. Like, say, *Dubliners*.

There are other possible criteria, too. One was proposed by David Foster Wallace: 'In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness'.⁵ Check, I think.

Or there is a point made by Roger Shattuck, an eminent critic of that other great quest novel (if indeed, like Tolkien's, it is a novel at all), *In Search of Lost Time*. 'The great books,' said Shattuck, 'affect the economy of life for many individuals by allowing them to achieve personal experience sooner, more directly, and with less groping. This sense, this secret, is what allows certain people to live life at all times as an adventure...'⁶ Decidedly check.

Finally – for me, most decisively, and for Tolkien's modernist critics most damagingly – there is the remark by Paul Ricoeur (who coined the term 'hermeneutics of suspicion') that what is now needed is a 'second naïveté', a post-critical rediscovery of wonder which constitutes true maturity.⁷ The contrast with those critics' juvenile obsession with being the Adult in the Room could hardly be clearer.

The work of scholars swimming against the critical tide such as Tom Shippey, indubitably, plus Verlyn Flieger, John Garth, and others, has also made a difference. I'm glad this event has afforded an opportunity to honour them – and, of course, Tolkien himself.

Thank you.

⁵ David Foster Wallace, in the *New York Times* (20.8.06).

⁶ Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars: A Study of Memory, Time, and Recognition in A la recherche du temps perdu* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964): 134.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, transl. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967): 351-52.