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THE HOBBIT HABIT

IN THE CRITIC'S EYE

-Dainis Bisenieks

Middle-earth is not our private preserve any more. It has become too visible, and some people are as dismayed by the fact as they would be by an invasion of orcs. Tolkien's work has captured at one stroke the readership of Kahlil Gibran, J.D. Salinger, and *Mad* magazine. The makers of posters and records have exploited the trend. And critics and commentators, from the anonymous pundits of *Time* upward, have put in a word, not always very polite, about work and readers both. No wonder some of us dislike this burst of publicity. We like to think that our interest in *The Lord of the Rings* is both individual and judicious: the critics will not acknowledge this.

I don't think that a private delight has been spoiled for me, and I have found the criticism -- even the worst of it -- instructive and even entertaining. If some of it is unfair comment, it is best to be aware of such. Know Your Enemy. I teach literature, and fantasy has for some time been my number one problem in criticism. What is literature for, and how can it be relevant to life even when it is fantastic? Thanks to the controversy over *The Lord of the Rings*, I have entered my profession with at least the beginnings of an answer to this question.

A point that I will not relinquish is that this is an important, complex, and enigmatic work. As much so as, let us say, *Moby Dick*. But there is a difference. While *Moby Dick* excites critics, *The Lord of the Rings* excites readers. All its recent critics have noticed that. They praise or damn the work not only for itself, but for its supposed effect on its reader. (Not the case with *Moby Dick*.) But readers are of many kinds, and I think none of the generalizations of the critics can wholly stand. Those who deplore the hobbit habit have been most categorical with theirs. I would like to make some remarks about them.

Important and complex, yes -- but perfect and entirely admirable? A number of critics have dissented, but their critiques reveal far more about them than about the book. But criticism most often is like that. We form our theories of art on the basis of our likes and dislikes. Within a certain range they may serve us well. But if a work of art falls outside that range, we can only say that it does no good that we know and, as far as we are concerned, ought not to exist at all. I don't think I can, by any argument, change the taste of those who were so deeply dissatisfied with *The Lord of the Rings*, but I would like to look at their doctrine and ask whether it fits my experience as a reader and what I know about stories and audiences in general.

It is difficult to keep one's cool about Joseph Mathewson.¹ The editorial policy of the magazine he writes for seems to foster the making of statements by implication and innuendo. He flatters his readers by suggesting, with a word or phrase, a shared knowledge ability: you and I know what's important. So, after misquoting the title of Tolkien's *Beowulf* essay, he says that it is "said to be well thought of by people who think about such things." Comment is superfluous. And though he seems to have read *On Fairy-stories* -- for he quotes

from it -- he uses the words "fairy tale" ("nothing more than...") and "escape" (+ "-ism") as if he had never given a moment's thought to the meanings Professor Tolkien gives these words (if only to refute them). We have met his like before: indignation would be wasted on him. I only wonder how much we can be harmed by those who are willing to be flattered by him. Having read his article, they know exactly what to think of the people who enjoy Tolkien's work.

Of Paul West we can see that he is baffled -- and he loses his cool and resorts to irrelevancies, nonsense, and name-calling.² Mathew Hodgart, while acknowledging Tolkien's skill in using the material of epic and saga, charges that "he brings everything down to the black-and-white of the fairy tales."³ "John Malcolm" (Peter Dickenson) says:

But still it is a children's book: the one thing it does not rely on for its effects is an adult experience of the world, the readers recognition that the writer is portraying an emotional truth about humanity.⁴

All these critics evidently believe that a story should be as much like life (with all its complexities and ambiguities) as possible, and that where it is not, it deceives. But can they be right in this? What would such a doctrine not condemn? If Mr. Mathewson finds the outcome no more in doubt than "in a classic Western", the appeal to form should strengthen my argument rather than his. For I believe that form is necessary to a story, is perfectly natural, and does not deceive. (Compare *On Fairy-stories*, Note H.) A comedy ends, according to the old adage, in a wedding, and a tragedy in a funeral. A eucatastrophic tale ends in joy: the Field of Cormallen... "And all my wishes come true!" It is not unaware of the sorrow that may come, but "The New Shadow" lies outside the frame of the story.

