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The Critical Response to Tolkien's Fiction

Abstract

This paper illustrates, primarily by reviewing reviews from *The Hobbit* to “The History of Middle-earth”, how Tolkien’s critics have approached his works and popularity. The paper also briefly comments on the state of Tolkien criticism in its second half-century.

Additional Keywords

The Hobbit; The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien criticism; The Silmarillion; Unfinished Tales

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In 1961 the critic Philip Toynbee wrote in the *London Observer*:

There was a time when the Hobbit fantasies of Professor Tolkien were being taken very seriously indeed by a great many distinguished literary figures. Mr. Auden is even reported to have claimed that these books were as good as *War and Peace*; Edwin Muir and many others were almost equally enthusiastic. I had a sense that one side or other must be mad, for it seemed to me that these books were dull, ill-written, whimsical and childish. And for me this had a reassuring outcome, for most of his more ardent supporters were soon beginning to sell out their shares in Professor Tolkien, and to-day those books have passed into a merciful oblivion.¹

Toynbee's dismissal of *The Lord of the Rings* was, of course, premature. Today the works of J.R.R. Tolkien are still read ardently, not only in Britain and America but around the world. *The Lord of the Rings* in fact was very popular at the time of Toynbee's remark, and more than thirty years and many thousands of readers later, it is a modern classic. To be fair, in 1961 the flurry of first reviews of *The Lord of the Rings* had ended, and almost nothing was being written about Tolkien. His fan movement had only just been born (in America), and the present great river of literature about him was not yet even a trickle. In that moment of critical calm, anyone might have misread the signs. But Toynbee clearly was inclined to do so, driven by (in Edmund Fuller's words) “an apparent total temperamental antipathy” (1968, p. 36) and by a need to convince himself, at least in the case of Tolkien, of the accuracy of his critical judgement. Later in his article Toynbee admitted that on several occasions he had “grossly misjudged a book, either to its advantage or to its detriment”, and that the opinions of other critics now and then had led him to change his own; but he felt sure that he was right about “the Hobbits”. Indeed, we find him in 1978, in a review of *The Inklings* by Humphrey Carpenter, still

remarking on the “immaturity” of *The Lord of the Rings*, and on Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams as “childish” in their devotion to “make-believe” (1978, p. 31). Some opinions are formed in steel and weather the years.

Toynbee's remarks are a good illustration, on the negative side, of the degree to which Tolkien's works often provoke a response more emotional than intellectual. Equally illustrative, on the positive side, would be the adulatory writings of some of Tolkien's fans, those who (as is their right) choose to love Middle-earth for its own sake and to give little or no thought to analysis. In between these poles is a vast territory of comments, opinions, and serious criticism about Tolkien. It is an ever-expanding country with many camps. It is, perhaps, necessarily vast: as Neil D. Isaacs has written, “in contemplating the artistry of Tolkien, one must broaden not only one's horizons but also one's definitions. Prose fiction has taken new turns or even jumps with Tolkien, and the critics must try to keep up” (1968, p. 11). And it is an interesting place to explore: to trace, one hundred years after his birth and more than fifty since the publication of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's phenomenal popularity and influence, to better appreciate the varied effects he has had on his readers, and in the process even to shed further light, by reflection, on his works themselves.

An interesting place to explore – but so far, little described, though well mapped. In the September 1986 issue of *Beyond Bree* I put on my own critic's hat to review the annotated bibliography of Tolkien by Judith A. Johnson (Hammond, 1986, pp. 7-8), and noted that the book was not yet the properly critical analysis of Tolkien criticism that needs to be written. This was, I now think, an unfair comment. The criticism of Tolkien's fiction alone is the stuff of which long dissertations are made. It could not be, and was not meant to be, fully covered by Johnson in her book. But she, and Richard West, and Åke Bertenstam, and George Thomson, and other bibliographers of Tolkieniana have laid the groundwork for such a study. It remains only for someone to

