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Abstract

An account of the reception by reviewers of the publication of *In de Ban van de Ring* (*The Lord of the Rings*) in Dutch. Also covers response to *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Critical reception; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Translations—Dutch

Tolkien in Dutch

A Study of the Reception of Tolkien's Work in Belgium and the Netherlands

Johan Vanhecke

Dutch is the first language into which *The Lord of the Rings* was translated. The man who should get the credit for this is Guus Sötemann.¹ He wrote three very enthusiastic reviews of the book in *Algemeen Handelsblad* (20.11.1954; 25.03.1955; 25.02.1956) and in this way convinced the editors of *Het Spectrum* to take the risk of publishing *The Lord of the Rings* in Dutch.

A Monument of Fantasy

The publication of *In de Ban van de Ring* (Under the Spell of the Ring) caused so many reactions that *De Maasbode* (10.08.57) wrote: "The seasons of the national book-production are these days marked by the work of a British professor." Of the nearly one hundred reviews I found for the period 1956-1958, only four are negative. The reviewers are not occasional journalists, but primarily people of serious intent.

Superlatives are rife. *Het Dordrechts Nieuwsblad* labels Tolkien "as one of the greatest of the great" (03.04.57) and his book as one of "the most important literary creations of the twentieth century." (05.11.57)

Het Volksdagblad (09.03.57) puts it "on the level of world literature" and thinks that by

its timeless frame and its universal human significance will prove to be of all time.... It constitutes one tremendous surprise for the reader, who has not lost the taste for select spiritual food. The publication of such a work is a major event, not repeated every century. Genius is only an occasional phenomenon.

For *Vrijheid en Recht* (15.03.58) it is a "monument of fantasy and the art of writing" and in *Oost-Brabant* (24.12.56) it is called "an unequalled work, which one can hardly imagine to be the production of one person." Fenix has in *'t Pallieterke* (01.08.57) he "never reviewed a work... that made such an overwhelming impression on him." Elsewhere we read:

Unnoticing, you are carried along, only gradually discovering that the fire has gone out, that the radio is still on but is only murmuring and that the night has worn on till about three o'clock in the morning. Where could you still find books like that, before Tolkien gave us one again? (*Hier Rotterdam*, 02.05.58)

A definitely different view is taken by Rijn Blijstra² in *Het Vrije Volk* (24.02.58):

The imagination however is limited, in spite of the many capital letters and the ample topography: when all the mysterious fortresses, caverns, volcanos, strongholds and woods are conquered, roamed or mounted, the reader is left with a number of experiences, which could hardly capture his attention.

According to him "this work has been nothing more than a most complex jigsaw puzzle for the author and a tedious sea of troubles for the reader, who at the end is back where he started, i.e. no wiser."

Fenix maintains in *'t Pallieterke* (07.03.57) exactly the opposite:

At the end you will stand there like I do, incredulous, bewildered, that this struggle for the preservation or the destruction of the world has been invented from a to z, that these characters only lived in Tolkien's matchless imagination.

Most reviewers are impressed by Tolkien's imagination. *De Gelderlander* (12.12.57) calls Tolkien a "fantasist of exceptional calibre" and his work is for the *Dordrechts Nieuwsblad* (03.04.57) "a fascinating book, the result of an immense mental process and a fantastic brain." "Seldom has human fantasy spread its wings more widely than in this giant fairy-tale." (R.S. Streven, 04.01.58).

In Dutch the word 'fantasy' is an equivalent of 'imagination'. In his essay "On Fairy Stories" Tolkien argues that 'fantasy' is much more. It is a form of art that combines "the power of giving to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality" with the "derived notions of 'unreality' (that is, of unlikeness to the Primary World), of freedom from the domination of observed 'fact', in short of the fantastic." ("On Fairy Stories," p. 43-44) The concept of the 'inner consistency of reality' is especially important to Tolkien. This is more difficult to achieve the more unlike the images and the rearrangements of primary material are to the actual arrangements of the Primary World. The value of the new world, created by the author as 'sub-creator,' depends for the greatest part upon the credibility for the reader who enters it.

The admiration of Lode Roose³ in *De Standaard* (05.01.57) goes out precisely to that:

... compositional capacity, that has made this mosaic of imagination into a well-balanced whole,

even so that the overall picture becomes clearer, as more and more parts gather together.... In an ingenious way the author managed to lend the nature of reality to his narrative, although it is built up merely from imaginary elements.

