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Tolkien Among the Moderns (2015), ed. by Ralph C. Wood

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Tolkien Among the Moderns, ed. by Ralph C. Wood. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015. 310 pp. \$32.00 (trade paperback). ISBN 9780268019730. [Also available in ebook format.]

The majority of Ralph Wood's five-page introduction is spent summarizing the essays in the collection. His brief editorial frame presents a number of claims: that Tolkien is "neither an escapist nor an antiquarian writer"; that his work centers on "a profound moral and religious vision"; and that Tolkien's engagement with "major literary figures and philosophical movements of our time" goes "largely unnoticed" (1). However, Wood's introduction overlooks the substantial body of scholarship written during the past thirty years on how Tolkien's legendarium engages with modernism, such as essays by A. R. Bossert, Michael Charlesworth, Patrick Curry, Dimitra Fimi, Verlyn Flieger, Judy Ford and Robin Reid, Margaret Hiley, Aaron Isaac Jackson, Patchen Mortimer, Joanny Moulin, Theresa Freda Nicolay, Martin Simonson, and, most significantly, the two-volume edition on *Tolkien and Modernity* edited by Frank Weinreich and Thomas Honegger. The failure to engage with the rich scholarship on this topic is both a missed opportunity and one of the major flaws of this collection.

The other major flaw, both in Wood's introduction and in most essays in the collection, is the failure to provide a working definition of the "moderns" beyond a chronological identification. Wood explains that the collection, by a multi-disciplinary group of scholars, a number of whom are publishing their first essay on Tolkien, originated in a seminar at Baylor University. The group had conversations about how Tolkien's work can be a guide for morality and religion in the twenty-first century which led to the consensus that his work is "as much modern as it is classical," in which "classical" was defined as the "seven classical virtues" (5). The lack of a well-defined subject produces an essay collection lacking in coherence and structure.

The two strongest essays that engage with Tolkien scholarship relevant to their topics are Phillip J. Donnelly's "A Portrayal of the Poet as an Old Hobbit: Engaging Modernist Aesthetic Ontology in *The Fellowship of the Ring*" and Dominic Manganiello's "Pouring New Wine into Old Bottles: Tolkien, Joyce, and the Modern Epic." Donnelly's essay engages with the relevant Tolkien scholarship on modernism but does not acknowledge Carl Phelpstead's work on the sage poetics of Tolkien's embedded verse. Donnelly focuses on an analysis of "aesthetic ontology," an ambiguous phrase which he explains could mean either how "an account of reality" is implied by a specific text or by a specific aesthetic theory (132). Donnelly builds on Shippey's comparative argument about Tolkien and James Joyce to argue that Tolkien's most striking response to the aesthetic theory of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* is Bilbo's poetry which is embedded in

Fellowship and framed in ways that criticize twentieth-century ideas about aesthetics and reality.

Manganiello's essay compares *The Lord of the Rings* and *Ulysses*, arguing they might be the most significant novels of the last century and citing Shippey to show that serious consideration of them was considered an "incongruous, even 'blasphemous' proposition" by some critics for years, an attitude which has begun to shift in the twenty-first century (171). Manganiello engages with scholarship on Joyce and Tolkien, including his own essays, and argues that they were alike in adapting elements of the epic into the genre of the novel while differing strikingly in their portrayals of artists' functions in their created universes. While the artist in Joyce's "decentered universe" exists in a world in which there is no God, the artist in Tolkien's universe exists in one that "retains discernible traces of a divine signature" (172). Manganiello concludes that Tolkien's fiction engages with the social and political events of the twentieth century without conforming either to the modernist aesthetic of the time or to the ironic stance Joyce adopted, resulting in their two very different heroes, Stephen Daedalus and Frodo Baggins.

Four essays by Moore, Tadie, Freeh, and Candler consider topics relating to modernity or to the modern world but engage in a more limited way with relevant Tolkien scholarship. Scott H. Moore's essay, "The Consolations of Fantasy: J. R. R. Tolkien and Iris Murdoch," is a strong analysis of Iris Murdoch's enjoyment of Tolkien's fiction, but does not move much beyond Tolkien's influence on Murdoch's fiction and philosophy. Moore highlights the apparent contradiction of Murdoch's criticism of fantasy with her deep appreciation of Tolkien's work and supports his argument with brief biographical information, but the majority of evidence involves the textual analysis of Murdoch's philosophy and fiction, focusing specifically on differences in terminology (*imagination* as opposed to *fantasy*), and the concept of consolation. He concludes that Murdoch "[employs] Tolkien's category of eucatastrophe, albeit in atheist dress" (211). Although Murdoch is a modern writer, Moore seems most interested in considering the implications of what he characterizes as his "seemingly outrageous" claim concerning Murdoch's atheism and Tolkien's influence on her work rather than on a larger argument about Tolkien and modernism (211). However, one of the most valuable aspects of the essay is how Moore's work hints at the complexity of reader reception of Tolkien's work in ways that I have not seen in scholarship.