¹ A letter by one C.D. Fettes, disputing Toynbee's remarks, was published in the *Observer* of 11 Feb. 1962. George Watson attempted to explain the dissension over *The Lord of the Rings* by describing Tolkien as the last Victorian: see “The Roots of Romance” [review of T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*], *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 Oct. 1982: 1098. Watson himself was a “dissenter” in the manner of Toynbee. He labelled *The Silmarillion* “flatulent and pretentious” and *The Lord of the Rings* “more of a phenomenon . . . than a work of literature, and more of an addiction than either . . .”

follow their guides. I cannot myself, in the space of this paper, write that important book; but I would like at least to contribute a chapter, or an introduction to a chapter, and to suggest a few directions to the ultimate author.

An account of the criticism of Tolkien's writings might begin with J.R.R. Tolkien himself. He was, as he once wrote, his "most critical reader of all" (Tolkien, 1966, p. 6). His letters are filled with self-analysis and second thoughts. He took note of his reviews, and was dismayed when he was misunderstood. He was concerned that his works should speak to a wider public, beyond his "inner circle" of readers. The latter included his wife and children, especially his son Christopher; and his "two chief (and most well-disposed) critics", C.S. Lewis and Rayner Unwin (Tolkien, 1981, p. 36). Lewis's criticism has been, or is being, well documented. Rayner Unwin's opinions were privately given to Tolkien, and for the most part are unpublished. Only his report on *The Hobbit* is widely known:

Bilbo Baggins was a hobbit who lived in his hobbit-hole and *never* went for adventures, at last Gandalf the wizard and his dwarves persuaded him to go. He had a very exiting time fighting goblins and wargs. at last they got to the lonley mountain; Smaug, the dragon who gawreds it is killed and after a terrific battle with the goblins he returned home – rich!

This book, with the help of maps, does not need any illustrations it is good and should appeal to all children between the ages of 5 and 9.²

Rayner Unwin himself likes to point out, with regard to his final comment, that he wrote the report at age ten. While still young, he also reported on *Farmer Giles of Ham* in manuscript, and he wrote a very astute response to the poem "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil", which Tolkien had put forward as a successor to *The Hobbit*:

I think that *Tom Bombadil* would make quite a good story, but as *The Hobbit* has already been very successful I think the story of Old Took's great grand-uncle, Bullroarer, who rode a horse and charged the goblins of Mount Gram in the battle of the Green Fields and knocked King Golfimbul's [*sic*] head off with a wooden club would be better. This story could be a continuation of *The Hobbit*, for Bilbo could tell it to Gandalf and Balin in his hobbit hole when they visited him.³

Boy or man, Unwin was found by Tolkien to be "a critic worth listening to" (1981, p. 120).

Professional critics began to take note of Tolkien's fiction in 1937, beginning with the reviewers of *The Hobbit*. As Åke Bertenstam (1988, p. 17) has written, these critics had among them a strong feeling of bewilderment. In their attempt to define *The Hobbit* they compared it to the *Alice* books, to *The Wind in the Willows* and other works by Kenneth Grahame, to the geometrical fantasy *Flatland*, and to works by William Morris and George MacDonald. Not all of these

comparisons were apt. The reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* was the most perceptive in this regard:

To define the world of "The Hobbit" is, of course, impossible, because it is new. You cannot anticipate it before you go there, as you cannot forget it once you have gone. The author's admirable illustrations and maps of Mirkwood and Goblinsgate and Esgaroth give one an inkling – and so do the names of dwarf and dragon that catch our eyes as we first ruffle the pages. But there are dwarfs and dwarfs, and no common recipe for children's stories will give you creatures so rooted in their own soil and history as those of Professor Tolkien – who obviously knows much more about them than he needs for this tale.

(Lewis, 1937, p. 714)

Obviously, indeed, for the reviewer was C.S. Lewis, who had read *The Hobbit* in typescript and knew something of Tolkien's unpublished mythology.