And Jos de Haes,⁴ himself a poet laureate, sighs away on BRT Radio (21.01.58):

How does he manage to keep this unreal atmosphere, with creatures all reacting to their own laws, intact for several hundreds of pages, with a profusion of details and phrases that contribute to pure poetry and psychological delicacy, to gruesome terror and good-hearted wittiness!

Rico Bulthuis⁵ believes:

unconditionally in this non-existent world, as we believe in countries where we have never been. We believe in it because this magic land is our heart, where J.R.R. Tolkien managed to unravel secrets and to evoke emotion in eternal truth. (*Haagse Courant*, 11.04.58)

Han Jonker wonders what he has to admire most:

his unequalled imaginative power, or the genius that the many happenings in this work is ordered logically and naturally so that one forgets that, after all, this is all sheer fancy. Moreover one has to admire the wisdom and knowledge of the human heart and of the human soul, which lie at its root. Only someone who has a profound knowledge of life and world... is able to recreate a familiar reality so poetically as well as so manly and strong. (*Eindhovens Dagblad*, 19.01.57).

Lieven Rens⁶ (*De Nieuwe Gids*, 29.01.66) has a more thoughtful approach:

...Tolkien is a great magician; but a greater writer than he could possibly have brought more relief into this fictitious reality, by making a stricter artistic distinction between matters of major and minor importance.

A Children's Book ?

Less enthusiastic is the reviewer of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (15.03.1958), A. Marja,⁷ who has understood that "to get hold of a magic ring, there is a continuous combination of stratagems, crusades, battles and strange jokes" in this book. His greatest problem is

that with a systematical stubbornness every detail in connection with certain biological functions is repressed. And precisely that area is still filled with the taboos, that are broken down by the great writers, striving for 'completeness', whether their name is Rabelais or Joyce.

And as he has the impression that Tolkien takes delight in the "goriness of wars." A. Marja should like to hear someone from the School of Freud "on the connection between the repression of certain feelings and the aggression released with it!" He thinks that Tolkien in fact speaks for

more than "some thousand pages long cheerfully 'talking about something else!'" When C. Ouboter, one of the organizers of the hobbit-dinner in Rotterdam, confronted Tolkien (on that occasion) with the criticism of Marja on his lack of eroticism, it is said that he answered sneering: "I've got four children!" Yet Marja thinks that Tolkien "has undeniably displayed his great qualities" and "that his work in the future will become a real classic fairy-tale book for young people."

This is of course an element that can be traced back to other critics like Edmund Wilson or Edward Muir. Also for Job in the *Twentsche Courant* (08.02.58) the world of J.R.R. Tolkien is closely

linked with the world of our youth, the world in which everything got a magic glow, by the power of imagination, and where the most common things were wrapped by the veils of mystery.

But that does not make his books exclusively juvenile literature. "It is a work to be read to children on a long winter evening and to enjoy it again yourself. It is the work of a poet." (Job, *Twentsche Courant*, 21.09.57) Other reviewers are more explicit: "Now, this is not a fairy tale for children, but a mighty epic about the battle between good and evil, light and darkness." (P.C., *Volksdagblad*, 21.09.57). "These characters have grown, not only beyond the fairy tale, but also beyond the romances of chivalry." (Rens, *De Tijd*, 01.12.56) According to Lieven Rens the book can easily be read by children, because of the lack of eroticism and the optimistic belief that it inspires. "Yet the complete enjoyment of this so rich and sensitive book will be restricted to adults." (*De Nieuwe Gids*, 29.01.66)

Aad Nuis⁸ in his "Apology for a Mad Book" (*Propria Cures*, 31.01.58) goes more deeply into the relation between children's fantasy and literature. He believes

that even the most 'adult' writer, whose aim it is to give a faithful description of people and human situations, is put to writing by the childlike pleasure to make your own creatures move.

He comes to the conclusion that pure fantasy literature hardly exists without some excuse: juvenile, lesson of life, folklore — Tolkien refused to use these excuses. A lot of people are

the victim of a puritan misunderstanding about the use of reading. It is nice and even useful to live one day without a sense of reality, when you are given the opportunity to do so without danger. Reading Tolkien is as much a waste of time as a holiday; it is an harmless form of escapism, as no ordinary man accidentally can consider it to be the reality.

In Nuis' opinion there are two points where Tolkien approaches children's fancy. More than anything else there is the feeling for order, making all details perfectly tally in and adding to the pleasure of reading. Besides, the book is almost completely sexless and there are "only three women in it that play a rather important role... By way of compen-

sation there is no female character with the powers of evil."

