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Early Glimpses of Middle-earth

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Early Glimpses of Middle-earth

Abstract

Discusses the review essays Tolkien wrote for *The Years' Work in English Studies* in 1923–1926, and finds parallels to his fiction writing. These reviews “offer interesting insights into a mind in which Middle-earth had already begun to take shape.”

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. “Philology: General Works”; Tolkien, J.R.R. Scholarly works

Early Glimpses of Middle-earth

Manfred Zimmermann

"It is merry in summer 'when shaws be sheen and shrads full fair and leaves both large and long'. Walking in that wood is full of solace. Its leaves require no reading. There is another and a denser wood where some are obliged to walk instead, where saws are wise and screeds are thick and the leaves too large and long. These leaves we must read (more or less), hapless vicarious readers, and not all we read is solace. The tree whereon these leaves grow thickest is the Festschrift, a kind of growth that has the property of bearing leaves of many diverse kinds. To add to the labour of inspecting them the task of sorting them under the departments of philology to which they belong would take too long. With a few exceptions we must take each tree as it comes."

Thus begins an article headed "Philology: General Works" by J.R.R. Tolkien in which he reviews, as he had done for the two previous years, publications that had appeared in 1925 and had bearings on the study of English.¹

Tolkien's diction, his fresh and unorthodox approach to literature and philology, and his favourite tree-and-leaf imagery are immediately recognizable; in the phrase in inverted commas, quoted freely from the 16th century *Gaye of Gisborne*, we can already detect the metre of the *Song of the Ents and Entwives* (II, 80-81).²

These early philological writings are remarkable not only for their erudition, their style, and their humour which takes unnecessary austerity off scholarship; they offer interesting insights into a mind in which Middle-earth had already begun to take shape. The author's wide reading, his love of languages, and his deep interest in words and names show clearly.

In the earliest of the three essays (1923,21) we find the first reference - as far as I am aware - in the Tolkien corpus to the *eald enta geweorc*, 'the works of giants', as the Anglo-Saxons called the ruined remains of Roman Britain, the nucleus whence sprang his creation of the famous race of the Ents. An article dealing with the etymology of OE *smeagan* is discussed (1924,39) and brings to mind a prominent character of *The Lord of the Rings*. We see Tolkien using for the first time a key-word of his later imaginative writings: "... rumour is mythopoeic" (1924,43). Rural England, especially its place-names and personal names, repeatedly receives loving mention. We encounter the *Weder-mearc* (1925,39) that sounds suspiciously like "Riddermark", and a river "Wenning, a tributary of the Lune (!) in Lancashire" (1923,31). The events at Bree come to mind when we read: "The family-name history is illustrated by a study of the progeny of Robert (known also to his friends as Nob, Hob, Rob, and Dob) ..." (1925,39). "Egidius Gilles" is the title of an article in a Festschrift (1925,48). In his remarks on a proposed Universal Script his aesthetics of script which were to influence his Elvish alphabets seem to shine through. Taking signs out of diverse and disparate systems and trying to amalgamate them into one can only result in ugliness which will prevent its acceptance: "(It) is not beautiful, and the eye is critical and irritable, and must be humoured" (1924,53).

Tolkien's sense of humour is quite often reflected in his essays (e.g. 1923,28; 1924,25; 1924,47-48; 1924,52), but where he sees incompetence at work, it comes in for scathing remarks though packed politely (1923,34-36). At the end of the first of the articles he gives an impassioned defense of philology, foreshadowing the battle between the linguists and the literati that occupied him for a period later on in his Oxford career (1923,36-37).³

Some of his statements seem to have roots in his mythopoeic imagination and, though used in criticism of scholarly publications, might equally well be applied to his imaginative writings. He is intrigued by a book on the

English language in America, especially by the chapter on the history and formation of American place-names (1925,64). The reason might be that when he set out to 'discover' the names of geographical features of Middle-earth, Tolkien's situation was much like that of the early settlers. A passage about a certain study being fired by "the allure-ment of the riddle of the past" (1924,65) could serve to describe his own "amazing (...) labours (of) the recapturing of fitful and tantalizing glimpses in the dark" (ibid.) in the creation of his *Ring*.

What he says of the state of Indo-European philology in the early twenties, after the discovery of Tokharish and Hittite, might be said of the then state of Middle-earth in the mind of its maker or of the prehistory of Middle-earth as seen by the Third Age Hobbits (or by us after reading *The Lord of the Rings*): "... the prehistory of Europe and Nearer Asia looms dark in the background, an intricate web, whose tangle we may now guess at, but hardly hope to unravel" (1924,27).

These essays, having at first sight hardly any relation to Tolkien's literary achievements of later decades, provide an unexpected and surprising opportunity to see a mythopoeic mind already at work, weaving a vast and intricate web of myth and history.

Notes:

- 1 The Year's Work in English Studies. Vol. IV: 1923. Ed. by Sir Sidney Lee and F. S. Boas. London 1924. pp. 20-37; Vol. V: 1924. Ed. by F. S. Boas and C. H. Herford. London 1926. pp. 26-65; Vol. VI: 1925. Ed. by F. S. Boas and C. H. Herford. London 1927. pp. 32-66. References are by the year under consideration and page number.
- 2 Reference to volume and page of the Allen & Unwin three volume hardcover edition (2nd ed.) of *The Lord of the Rings*.
- 3 Cf. H. Carpenter: J. R. R. Tolkien - A Biography. London: Allen & Unwin 1977. pp. 118, 136-137. The competition between the two factions of the English faculty found an outlet in the song 'Lit' and 'Iang' in J. R. R. Tolkien, E. V. Gordon & others: *Songs for the Philologists*. Privately Printed in the Department of English at University College. London 1936. p. 27.