Since *The Hobbit* was a children's book, many of its reviewers noted elements that would appeal to children, and many classified the book by age. Anne T. Eaton, in a slightly confused article in the *New York Times Book Review*, wrote that "the tale is packed with valuable hints for the dragon killer and adventurer in Faerie. Plenty of scaly monsters have been slain in legend and folktale, but never for modern readers has so complete a guide to dragon ways been provided." She specified ages eight to twelve as the appropriate readers for *The Hobbit* – but then wrote, in the same review, that the book was suitable for "ages from 8 years on", and finally called it "a book with no age limit" (1938, p. 12). C.S. Lewis again was on the mark in the *Times Literary Supplement*, with his statement that *The Hobbit* is "a children's book only in the sense that the first of many readings can be undertaken in the nursery" (1937, p. 714).

Having written a children's book, Tolkien was categorized as an author for children – at least, by the reviewers. His second book of fiction, *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949), confirmed that label. *Farmer Giles* was published for children, though it had long before grown from a family game into a sophisticated tale combining fairy-story characters with references to medieval history, Oxford University, and the *OED*. Unlike *The Hobbit*, it went largely unremarked by the reviewers, a fact Tolkien ruefully noted (1981, pp. 138-9). But it too was received generally with favour.

The critics' mood and approach changed dramatically with the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5). If Tolkien was a writer for children, what was this? A three-volume book, largely serious, compared by advance readers to Spenser, Malory, and Ariosto. The reviewers were put on their mettle. Some responded with the first serious analysis of Tolkien's fiction; others did not rise to the occasion.

The anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of the first volume, describing hobbits, wrote that "it is as though

² From the manuscript reproduced in *The Annotated Hobbit*, ed. Douglas A. Anderson (1988) p. 2, quoted here with permission of Rayner Unwin.

³ Rayner Unwin, report contained in an unpublished letter from Stanley Unwin to J. R. R. Tolkien, 16 Dec. 1937, quoted here with permission of Rayner Unwin and HarperCollins.

these Light Programme types had intruded into the domain of the Nibelungs." He noted Frodo's development "from a greedy young hobbledehobbit" to "a noble paladin", and remarked:

Only considerable skill in narrative can surmount the difficulty of this complete change of key within the limits of one book. It is a near thing, but Professor Tolkien just pulls it off . . . Yet the plot lacks balance. All right-thinking hobbits, dwarfs, elves and men can combine against Sauron, Lord of Evil; but their only code is the warrior's code of courage, and the author never explains what it is they consider the Good . . . (Anon., 1954a, p. 541)

"Perhaps, after all," the reviewer thought, "this is the point of a subtle allegory", of the West against the Communist East. But "whether this is its meaning, or whether it has no meaning, *The Fellowship of the Ring* is a book to be read for sound prose and rare imagination."

W.H. Auden (1954, p. 37), writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, noted that *The Lord of the Rings*, unlike *The Hobbit*, was written in a manner suited to adults, "to those, that is, between the ages of 12 and 70" – a very odd range. He called *The Fellowship of the Ring* an adventure story, and compared it to John Buchan's *The Thirty-nine Steps*. Donald Barr, reviewing the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, also noted that it was not for children (a fact which still eludes some critics), and that it was "not metaphysical like E.R. Eddison's [fantasies], nor theological like George MacDonald's". He thought that the work would appeal to "readers of the most austere tastes" who "now long for the old, forthright, virile kind of narrative", and that it had "a kind of echoing depth behind it, wherein we hear Snorri Sturluson and Beowulf, the sagas and the Nibelungenlied, but civilized by the gentler genius of modern England" (1955, p. 4).