Also Louis Theodoor Lehmann⁹ raises objections against the sexlessness of Tolkien's mythology. He experiences the lack of women in the story as "something very chilly." His criticism on *The Lord of the Rings*, covering other aspects too, is described in two very humorous articles in *Literair Paspoort*: "The occult storybook about Indians" and "A Herodotus for Nephelokokkugia or the professorial *divertissement*" which dates from before the Dutch translation. He calls the "ringstuff... a forced and lifeless invention of an occult brain" and the notion 'evil' rather simple minded. Tolkien is "not very economical with his variety of creatures... when he needs a sensational effect or a *deus ex machina*."

He writes

a kind of epic jargon, that technically has a lot in common with William Morris' 'English without French words,' but only produces the effect of an old-fashioned romantic serial.

He also finds a too clear political tendency in his work.

Lehmann adds a number of personal aversions. He cannot stand the Rohirrim, because they look like "Wag-nerian Teutons." For the rest

the men are too heroic, the elves too noble, the dwarfs too tough, the ents too hazy and the hobbits too decent.... Moreover all five have, along with their nobleness and altruism, a sinister and suspicious delight in the massacre of as many orcs as possible.

And it is precisely these orcs that he finds "quite sympathetic compared to their comic book hero-like slaughterers."

And yet "Tolkien has something of the genius that makes landscapes alive." The history of the diverging population is "woven into the story in a very fascinating and 'real' way." The book is "in spite of many things often extremely fascinating" and Lehmann's conclusion is: "anyway I am beginning to feel at home there and I will probably not sell the book second-hand."

The Surprise

For many critics *In de Ban van de Ring* is a complete surprise. They are delighted "that in a time, when so much reading appears in the shops, a book is published that is so surprisingly new and original." (WHB, *Tijd en Taak*, 16.11.57)

Now that extreme simplification and defacing of all romanticism seems to be the command of this literary hour, we face here a powerful imaginative concept, in which we are no longer allowed to take interest, but that moves us with its authenticity and profound meaning.... How many people will be receptive to this mighty advancing epic, this marvel of imagination, that nevertheless stands so near

to human existence?" (*De Nieuwe Limburger*, 31.12.57)

According to P. in *De Maasbode* (17.11.56) Tolkien gives the art of novel-writing an unexpected yet useful impulse. The art of the romancer seemed worn-out. The storytellers finished, the romanticists dried up, the psychologists sicked out. And then suddenly appears a professor from Oxford, going back to the pure fantasy, back to the elemental human experience, for a long time not supposed to be fascinating by problem browsers.

It is hard to believe

that such a thing could be achieved in our wicked twentieth century, that so much brilliant open-mindedness could be attached to such a vision without precedent, so much fantastic imaginative power to such fascinating narrative skill." (Fenix, 't *Pallietkerke*, 19.12.57)

Willem Wagener¹⁰ is less enthusiastic in the *Rotterdamse Nieuwsblad* of 19 July 1958. His opinion is that Tolkien had produced his work "with the angelic patience and the sense of artistic values of someone who copies the Cologne cathedral with matchboxes at one thirtieth of the full size." And in itself it was not such a problem for him. "But Tolkien has nowhere in his epic distinguished himself by sublime speech. Nor did he succeed to cover everything he wrote with a magic glow."

This point of view puts him in a solitary position. "Most amazing is Tolkien's use of words; that in him created names becomes a palette of his imagination," says M. Coutinho in *Vrij Nederland* (01.03.58). Boswinkel is struck (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 8.12.56) by Tolkien's diversified style which, in accordance with every new theme, assumes different characteristics:

he is cheerful when we're with the Hobbits, sonorous and high in the mouth of the Elves, concise and fast in adventure, poetically and colorful in descriptions of nature — a varied sampling of language, arranged by a superior intelligent man.

And Han Jonker (*Eindhovens Dagblad*, 11.01.58) talks about

the unequalled way in which this epic is told, his superb language and imagery, showing deep erudition, his mild humor and poetical touch, his knowledge of nature and military strategy, his great tension, mounting from page to page to the climax, his charming dialogues and mythical dreamlike states.

This view on Tolkien's style and language cannot be separated from the translation by Max Schuchart. In nearly every review it is glorified. They praise Schuchart's linguistic interpretations as well as his poetical feeling. It cannot be called a big surprise when Schuchart in 1959 was rewarded with the Martinus Nijhoff Prize for the best trans-

lation. Schuchart worked well over a year and a half at the translation and corresponded with Tolkien about the nomenclature. First the editor had the intention of "dutchifying" all the names. Tolkien was of course against this, but finally made a compromise with Schuchart: for the English names they tried to find a good Dutch equivalent. The correspondence with Schuchart was the base of a "Guide to the names in *The Lord of the Rings*" that Tolkien wrote after the poor Swedish translation by Åke Ohlmarks.