Joseph Tadie considers how Tolkien's legendarium can be seen in dialogue with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, a twentieth-century Lithuanian Jewish Francophone philosopher. Levinas fought in the French army during World War II, was taken prisoner and sent to a labor camp, and his family in Lithuania was

murdered by the Nazis.¹ In “‘That the World Not be Usurped’: Emmanuel Levinas and J.R.R. Tolkien on Serving the Other as Release from Bondage,” Tadie explains that his main purpose is justifying the study of Tolkien’s work as “a topic of serious academic consideration in the contemporary university” through the method of considering relationships between his work and “important non-Christian thinkers,” such as Levinas (219). The essay does an excellent job of identifying key linguistic and thematic elements that appear in both authors’ work without making specific source or influence claims by relying on textual analysis and the relevant scholarship on Levinas. Tadie focuses primarily on comparing the ideas of the two writers as being similar challenges to modernity. While he is the first to consider Tolkien and Levinas, his essay would have benefitted from some consideration of the Tolkien scholarship on alterity and his handling of the Other (Chance, Gehl, Shippey, and Sinex). While Tadie evaluates two publications by Chance in his first endnote as “exemplary . . . for engaging Tolkien to [sic] the postmodern context and its concerns,” her publications are not listed in the Bibliography, perhaps in error, and he does not summarize her arguments and or explain how his analysis engages with hers (n. 1, 239).

Helen Lasseter Freeh’s essay, “On Fate, Providence, and Free Will in *The Silmarillion*” (Chapter 2), engages extensively with Tom Shippey’s major argument about Tolkien’s concern with the nature of evil in order to argue that his work responds to the question: “What is the principle of order defining a world in which radical evil and suffering continue to flourish?” (51). Freeh argues that the significance of Tolkien’s work in relation to contemporary life is that it provides an “answer to the despair of materialism and determinism” (52). She concludes by saying that his answer is developed fully only in *The Lord of the Rings* with its human narrator because *The Silmarillion*’s elven narrator is unable to understand the divine plan of Middle-earth (75). Freeh’s essay would have been stronger with some consideration of relevant peer-reviewed articles on the topic of free will,

¹ The biographical information on Levinas is drawn from his entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Bergo). Tadie provides minimal biographical information about Levinas (or Tolkien) in the essay. Tadie refers to Levinas as an “important non-Christian [thinker],” (219) in the introduction although a later brief reference to him as a member of the “Jewish community” occurs when Tadie argues that the two writers avoided “the dialectic characteristic of so many moderns who vacillated between either exaltation in or belittlement of the ego,” an element that he calls “other-than-modern . . . gleaned from their respectively Jewish and Catholic communities” (225). The second published essay on Tolkien and Levinas, in a 2017 collection, discusses his life and the ways his work engaged with Nazi ideology as well as citing Tadie’s first essay on the topic (Dawson).

fate, and providence in *The Silmarillion* (Croft, Fornet-Ponse, Jensen, Whitt). Her close reading and engagement with Shippey's arguments and other relevant Tolkien scholarship supports her reading of the narrative perspective of *The Silmarillion*, but her secondary claim concerning the uniqueness of Tolkien's work in the twentieth century is weaker in part because of the way her introduction slips from "nineteenth and twentieth-century English writers and poets," a limited group, in the first paragraph to "much of twentieth-century literature" in the second paragraph which she then argues identifies contemporary despair but does not offer solutions (51-52). The second category, even with the limiter of "much," is broader than the first and assumes a homogeneity that does not exist in "twentieth-century literature" since it necessarily includes literatures in other languages and from other nations. "Tolkien or Nietzsche: Philology and Nihilism" by Peter M. Candler, Jr. is his second publication on the two authors.² Candler frames his argument by acknowledging that there is no evidence of Tolkien having read Nietzsche's work but speculates that the Inklings must have known about Nietzsche and may have been incidentally influenced by his ideas given that Chesterton was writing about them (95-6). Instead, disclaiming any intention of making an argument about influence, Candler focuses on exploring what he describes as a "kind of allusive affinity" between the two writers based on their common training in philology, distrust of the modern mechanization, and their dislike of "modernity as a philosophical-cultural problem" (96). Arguing the two's interests in narrative and myth in relation to politics and nationalism were similar, Candler concludes that they used that interest for different purposes as shown in their respective heroes, Zarathustra and Frodo. Nietzsche's anti-Christianity and the vision of his work, which was, as Candler notes, identified as one of the Third Reich's ideological foundations differs markedly from Tolkien's anti-imperialist and religious vision. Candler's expertise is primarily on Nietzsche; his essay and bibliography are well supported by relevant scholarship on Nietzsche and on modernity but only two works on Tolkien are referenced. While no other scholar has written on Tolkien and Nietzsche at the time of this writing, given that a significant part of Candler's argument concerns Tolkien's criticism of imperialism and nationalism, engagement with the scholarship using postcolonial approaches to Tolkien's legendarium would have been welcome (Battis, Hiley, Hoiem). In addition, while Tadie's essay also considers Tolkien's