With the publication of *The Two Towers*, the *Times Literary Supplement* proclaimed the work to be "a prose epic in praise of courage", and noted that "within his imagined world the author continually unveils fresh countries of the mind, convincingly imagined and delightful to dwell in." However, "large sectors of this mythic world are completely omitted; women play no part [a frequent comment by critics, not fully warranted]; no one does anything to get money [!]; oddly enough, no one uses the sea, though that may come in the final volume. And though the allegory is now plainer there is still no explanation of wherein lies the wickedness of Sauron." (Anon., 1954b, p. 817). The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of *The Return of the King* also praised Tolkien's work, at length and with poetry: "At last the great edifice shines forth in all its splendour, with colonnades stretching beyond the ken of mortal eye, dome rising behind dome to hint at further spacious halls as yet unvisited." With

foresight he found *The Lord of the Rings* "not a work that many adults will read right through more than once; though even a single reading will not be quickly forgotten. In the schoolroom it may be read more avidly, perhaps again and again. If that comes to pass its influence will be immeasurable. As with Kai Lung and *The Wind in the Willows*, posterity may identify not direct quotation, but half-hidden reference, which assumes that every well-rounded and book-loving undergraduate is familiar with the adventures of Frodo Baggins among the evil mountains of Mordor." (Anon., 1955, p. 704). But he thought that Tolkien could have distinguished Good and Evil better. In response to a reader's letter, the reviewer wrote, now with an astounding lack of perception, that "throughout the book the good try to kill the bad, and the bad try to kill the good. We never see them doing anything else. Both sides are brave. Morally there seems nothing to choose between them."⁴

By now the critical climate was such that W.H. Auden could write: "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 . . ." (1956, p. 5).⁵ Foremost among the latter group was the critic Edmund Wilson. In "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!" in the *Nation*, he wrote that "there is little in *The Lord of the Rings* over the head of a seven-year-old child. It is essentially . . . a children's book which has somehow got out of hand . . . an overgrown fairy story, a philological curiosity". It dealt with, he said, "a simple confrontation – of the Forces of Evil with the Forces of Good, the remote and alien villain with the plucky little home-grown hero. There are streaks of imagination" – Ents and Elves – "but even these are rather clumsily handled . . . The characters talk a story-book language that might have come out of Howard Pyle, and as personalities they do not impose themselves." Tolkien's "poverty of imagination", Wilson felt, was "almost pathetic". How is it, he asked, "that these long-winded volumes of what looks to this reviewer like balderdash have elicited such tributes" from C.S. Lewis, Naomi Mitchison, and Richard Hughes, among others? The answer, he believed, was "that certain people – especially, perhaps, in Britain – have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash" (1956, pp. 312-13). Wilson's review was immediately notorious and provoked a counter-response, most notably "Hwaet We Holbytla . . ." by Douglass Parker in the *Hudson Review* (1956-7).⁶ Parker's review of *The Lord of the Rings* not only provided balance to Wilson, it was one of the first lengthy comments on Tolkien's epic, and remains one of the most literate essays to deal with Tolkien and his fiction.

The most interesting series of reviews of *The Lord of the Rings* appeared in the *New Statesman and Nation*. Naomi Mitchison liked *The Fellowship of the Ring* for its details of

⁴ Reply to letter to the editor from David I. Masson, *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 Dec. 1955: 743. Anthony Bailey made a similar comment in his "Power in the Third Age of the [sic] Middle Earth" (1956, p. 154). C.S. Lewis replied to all such readers who saw only black and white and no grey in *The Lord of the Rings*, in his "The Dethronement of Power" (1955).

⁵ This review of *The Return of the King* provoked Tolkien to write an extensive private comment on his critics, published in *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (pp. 238-44).