Schuchart made his translation while he was reading the book, as he thought it impossible to read the whole book in advance, in view of the short time reserved for the first part. The jury of the Nijhoff Award had a special mention for the translation of the poems. Schuchart was very pleased with this, having been a poet himself for some time, and also because the translation of Tolkien's poetry had given him a difficult time.

A Religious Book ?

Jan Klein (*Idil*, 11.57) finds in Tolkien's poetry a religious dimension: "Under the blanket of these strange verses shines vividly a spiritual, yes, religious reality, though of course God is never mentioned."

This touches on an important point of discussion in Tolkien's work. Some people are surprised by the lack of an explicit concept of God in the mythology. Tolkien wrote about this to the Jesuit Robert Murray:

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (*Letters*, n° 142)

P.A. Hekstra looks at the book from a Calvinistic point of view. He sees it as a work on redemption by means of grace. He searches for Biblical symbolism in parallels and finds three of them for the taking.

The first is that the world is doomed by human guilt, the second that mankind must and can be saved, the third that in this context good and evil are absolute opposites.

Hekstra is also tempted into searching for

more carefully hidden symbols. I think for example of the date of the day of deliverance, 25th March. Has it something to do with Annunciation Day? And what prospect of paradise can be opened for us, what promise of the new earth, when we read that after the final battle the name of Mirkwood, the great twilight-wood, that came more and more into the power of destruction, is changed into Greenwood the Great. A very strong argument for a reference to Christian ideas is the fact, that the return of the rightful king is looked forward to with

a Messianic desire. (*Ruimte*, 01.58)

According to Hekstra, Tolkien has bypassed the problem of the absence of God (which wasn't easy for him as a Roman-Catholic) by showing the human side of the work of salvation. (*Calvinistisch Jongelingsblad*, 05.12.1958)

A lot of people experience some sort of religious feeling. Ton Neelissen testifies in *Haarlems Dagblad* (13.07.57): "Three visitors of a Haarlem bookshop declared, independent from each other, to the salesman that *In de Ban van de Ring* reflected their belief. They were members of three different religious communities."

Comparisons

Not a single critic succeeded in connecting Tolkien with fantasy literature. This is not illogical, as the genre was not so popular as it is today, and works of fantasy were hardly translated in Dutch. Only G.H.M. van Huet refers to Tolkien's friends Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis, and Lehmann notices a similarity in style with William Morris. Usually *The Lord of the Rings* is called an epic and people love to compare it with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Grail-stories*, *Don Quixote*, the *Nibelungen* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

But also a bit of *The Canterbury Tales* and something of the masonic solemnity of *The Magic Flute*, is all in it. One moment Van Schendel could have written certain passages, for here too ordinary words can say more than an artistic combination of words ever could have done. The other moment however it is as if Jeroen Bosch in person exchanged the paintbrush for the pen and with it recorded visions, in which the fear took shape in the most incredible and yet at once sizeable creatures. But suddenly it is again as if Eichendorff and Tieck are speaking, and this really is not only because Tolkien in a too romantic way interrupts his story with songs time and again. (Johan Winkler¹, *Het Parool*, 02.02.57)

K.J. Hahn¹² started from a strong prejudice, "an old and well-tested distrust" against modern fairy tales. He admits that he was wrong this time.

Tolkien indeed succeeded in writing, in the style of the old sagas, a modern, exciting and gripping epic, that I would not so easily compare with the *Iliad*, the *Eddas*, the *Song of the Nibelungs* and similar works of world literature, but that in the grand manner and the homogeneity in conception, surpasses everything that has ever been undertaken in this vein by historical experts and neo-romantic poets.... what his really rich and indefatigable fantasy makes out of this material [from old epics and sagas], is not a composition for a seminar, but a fascinating and, through his unique and enigmatic character, confusing work. (*De Linie*, 17.11.56)

P.C., who after reading the first part claimed to have tasted something of all the works already cited (*Volksdagblad*,

01.02.58), went after the third part in search of a kind of proto-mythology:

The secret of its appeal lies probably in this, that it touches the secret, no more suspected, strings in the mind of the Nordic man. The long buried subconsciousness of the old 'Middle-earth' is uncovered here; in it are united, so to speak, all the traditions of our peoples and the age-old allegories about the struggle between good and evil, that recall to mind the sound of old swords as well as the plucking of the strings in secret woods." (*Volksdagblad*, 01.02.58)

M. Coutinho (*Vrij Nederland*, 01.03.58) sees no point in the search for comparisons and rules out the possibility of classification:

It could be called fairy tale, saga, myth. It is all this rolled into one and still different. It is philosophy, humor, irony, story and geography. It is threatening, gentle, adventurous, oppressing and liberating. But above all it is amazingly clever and original.