² His first essay is not listed in his bibliography or endnotes: "Frodo or Zarathustra: Beyond Nihilism in Tolkien and Nietzsche" was published in a 2008 Walking Tree collection, *Tolkien's the Lord of the Rings: Sources of Inspiration* (Caldecott and Honegger).

and Levinas's engagement with Nietzsche's ideas, apparently Candler and Tadie were not given the opportunity to read and engage with each other's ideas.

The essays by Walsh and Thomas, although doing interesting comparative analyses, do not present strong arguments about Tolkien and modernism. In "Philosophic Poet: J.R.R. Tolkien's Modern Response to an Ancient Quarrel," Germaine Paulo Walsh analyzes Tolkien's work in the context of Plato's criticism of poetry in the *Republic*. She explains the connection to modernity by claiming that Tolkien's position on human creativity challenges the twentieth century rejection of God and by analyzing Éowyn's characterization which Walsh claims is a surprising engagement with modern feminism. The essay constructs a dialogue between Plato's arguments concerning poetry and Walsh's analysis of Tolkien's ideas about art and virtue in his legendarium. Although I am not knowledgeable about Plato's work, these sections seem the strongest part of the essay, especially Walsh's handling of the complexity and scope of the evidence from Tolkien's legendarium. A weakness in the essay is that there are no explicit connections made to modernism. Walsh develops detailed readings of Éomer and Éowyn, on the differences between wisdom and honor to argue that they reflect Tolkien's critique of a problem in Rohan: a limited focus on honor defined as bravery in battle. This definition is what Tolkien called "the Northern theory of courage," referring to beliefs of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon culture as shown in *Beowulf*, a topic which has been addressed in essays by Mary R. Bowman and Łukasz Neubauer. However, despite Walsh's mention of modern feminism, the essay does not develop that argument or engage with the relevant Tolkien scholarship on Éowyn, which includes specific essays on feminism, gender, and modernity (Benvenuto, Michel, Reid, Smith, Thum, and Wallace), or with Edith Crowe's groundbreaking feminist essay on Tolkien's legendarium in which she argues not that Tolkien is a feminist but that his concerns about power and the powerful female characters, especially in *The Silmarillion*, are similar to those expressed by many feminists.

Michael D. Thomas's "Unlikely Knight, Improbable Heroes: Inverse, Antimodernist Paradigms in Tolkien and Cervantes" seems, upon first glance, an outlier in the collection since he compares Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. It is unclear how Cervantes fits the collection's theme of modernism except in the most technical, post-medieval sense. Thomas compares the authors' two major works and argues that there are important similarities in structural elements (length of text, multiple characters, complex plots, world-building), publication (in multiple volumes), and themes, specifically their handling of the development of virtue which result in both writers "[offering] imaginative readings of their current social milieu that stand at variance with the prevailing ideas of their age" (80-81). He supports his claim by analyzing the improbable heroes, their development of knightly virtues, and the

authors' opposition to the development of war technologies. Thomas presents an interesting and convincing reading of the similarities based on his close reading of the texts, but he has minimal engagement with scholarship on either Cervantes or Tolkien. The essay would be stronger if he had incorporated existing scholarship on Tolkien's unlikely heroes and antimodernist themes (Clark, Flieger, Fornet-Ponse, Goldberg, Persoleo, and Simonson) and on the modern and postmodern readings of Cervantes (Cruz and Johnson, Farrell, Graf, Weber) which would support his interpretation of their work as antimodernist.