⁶ Another good reply to Wilson, and to Philip Toynbee, is Shippey, 1982, pp. [1]-3.

geography and language. It was not, she wrote, an allegory but "a bigger bit of creation altogether: perhaps a mythology." She regretted only that "certain aspects of this mythic world are not completely worked out. Professor Tolkien is not an economist; there are uncertainties on the scientific side. But on the fully human side, from the standpoint of history and semantics, everything is there" (1954, p. 331). Maurice Richardson, the reviewer of *The Two Towers*, on the other hand, thought that the work would "do quite nicely as an allegorical adventure story for very leisured boys, but as anything else . . . it has been widely overpraised." The work, he said, had begun as "a charming children's book" but "proliferated into an endless worm". He thought its fantasy "thin and pale". He liked the battle scenes and the "atmosphere of doom and danger and perilous night-riding", and he thought that the allegory (as he perceived it to be) raised "interesting speculations": does the Ring relate to the atomic nucleus, and are Orcs at all equated with materialist scientists (1954, pp. 835-6)?

Francis Huxley, in reviewing *The Return of the King* in the *New Statesman and Nation* (1955, 587-8), also reviewed Richardson's review. "When what is really a mythological story is criticised for being childish," he wrote, "I, for one, immediately suspect Mr. Richardson of having missed the point." He thought Richardson's remark that the book was "an endless worm" inspired, though not in the way it was meant.

Professor Tolkien has, indeed, used all his ingenuity in inventing the various languages of elves [*sic*], orcs, hobbits and dwarfs, together with their histories and family trees which . . . form an appendix of a hundred pages; and perhaps one has to be a "very leisured boy" to appreciate them, or, of course, to invent them. The action of the history, however, has nothing in common with such mechanical inventions: it has not been contrived, it has arisen, like all true mythology. Small wonder, then, that the story is like a worm, throwing its coils about the reader: for is it not Frodo's blessed and unhappy fate to let himself be swallowed by the dragon of evil, the Dark Power, so that he may conquer it? He walks into its mouth, bearing the Ring that can make its wearer invisible, and also compel the dragon to his will: for the ring is the image of the dragon itself, endless because its tail is in its mouth (as a smattering of mythology will tell one); and the ring must be destroyed and not used for fear that Man will turn into a dragon, instead of the dragon turning into man.

After *The Lord of the Rings* was complete and its initial reviews had been published, the serious criticism of Tolkien began to pass for the most part from newspapers and wide-circulation magazines to specialist journals and to books and dissertations. But except for a lull in (roughly) 1957-1961, Tolkien has remained (for better or worse) in the public eye. *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (1962) and *Tree and Leaf* (incorporating "Leaf by Niggle", 1964) drew a modest critical response, and then the competition in the United States between the "pirate" Ace Books paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings* and the authorized Ballantine Books

edition changed the tone of Tolkien criticism once more. This publishers' "war over Middle-earth" and its root question of the validity of Tolkien's American copyright generated enormous publicity, which put a spotlight not only on the central issue but on the fan movement that had quietly grown around *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and was now in the thick of the controversy, roused in support of a favourite author against the injustice of an unauthorized publisher. The publicity also sold books, which was itself newsworthy. The general media took note of Tolkien's growing popularity, and of the "Tolkien cult", and became often more interested in his fame and phenomenal sales than in his texts.

Edmund Fuller observed in 1962 that the critical acclaim with which *The Lord of the Rings* was received was so great as to carry in it "an inevitable counterreaction – a natural hazard of any work unique in its time that kindles a joy by its very freshness" (p. 36). He was referring to early dissenters such as Edmund Wilson and Philip Toynbee; but their remarks were polite compared to some of the criticism that erupted in 1977 upon the long-anticipated (posthumous) publication of *The Silmarillion*, and that later was directed against *Unfinished Tales* and "The History of Middle-earth". Its force was strong, and is not yet spent.