Interpretations

Several critics explicitly put forward the question about the deeper meaning behind this story. The magazine *Dux* (03.57) touches upon a very important aspect of Tolkien's original intention: "The great value of this book is that it fills an important need of this time, the absence of a real, satisfying fantasy world." From his youth up, Tolkien indeed wanted to create his own mythology, which he could dedicate to his own country, England.

A lot of people search for an allegorical interpretation. The three main tendencies that reappear again and again, like in the other countries, are: "Is the bad Sauron Hitler? Is he Stalin? Is he man who plays an all too dangerous game with atomic power?" (Johan Winkler, *Het Parool*, 02.02.57)

According to *De Tijd* (27.07.57) there are no hints at actual situations, but Tolkien was inspired by:

the tragedy of a very civilized human race, living under the doom of menace. Tolkien saw through it, and so could look upon it and describe it from a viewpoint, rising above it. He could experience the relativity, but he could also see the hopeful outcome.

Tolkien's world is

with all his menace more pure and wide than ours, because the puzzling inessentials have made room for simpler and more sincere situations.

Willem van de Pas is even more straightforward in *Het Centrum* (19.12.57).

Tolkien's book is of all times, dealing not with the defects of one period or another, but with the powerful theme that keeps the world under tension ever since the sin of Adam. And in this light

all of his figures become personifications of the good and bad elements, that play a part in this 'tragedy of tragedies.'

The reviewer of *Hier Rotterdam* (02.05.58) thinks that we do Tolkien wrong by pretending that his book is an attack on fascism, national-socialism and things like that.

Tolkien does not fight against symptoms, but against the attraction of Evil, against the explaining-away, the endurance of Evil, against the slumber under the intoxication of the Poison that spiritually threatens the world.

In *De Bazuin* (05.09.59) it is suggested that "in that time there were certain manifestations of Sauron, that inspired Tolkien to this creation" and that it makes the trilogy "in addition to a genial conception a magnificent manifest of hope and trust."

It is obvious that an author is influenced by what happens around him. That does not mean that he has to refer to it explicitly. That is also the opinion of Lieven Rens in *De Nieuwe Gids* (29.01.66), who thinks that all references (if any), are very subtle and that the key is missing:

Deliberately any symbolic meaning is so overgrown with pure imagination, that every thread that one may find, is immediately cut with a laugh, and that every spot that the searching reason seems to discover flies away as a mocking wisp-o'-the-wisp. Till that reason gives up and voluntarily experiences all capricious of Tolkien's fantasy, and gets under the spell.... All the depth that can be found, is owed to a supreme imagination; owed to the fact that it is impossible to create a world, without there being a lot in it, that is not surmised on the surface."

Several reviewers consider the interpretations as less important. "Such books are often not so thought-provoking as they seem; it is probably not difficult to get more out of it, than Tolkien has meant." (Paul de Casparis, *De Telegraaf*, 17.01.57) "He only writes a powerful story, from which anyone can draw what he himself wants." (Han Jonker, *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 19.01.57) "A lot of interpretations are possible, but of no importance for the artistic meaning of this work, that as a production of imagination is unique in modern literature." (Jos de Haes, *BRT*, 24.09.57)

Some people recognize "the struggle of mankind on his way to the realization of the truly good" (Wse, *Oost-Brabant* 20.12.56) and see how the small man "owing to the circumstances may grow to an often frightened and just so a really great hero." (Boswinkel, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 08.12.56) Similar views are developed in *Katholiek Digest*, *De Bazuin*, *De Nieuwe Gids*, *De Bussumse*, and *Courant en De Twentse Courant*.

K.J. Hahn concludes in *De Linie* (17.11.56):

There is no clear idea behind the story, but as a

whole it is a powerful and fascinating symbol for the life of mankind; the existential conflict in the human heart is projected to the outside in a great epic saga, where the motives become symbols and the events become memories, indications and warnings. That's why modern man will recognize himself in this happening, but in a conciliatory, not an agonizing way.