Ralph C. Wood's concluding essay, "Tolkien and Postmodernism," argues that Tolkien, while not being a postmodernist, produced work showing concerns that "overlap with those of the postmodernists" (247-8) while nonetheless criticizing aspects of postmodernism. The chapter is a complex one with multiple strengths and weaknesses. In recent years, Tolkien scholars have challenged the stereotype of Tolkien as a medievalist whose work ignores the "modern world" in order to analyze how he, as a modern writer, challenged some of the dominant ideologies of modernism, producing texts that can be identified as postmodern in some respects. Just as Wood's introduction does not engage with the Tolkien scholarship on Tolkien and modernism, so too this chapter does not cite or engage with work on Tolkien and postmodernism, such as Brian Attebery; Chance; Chance and Alfred Siewers, especially Verlyn Flieger's essay, "A Postmodern Medievalist?" in their edited collection; Gergely Nagy, or even Wood's earlier essay, "J.R.R. Tolkien: Postmodern Visionary of Hope." The complex range of definitions of postmodernism and the different approaches in the scholarship mean that the current status on Tolkien and postmodernism has not reached a consensus.

Much of what Wood says about Tolkien's work in relation to modernism is well-supported, specifically the four ways Wood sees Tolkien's work responding to the "errors of modernism" (253) such as Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead." The responses include Tolkien's positive portrayal of a certain type of cultural and linguistic pluralism that is not relativistic; his insistence on "knowledge and truth [being] historically located and grounded"; his criticism of modernity's false universality; and his showing divine action as being "hidden . . . obscure . . . [and] found in small communities of the weak . . . who overcome modern self-aggrandizing individualism," which allow Tolkien's work to "enable Christians to enter the postmodern 'tournament of narratives'" (253).

Wood's analysis of the specifics of Tolkien's textual response are the strongest parts of the essay, but other parts where Wood makes generalized comparative claims about historical periods and religions are weaker because lack of clear definitions of periodization. A common thread in these sections is the superiority of Christianity and Western culture to the "godlessness implicit in the indigenous Nordic cultures, a cosmic vacancy that eerily resembles our late-

modern sense of divine absence and abandonment” (262) that underlay Nazi appropriation of Nordic mythology. Wood argues that Tolkien’s work, drawing on the same mythology, was anti-imperialist because of the central theme of loss.³ Wood’s most sweeping claim is that Tolkien’s work has converted readers from “hegemonic and triumphalist modernism—not to an archaic postmodernism, but to the classically Christian virtues of the hobbits and their friends” (274). These parts of the essay tend toward a binary of good vs. evil and towards an allegorical reading of Tolkien’s work as a Christian text at play in the postmodern world.

Wood’s allegorical over-reading and his claim regarding the conversion of “unaware readers” from “modernism” to “Christianity” does not acknowledge the extent to which different readers can interpret any work of literature as applicable to their lives in different ways. In contrast, Verlyn Flieger’s essay, “But What Did He Really Mean?,” explores reasons for the disparity between how readers from different religious traditions have responded to Tolkien’s work: between the “neo-pagans who see in its elves and hobbits an alternate to the dreary realism of mainstream culture and . . . Christians who find an evangelical message in its imagery of stars and light and bread and sacrifice” (149). Flieger argues the reason for the varied reception is Tolkien’s habit of writing contradictory and ambiguous statements about his intentions in his letters as well as in various drafts of “On Fairy Stories” and *The Lord of the Rings* which allow “the same cherries [to] be picked by both sides to support contending positions” (149). Flieger’s conclusion is that Tolkien’s personal conflicts and contradictions led to his creating “a story whose strength lies in the tension created by deliberately unresolved situations and conflicts” (164).

Overall, Wood’s collection, in failing to provide a working definition of “the moderns” and in failing to engage sufficiently with recent work on Tolkien, offers little to advance the broader field of Tolkien studies. Some essays offer interesting and insightful passages, but the collection fails to hold together.

³ As noted by Pascal Nicklas in a 2003 essay published in a German journal on the Inklings, contemporary white supremacists and neo-Nazis praise the mythic vision they see in Tolkien’s work in ways that are similar to the Nazi politicization of the Germanic mythos that Tolkien criticized in his 1941 letter to his son, Michael. In regard to the question of Tolkien’s handling of the theme of imperialism in his fiction, as opposed to his personal opposition, Elizabeth Massa Hoeim’s 2005 essay, “World Creation as Colonization: British Imperialism in ‘Aldarion and Erendis,’” argues that Tolkien’s criticisms of imperialism are complex because his major characters who are sub-creators are also colonizers.

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