Tolkien's publisher, Rayner Unwin, has said that the reviews of *The Silmarillion* were among the most unfair he had ever seen (Yates, 1978, p. 14). Not all were negative: Anthony Burgess, for one, wrote favourably in the *Observer* (1977); and John Gardner, in the *New York Times Book Review*, though he found faults, thought that the central part of the book had "a wealth of vivid and interesting characters, and all of the tales are lifted above the ordinary" (1977, p. 1). But these were in the minority. In contrast, Eric Korn in the *Times Literary Supplement* dismissed *The Silmarillion* as "unreadable" and found that "what is admirable or enjoyable" in *The Lord of the Rings* is absent in the later work, and that "what is bad is magnified. Most lamentable is the absence of landscape . . . no pubs or pipe-smoking Rangers or Wizards [are] in the world of *The Silmarillion*, no hobbits, or ents or Gollum . . . still [as in *The Lord of the Rings*] no women, but lots of female personages, all either Pallas Athene or Brunnhilde or Yseult, unnervingly large, healthy and clear-eyed, like John Buchan heroines." Korn also criticized Tolkien's language, which he said had "crossed the boundary between mythology and scripture, and lost its head entirely . . . [There are] too many exotic names for pleasure: not the Horns of Elfland faintly blowing but a garrulous station announcer for Finnish State Railways" (1977, p. 1097). Francis King, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, struck much the same note by comparing *The Silmarillion* to an "overlong and rather indigestible meal" and noting that though his writings have "indisputable grandeur and power . . . Tolkien forged no style of his own . . . but instead fell back on a late-Victorian archaism, reminiscent of George MacDonald and William Morris." King, too, found no women in *The Silmarillion* "worthy of the name", only a cast of males the majority of which "behave as though they had never reached puberty" (1977, p. 14). L.J. Davis in the

New Republic, perhaps the most caustic of the reviewers, compared *The Silmarillion* to the Book of Mormon and remarked that all of its characters “are 37 feet tall and live for a million years”. He found Tolkien’s book to be “a weak gloss” on *The Lord of the Rings* and likely to lead many of his admirers to “grave disappointment” (1977, pp. 38-40). Richard Brookhiser, in the *National Review* (1977), was more charitable but still negative on balance: *The Silmarillion* was “no discredit” to Tolkien but was less successful for its lack of hobbits.

Such responses were perhaps to be expected. *The Lord of the Rings* was a hard act to follow, and *The Silmarillion*, as many critics pointed out at length, was a very different book; and if instead it had been like its predecessor, Tolkien still would have been criticized, for repeating himself. That *The Silmarillion* sold well despite its many unfavourable critics is (depending upon one’s point of view) either evidence of its true quality or a deplorable indication of the sheeplike nature of Tolkien fans who blindly practice “brand loyalty”.⁷ In any case, it still (unfairly) bears the stigma of a “difficult book”, and has received less than its share of serious consideration.

Unfinished Tales, published in 1980, fared no better. Brian Sibley, writing in the *Listener*, called it “an expensive, 500-page postscript that adds little to its author’s reputation or to the appreciation of his other work”, though he added that it “also, mercifully, takes nothing from them” (1980, pp. 443-4). And Guy Gavriel Kay, who assisted Christopher Tolkien in editing *The Silmarillion*, wrote in a Canadian magazine that “for someone innocently seeking a good read, *Unfinished Tales* emerges as inaccessible, pedantic and perhaps ultimately saddening. Where has the magic gone? One feels at times like an archeologist, digging amongst the dusty rubble of a once-glorious civilization . . . Broken shards of pottery . . . the dry dust of scholarly footnotes replacing the gleam of enchanted swords.” (undated, p. 16).

As for “The History of Middle-earth” (1983-), its reviewers have divided between those who find the series a tribute to Tolkien’s imagination, and those who merely ask *Why?* I need not quote extensively from the reviews to suggest their flavour. Valerie Housden’s remark in *Vector* on *The Lost Road and Other Writings* is typical: “A must for Tolkien freaks and those preparing doctorates, my cat and I agreed this book was a good excuse for a snooze on a rainy afternoon” (1988).⁸ Of course, these books, analysing the development of Tolkien’s works through a scholarly presentation of his manuscripts, are primarily for Tolkien specialists, and the careful buyer will recognize them as such. Reviewers may justifiably warn prospective readers that “The History of Middle-earth” is not necessarily for those “seeking more of the joy and excitement of the Hobbit stories” – but the critics protest too much, and many readers do not agree with them. The generally good sales of the

series, the fan response to the four volumes that deal with the history of *The Lord of the Rings*, and the recent appearance in mass-market paperback of the two volumes of *The Book of Lost Tales* suggest that “The History of Middle-earth” appeals to more of Tolkien’s public than his critics acknowledge.