According to Ton Neelissen in *Haarlems Dagblad* (13.07.57) the reader himself is the key:

Someone who's asking for a psychic inflation can try to graft 'The Lord of the Rings' onto an analyzable ideology, onto manuscripts of the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-Gita* up to those of Sartre, onto sagas, myths and fairy-tales of all times from all parts of the world, but in the end he will have to admit that *The Lord of the Rings* is only true, because he has read it. The reader is the 'missing link' between this book and the world and it is only true for him. He is the only key to this work, and no-one else. The book is true for everyone individually. In him it starts and ends. And who is able to analyze his own beginning and end? The reader too has his own journey. And we are the fellowship."

Tolkien was not happy himself with all those diverse interpretations and reacts to them first in letters, and later in the new introduction to the American paperback edition. He states very clearly that the book has no inner meaning nor message:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations... I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and the experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.

He admits that a writer cannot remain unaffected by his experiences:

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.

Tolkien's prime motive

was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times even excite them or deeply move them. (*Foreword*, 1966)

When *In de Ban van de Ring* was published in 1957 and 1958 no one knew the author. Neither was it the work one expected from an Oxford professor. Yet ninety-five percent of the reviews were extremely positive. The greater part of the reviewers was impressed. When we, thirty years later, read what they have written, we see that most of them, despite their wide reading, are not able to place

the work in a literary context. This has probably a lot to do with the difference between "novel" and "romance." *In de Ban van de Ring* belongs to the latter genre, which was not very popular at that time.

It is also striking that they emphasize different things, and not everyone is touched by the same aspects. Still a lot of elements arise, that later will be much repeated subjects of dissertations and articles: the role of the women, Tolkien's view on fascism, the religious undercurrent, the relation to older myths and sagas....

The Dutch reviewers had the right impression of the impact the work could have, although it did not seem to come to that in the beginning. Opposed to the enthusiastic press reactions stood a weak sale. It took many years before the 3000 copies of the first printing sold out. The reason was the same as in England and America: the books were too expensive. (fl. 12,50 for each part). Only in 1965 *In de Ban van de Ring* got a second printing: as three parts in the popular paperback-series Prisma-books, and in a one-piece, expensive, thin-paper edition. Reviews were very scarce then, but the sales were incredible. In twenty-five years time *In de Ban van de Ring* received more than thirty reprints, which represents sales of more than one million copies.

Other Books

In 1960 a translation of *The Hobbit* was published in the same Prisma-series. It may seem hard to believe, but after a long search I found two very small reviews, of six lines each. But it was also very cheap, and at the end of the book a part of *The Lord of the Rings* was included, as a kind of appetizer.

From time to time an article on Tolkien appeared. So Herman Servotte¹⁵ published a review of *Tree and Leaf* in *Standaard der Letteren*. And in 1971 three of Tolkien's stories were published in the Prisma-series. It was a jubilee-edition, as it was n° 1500 in this paperback-series. Again there were only a few reviews, some of which came years later, as it was reprinted several times. Two of them were very negative, because the reviewers expected a new *Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. Other reviews were quite positive. Also a translation of *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* only received two reviews, but they were both very positive.

The strangest thing, however, is that Tolkien's death was hardly mentioned in the press. The German critic Willy Haas, who died a day later, got more attention. In Belgium *Het Handelsblad* and *The Volksgazet* printed a short note from the Reuters press bureau, and in *Dietsche Warande en Belfort* a poem was published. But the magazine *Spectator* devoted more than a page to him. We are given a very good survey of the reactions to Tolkien's work, the positive as well as the negative. His last sentence is: "If you have read till the end of this article, you will probably know that just now has passed away the greatest, if not the most controversial, writer of all time." In the Netherlands Tolkien's death was frontpage news for the

Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant. Peter van Eeten called Tolkien "one of the greatest story-tellers of our time" and the "equal of Cervantes." Reading Tolkien is "to get another world, a bit like our earth but, in spite of the evil, more splendid and pure than the one in which we live." Also *De Tijd* published an obituary, in which Tolkien is called a "unique master-teller." He describes in short the cult in America, and especially the hippies. "For lovers of Tolkien's work, the death of the author doesn't change anything; they can reread the books, as they were intending to." (Urias Nooteboom, *De Tijd*, 04-09-1973). All this is in deep contrast with the attention Tolkien got in the late fifties.

The Silmarillion

From 1977 on Tolkien received more attention, due to the Bakshi film and the publication of *The Silmarillion*, the biography and the *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Several reviews were nothing more than reworked press mailings, with sometimes very silly mistakes and very trivial comments like "The *Silmarillion* completes Tolkien's own legend" (*De Standaard*, 17-09-1977) and "Reading Tolkien surely is not easy, but for those who are able to immerse themselves into these stories, they are valuable reading" (*Lektuurgids*, April 1979).

