Tolkien and Modernity

Review of HONEGGER, Thomas, and WEINREICH, Frank (eds.) (2006). *Tolkien and Modernity* Vols. I-II. Zurich and Berne: Walking Tree Publishers

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The editors of this collection of essays state in their introduction that the project "grew out of the wish to further the exploration of Tolkien as a 'contemporary writer', i.e. an author whose literary creations can be seen as a response to the challenges of the modern world." The approach is not new – both Tom Shippey (*J.R.R Tolkien: Author of the Century*) and Brian Rosebury (*Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*) have previously written significant studies on the subject – but the essays contained in these two volumes show that there is still much to be said about Tolkien's relationship to his own times, and many of them offer substantial advances in the field.

The treatments to the theme vary greatly, ranging from the perspective of comparative literature, as in Thomas Honegger's analysis ("The Passing of the Elves and the Arrival of Modernity: Tolkien's Mythical Method") of Tolkien's particular version of a well-known stylistic feature of high Modernism, to philosophical issues present in Tolkien's writings that are seen to be inherently modern, perhaps best expressed in Frank Weinreich's succinct "Brief Considerations on Determinism in Reality and Fiction".

One interesting perspective is derived from Tolkien's own theory of fairy-tales, as explained in his 1937 essay "On Fairy-Stories" (which has come to be considered a cornerstone in the growing corpus of research conducted in the field of fantasy literature). Such an approach is taken by Jessica Burke and Antony Burdge, in their article "The Maker's Will … fulfilled?". Here, Burke and Burdge examine how the process of "sub-creation" (a term coined by Tolkien to express his underlying assumption that "authentic" fairy story, as he understands the term, articulates a transcendent contact between a higher reality and the earthly reality) colours his works throughout. In comparing Tolkien's literary efforts with other modern sub-creative works, they reach the somewhat hasty conclusion that modern man lacks creative powers. In spite of such sweeping affirmations, the article not only succeeds in explaining Tolkien's creative impulse with reference to his own theoretical framework, it also becomes highly revelatory of the shortcomings of much post-Tolkienian fantasy that centres more on delivering formulaic entertainment than on a conscious aesthetic attempt to establish a profound relationship between the text and our own reality through the art of fairy-story.

Anna Vaninskaya's "Tolkien: A Man of his Time?" provides a valuable overview of Tolkien's historical moment. While some of the analogues have been previously discussed more persuasively and in greater detail, such as Tolkien's place in the fantasy tradition of Rider Haggard, G.K. Chesterton, and William Morris, or in the romantic critique of industrial society, Vaninskaya manages to convincingly put the author in the ground-breaking context of late-Victorian

historical reconstructions, and explains in a clear way the relationship between Tolkien's literature and the general framework of nationalist ideas that pervaded in England during the interwar years. These are welcome additions which make the article worth reading.

Bertrand Alliot's essay "J.R.R. Tolkien: A Simplicity Between the 'Truly Earthly' and the 'Absolutely Modern'" claims that Tolkien strove to recover in his literature a lost, pre-modern simplicity, especially by means of extensive portrayal of the hobbits. He did this not because of an escapist nostalgia, Alliot argues, but in order to integrate it in the modern world, and he lands somewhere between the two poles. Alliot introduces several interesting perspectives, such as the idea that an acceptance of the loss of the 'truly earthy' is central to many characters, and a new, nuanced focus on Tolkien's views on the concept of 'simplicity'.

The most ambitious essay in the two volumes is without doubt Martin Simonson's "An Introduction to the Dynamics of the Intertraditional Dialogue in *The Lord of the Rings*: Aragorn's Heroic Evolution". Here, Simonson sets out to explore the different stages in Aragorn's evolution as a character with reference to how he internalises the different narrative traditions he encounters on the road to Minas Tirith. The analysis as such becomes a statement on how Tolkien's approach to genre interaction in his most well-known work differs from modernist expressions of what Northrop Frye, in his seminal work "Anatomy of Criticism", termed "ironic myth". Simonson believes that his approach will clear the way for several advances in criticism on Tolkien's work, namely 1) to provide a new approach to several stylistic contradictions in *The Lord of the Rings*; 2) to produce relevant criticism concerning genre in the tale (an issue which has been marked by contradictory opinions so far); 3) to find a space for a fruitful interaction between source-hunting studies, on the one hand, and the revelation of the story's contemporaneous character, on the other; and 4) to establish a meaningful relationship between Tolkien's work and modernism. As the title suggests, the article offers only an introduction to the subject, but the conclusions laid out by Simonson are convincing and it will be interesting to read his upcoming full-length study on the issue to get a broader picture of the genre interaction embodied by other characters and episodes.

Taken together, the two volumes of *Tolkien and Modernity* present the reader with the largest collection of essays on the historical context both for the writing of Tolkien's work that has been published so far. While some essay may seem a bit strained, others are fresh and brilliant, and the books furnish the scholar as well as the general reader with a wide range of perspectives that outline Tolkien's general position in the twentieth century and open up many intriguing new lines of inquiry.