From reviews an account of Tolkien criticism must pass to more formal scholarship, which I cannot begin to cover here. But I would like to make a few remarks about where Tolkien studies have been and where they might go. Looking at the first Isaacs and Zimbardo collection of essays about Tolkien, published nearly a quarter of a century ago, some of the comments it contains now seem simplistic. Our body of knowledge is so much greater today. Humphrey Carpenter’s biography, and Tolkien’s published letters, and “The History of Middle-earth” all inform and colour our views of Tolkien and his works – or should. Neil D. Isaacs twice over the years has made the irritating remark that he was concerned with Tolkien criticism aimed at the serious student of literature, not at the Tolkien fan. This is an artificial and even insulting distinction. Most good Tolkien criticism is being produced today by fans, many of whom are also professional academics, and the fan journals are the backbone of Tolkien studies, certainly its most ready outlet, and increasingly sophisticated. It is there, I think, that new ground is most likely to be broken.

Tolkien’s readers may never catch up to his later books. I once spoke with a woman who said, with great enthusiasm, that she *loved* Tolkien’s books, but when I mentioned *The Silmarillion* she gave me a blank stare. She knew only *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien scholarship has had much the same blindness. Though Neil Isaacs, in the second Isaacs and Zimbardo collection, *New Critical Perspectives*, admitted that *The Lord of the Rings* is not Tolkien’s only work worthy of attention, “still [there is] a general understanding that the trilogy [*sic*] is, if not the heart of Tolkien’s work, at least head and shoulders above the rest of his creative corpus” (1981, p. [1]). He also remarked that “the publication of *The Silmarillion* should . . . stimulate some reexamination of certain critical issues regarding the trilogy” (p. 7). This is far too narrow a view.

Much can be said about *The Lord of the Rings*, and much remains to be said. But it is disappointing to see so little written on *Farmer Giles of Ham*, and *Smith of Wootton Major*, even *The Hobbit* after all these years. And now we have Tolkien’s drafts: *Unfinished Tales*, currently nine volumes of “The History of Middle-earth”, and John Rateliff’s history of the *Hobbit* manuscripts yet to come. All of these need to be taken into account, if we are to see the span of Tolkien’s creativity, the body of his works as a whole rather than just its individual parts. And new critical roads need to be taken: the study, for example, of Tolkien’s

⁷ See Auberon Waugh, “Some Useful Things to Do with Books”, *Literary Review*, Apr. 1992: 1.

⁸ Gillian Somerville-Large, who “reviewed” *The Lays of Beleriand* in the *Irish Times*, 28 Sept. 1985, could not even bring herself to read the book, “because Tolkien makes me queasy in the stomach”. “You could read this stuff,” she wrote, “or you could use the time to learn shorthand typing, computer studies or flower arranging.” Only a handful of reviewers outside the fan literature have given “The History of Middle-earth” the consideration it deserves, e.g. Stephen Medcalf, “Elven Evolutions” (review of *The Book of Lost Tales*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 July 1985: 802.

language and languages – not just his invented tongues, but his English prose and poetic styles – and of his paintings and drawings, which also reflect his vision and are directly related to the development of his texts. Tolkien's critics, I say again, often have taken a narrow view. I am hopeful, however, that their eyes are now opening wider. The range

and quality of papers presented at the Tolkien Centenary Conference are proof that this is so. The land Tolkien made is rich, and the paths to its heart are many. The critical response to Tolkien's works must follow all these roads, as far as they will lead.

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