On the whole the reviews of *The Silmarillion* were rather negative. Jacob Loosjes heads his review "Disappointing understandable but not sensible." He finds it "a breathtaking book" and is mostly amused by all the soreheaded criticism that appeared in the British press. (*Haarlems Dagblad*, 28-10-1978) J. Dautzenberg says that Tolkien is both praised and abused erroneously.

He is an average writer whose power lies not in the telling of a tale (the Ring is sometimes utterly boring) but in the making up of a more or less consistent fantasy-world, where elements of existing mythologies are recognizable, but that still is a whole own creation, and even a rather impressive one. (*De Volkskrant*, 25-11-1978)

In the same vein writes Jan Van der Vegt:

The Silmarillion stories suffer from a surplus of information about all these elvish people and their entanglements, with all those strange elvish names.... Tolkien misses the ability of a truly great writer: to put in a story a number of characters with a clear personality, against or next to each other.

He may be right in this, especially in connection with *The Silmarillion*, but I sometimes wonder how those critics read their books. According to Van der Vegt, there is only one love-story in Tolkien's work, the story of Beren and Lúthien "who manage to snatch away one of the Silmarils from Morgoth, whereafter Beren becomes immortal."

Anyway at the end he admits that Tolkien has done a unique thing — he has:

constructed his own mythology, and from it he has derived a series of sagas, heroic and adventure-

stories, and all that in such an astonishing completeness as is only possible in a collective, anonymous tradition of centuries! (*De Nieuwe Linie*, 22-08-1979)

Wim Zaai¹⁴ points out that Tolkien tried to reconcile his own mythology with his Catholic religion.

As a whole *The Silmarillion* is crumbly and not half so convincing as *The Lord of the Rings*, but some of the many short pieces are sublime and belong to the finest things that Tolkien has made.... such beautiful chapters. Pieces, that would take centuries for an anonymous mankind to make. (*Elseviers Magazine*, 05-11-1977)

Not so kind is Martin Koomen. He says that *The Silmarillion* proves that it is impossible to create a mythology, consciously and on paper. It is not a literary genre. For him *The Silmarillion* is "an uncoordinated collection of bombastic sounding texts, that lack both head and tail as well as sense and meaning. Against a great number of exotic sounding names is a minimum of action. Those who derive pleasure from it should try the phone book of Lahore." (*Vrij Nederland*, Bijvoegsel n° 34, 1978)

But the most terrible review was written by Maarten 't Hart¹⁵: "An unreadable jewel."

Even the most hardened Tolkien-fan will be disappointed after some twenty pages.... Dialogue in this book is as scarce as a purple heron in a Dutch polder; nothing disturbs the heavy progress of this ponderous prose about always new gods.... Hobbits and Ents are lacking in this work, as are exciting stories." (*Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, 21-10-1977)

He is also worried about the first print of 140,000 copies (he seemed not to know that Allen & Unwin had to print an awful lot more to meet the needs of the bookshops): "All relations are distorted when Tolkien's works are elevated to revelations." And then he wonders if Tolkien didn't commit plagiarism. He compares Frodo and Sam to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza and Pickwick and Sam Weller, and states the problem of the good and the bad guys, and Tolkien's tendency to racism. These are not highly original ideas, but they are strange for a reviewer who used to recommend Tolkien's books to his friends.

Sus van Elzen also belongs to the group of people, who used to adore Tolkien, but changed their ideas when Tolkien became popular. In September 1980 he wrote a very critical article on Tolkien, seven pages long in *Knack* (03-09-1980). He makes a rather ironical abstract of the biography, and then discusses the Tolkien books, usually in a combination of nice and bad things. *The Silmarillion* is not a real mythology, because it is "not incoherent enough" and because the stories are "too interesting and, especially, too well written." A bit further on we read that the mythology is "very badly written, but that was not

Tolkien's fault." Van Elzen cannot believe that Tolkien did not know that his mythology was fake and that he couldn't write, as "it was his job to know such things and he knew his job." He supposes that there is a tragic reason why Tolkien did not finish *The Silmarillion*: "the idea that he then would be obliged to publish it, and that so his puzzle, his own-made world, the work of his youth would be devaluated."

He writes similar things about *The Lord of the Rings*.

As Tolkien was a Catholic, level-headed and right-minded person, it became a kind of epic of that right-mindedness. It is a book... where nothing is questioned... that makes no sense at all.... From the Ring-trilogy you can judge what right-minded people are against, when they stop and think for a moment: against stupid demolition of nature, against barbaric industrialization, against murder and manslaughter, tyranny and wild violence. And especially against everything that could get their right-mindedness in difficulty. Like sex. Because sex would have caused problems.