A modern critic (who has not, to my knowledge, dealt with Tolkien) has offered the viewpoint that the novel "reads experience".⁵ It is, so to speak, about "Everyman". But this begs the question: "experience" cannot be generalized. What any story-teller offers is an interaction of character and fortune. What interests us is what the hero does with his fortune. I mean by this term everything in the story which is axiomatic and may not be analyzed or questioned -- everything that is given at the beginning of the story in order to have a beginning. And that can be as fantastic or as improbable as we like. As long as all the cards are on the table. Lear's daughters, Goneril and Regan, are wicked: we need not ask why. What matters is that fate of Lear, that terrible-tempered old man, as determined by his character and by such friends and enemies as he had. The 20th century writer can no longer give human form or origins to perfect villains or heroes -- there can be no Goneril or Regan in realistic fiction -- but he is, as always, free to enter the realm of fantasy.

Tolkien has given his hobbits real enemies (who, by de-

2. West, Paul, "Nondiwasty Snep-vungthangil?", *Book Week*, Feb 26, 1967, p. 1.
3. Hodgart, Matthew, "Kicking the Hobbit", *New York Review of Books*, May 4, 1967, pp. 10-11.
4. Punch, Nov 16, 1966, p. 755.
5. Friedman, Alan, *The turn of the Novel*, N. Y., Oxford Univ. Press, 1966. See especially the preface.

* Based on paper delivered at T. S. A. meeting in N. Y., Dec. 29, 1967.
1. Mathewson, Joseph, "The Hobbit Habit", *Esquire*, Sep. 1966, p. 130.

finition, do not understand good faith) and real allies (who, by definition have no credibility gap). To do so is not to pretend that such exist on earth: see, in the preface to the revised edition, Professor Tolkien's remarks on what his story would have been if it had paralleled the course of events of World War II. It would have been, in brief, a story without form, without an actual or foreseeable ending. In the story as written, a real, demonic enemy --Sauron-- is completely defeated, although -- "Other evils there are that may come... Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world...." (III,190, Bal. Bks.) It remains to wrap up the loose ends of the story, and the author may properly write "The End."

When Mr. West speaks of "a virtue that triumphs untested or an evil that dies uninvestigated" (and other critics have made the same charge) I think he is mistaken on the first point, and the second is largely irrelevant. The hobbits, with whom we are mainly concerned, certainly are tested. That is what makes it an exciting story. The evil of Sauron or of the orcs does not need to be investigated, and that of Saruman and Gollum has been.

A point that may be disputed is whether all of Prof. Tolkien's cards are on the table. Has he dealt out his heroes' fortunes quite openly? Their great good fortune is, of course, to have such allies as Gandalf and Aragorn. But why are Frodo and his friends chosen? We are told that the hobbits of the Shire "were...sheltered, but they had ceased to remember it.... Nonetheless, ease and peace had left this people curiously tough. They were, if it came to it, difficult to daunt or kill; and they were, perhaps, so unwearyingly fond of good things not least because they could, when put to it, do without them..." (I,25) We know Gandalf's good opinion of our

heroes: they are the most adventuresome and curious hobbits of the Shire. Subtle advantages, these: the fate of Fredegar Bolger comes closer to the average of "experience." So it is possible that Prof. Tolkien has somewhat stacked the cards in favor of his heroes, making their world more idyllic than it has a right to be. Perhaps the book does owe some of its appeal to this.

John Boardman's criticism on this score is the most judicious that I have heard.⁶ He has pointed out medievalist and reactionary elements in *The Lord of the Rings*: the Shire, quite impossibly, has no sanitation or public health problems, and there are no sympathetic portraits of people who like machinery. He has said it so well that I cannot doubt if these features of the book affect readers. And do I perhaps share that anti-machine bias?

To raise a question like this without impugning the whole structure -- that is what criticism ought to do. And I believe the structure stands unshaken. What Prof. Tolkien thinks about machinery can be learned from *On Fairy-stories*; and his viewpoint is by no means one-sided. Nor is the medievalist element, I think, the most important in his work, or the chief cause of its wide appeal. If it were, more people might be reading the prose romances of William Morris. But why is the work of Morris dead? Most often, I think, because it is difficult for today's readers, but that is, after all what gives shape and direction to the story (no matter what other virtues it has). I think its portrayal of decisiveness and courage is not at all improbable. Not the idyll, but the deeds of elves, dwarfs, men, and hobbits make it the exciting and moving story that it is.

6. "Forward to the Middle Ages With Tolkien", delivered at T. S. A. meeting in N. Y., Dec. 29, 1967. To appear in Tolkien Journal.