And yet it is a great book... because it is the book every small boy dreams of ... because it moves all boundaries of the original adventure story to its outer limits.

He proposes to give this children's book of children's books back to the children.

The last book to be translated into Dutch was *Unfinished Tales*. The reviews were not really bad, but again they were few. And for expensive hardbacks reviews are a necessity. These days only *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are reprinted regularly. *The Silmarillion* is still on the market, but only in the 1988 edition. The two Tolkien exhibitions, in Antwerp and The Hague, were very successful, but the Dutch editor Het Spectrum was not very interested. And yet this time, the press showed a lot of enthusiasm for Tolkien's birthday. The Antwerp exhibition in Belgium was featured three times on television, eight times on the radio, and got twenty-three reviews in magazines and newspapers, five of which were full-page articles. Middle-earth is quite alive in the Lowlands.

Notes

1. Guus Söttemann (1920-) would later become Professor in Dutch Literature at the University of Utrecht.
2. Rijn Blijstra (1901-1975) was head of the cultural redaction of *Het Vrije Volk*. He wrote several psychological novels and art-historical surveys, and received some awards.
3. Lode Rooze (1920-1991) would become Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at the Universities of Antwerp and Louvain, and President of the Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature.
4. Jos de Haes (1920-1974) received the (Belgian) National Prize for Poetry in 1965, and many other awards.
5. Rico Bulthuis (1911-) (Netherlands) wrote many fairy-tales and several novels.
6. Lieven Rens (1925-1983) (Belgium) Poet and Specialist in Renaissance Drama. Professor at the University of Antwerp.

7. A. Masrja (1917-1964) was a protestant poet and writer of short stories. Well known for his radical views on literature.
8. Aad Nuis (1933-) (Netherlands) is a Professor of Modern Dutch Literature at the University of Leiden. He wrote poetry and essays, and is now a member of the Dutch Parliament.
9. Louis Theodoor Lehmann (1920-) (Netherlands) Poet.
10. Willem Wagener (1901-1968) (Netherlands) Wrote several novels and was a professional journalist at the *Rotterdam Nieuwsblad*.
11. Johan Winkler (1898-) (Netherlands) was a very important journalist. He was adjunct-editor of *Het Parool* and editor-in-chief of *Vrij Nederland*.
12. Karl Josef Hahn (1912-) (Netherlands) Specialist in German Literature.
13. Herman Servotte (1929-) is Professor of English Literature at the University of Louvain.
14. Wim Zaal (1935-) is an important journalist, who works for many magazines. He also published poetry.
15. Maarten 't Hart (1944-) Well known Dutch novelist, who received several awards.

A complete list of articles in Dutch magazines and newspapers will be published in 1993 by Unquendor.

Tolkien Tributes (continued from page 31)

The most revealing piece of writing about J.R.R. Tolkien's deep commitment to Middle-earth is, without question, his own "Leaf By Niggle". Tolkien disabused his readers regarding any allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*, but an open-hearted reading of "Leaf by Niggle" with Tolkien's own artistic creations and frustrations in mind allows for an almost allegorical interpretation. There is no fictional work by Tolkien that affects me more profoundly than "Leaf By Niggle", because within the narrative is Ronald Tolkien's life blood, the artist who will never be able to finish what he started. Make no mistake, Niggle is Tolkien.

There have been many wonderful essays written about Tolkien's linguistic creations, but, again, the most important is without doubt a product of his own pen. A careful reading of "The Notion Club Papers" in the latest volume of *The History of Middle-earth series, Sauron Defeated*, will do more to enhance the reader's understanding as to what Tolkien felt about language and why he created languages and the accompanying narratives, than any other one exercise. Each of the characters in the story is easily identified with the several members of the Inklings (CRT demonstrates that clearly in his commentary, I believe), but the carefully orchestrated discussions on language are at the heart of the matter. In my opinion, language has ever been at the heart of the entire matter from the very beginning, long before Bilbo was the Hobbit. Middle-earth is the languages; the languages are Middle-earth.

Finally, where does one end? It is hard to say. As long as there are those who find in Tolkien's writings a kindred spirit, there will be Tolkien Societies, Mythopoeic Societies, *Mythlore*, *Mallorn*, and all of the others. The most important product of my reading of Tolkien has been the friendship of men and women who share a love for a fabricated world, a world that has become more substantial as we have learned to love each other because of our love for that world's maker. J.R.R. Tolkien would be happy with that.