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Tolkien's Intellectual Landscape (2015) by E.L. Risden

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Tolkien's Intellectual Landscape, by E.L. Risden. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015. viii, 232 pp. $35.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9780786498659. [Also available as a Kindle ebook].

Professor Risden, an insightful commentator with an appealingly familiar style, provides in this volume a good deal of new material interlaced with some of his earlier writing. The book consists of a significant Introduction ("The 'Author of the Century' in His Century: Extending the Intellectual Landscape," 1-22) and Afterword ("Mechanized Landscape and Spiritual Landscape—In Retrospect," 200-212), framing eight chapters, each with at least two subsections, making up, in effect, a linked collection of some twenty essays (in the following list, sections I noticed as being revised from Risden's previous publications are indicated in parentheses):

Chapter 1, "Tolkien as Scholar, Narrator, Stylist" (23-66): "On Roots and Branches, with Some Particular Attention to Roots" (23-41); "Narrative Experiments: The Linear versus the Gothic" (41-59) (cf. "Tolkien's Resistance to Linearity," in *Picturing Tolkien: Essays on Peter Jackson's "The Lord of the Rings" Film Trilogy* (2011), 70-83); "The Linguistic Landscape: Mapping with Style" (59-66).

Chapter 2, "Heart of Darkness, Heart of Light: Externalizing the Internalized Quest" (67-83): "Tolkien, Excalibur, the Grail Quest, and the Moderns" (68-80); "Darkness, Light, and the Quest to Destroy the Ring" (80-83).

Chapter 3, "The World of the Text and the Expanding Waste Land" (84-96): "Middle-earth and the Waste Land: Greenwood, Apocalypse, and Post-War Resolution" (84-93) (cf. "Middle-earth and the Waste Land: Greenwood, Apocalypse, and Post-War Resolution," *Tolkien in the New Century: Essays in Honor of Tom Shippey* (2015), 57-64); "A Postscript to Tolkien and Eliot: Some New Leaves on Some Old Branches" (93-96) (cf. "Tom Shippey, and a Few New Leaves on Some Old Branches," *Tolkien in the New Century*, 16-19).

Chapter 4, "Tolkien on Heroism: Beorhtnoth, Aragorn, and Arthur" (97-123): "Mimetic/Prophetic Heroism: Auerbach, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *Beorhtnoth, Beorthelm's Son*" (97-106); "Aragorn and the Twentieth-Century Arthur" (106-123).

Chapter 5, "Epic, Faërie, and Myth: The Mortal and the Monstrous Body" (124-146): "Beowulf, Tolkien, and Epic Epiphanies" (124-131) (cf. "Beowulf,

Tolkien, and Epic Epiphanies," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 9 no. 3 (1998), 192- 199); "Rehabilitating Aglæcan and Faërie" (131-138); "Monsters, Norse Tradition, and the Conjunction of Spirit and Flesh" (138-146).

Chapter 6, "Tolkien and Myth: Orientalism and Occidentalism" (147-165): "Tolkien, Classical Myth, and Said's Orientalism: Othering the East and the South" (147-155); "Myth and the Problem of Generational Succession in *The Silmarillion*" (155-165).

Chapter 7, "Good and Evil, Choice and Control" (166-181): "Tolkien and Leadership Theory" (166-175); "Finding the Nature of Good and Evil" (175-180)

Chapter 8, "Teaching Tolkien and His World, and Why He Matters" (181-199): "The World of the Text" (181-192); "The Problematic Tolkien: Social Conservative, Political Liberal, and Practical Theorist" (192-199).

To write a wide-ranging monograph on Tolkien at this point in history is not, perhaps, a matter of steering between Scylla and Charybdis, but it at least involves threading the rapids between the Argonath of the discipline, Tom Shippey on the one hand and Verlyn Flieger on the other. Risden dedicates his volume to these two great scholars, and in the introduction graciously positions his work with respect to theirs and that of other scholars: "My project here takes up where [their] arguments conclude [. . .] with the goal of filling out Tolkien's intellectual landscape, the growth and variety of ideas" (6).

Risden pursues this "filling out" with any number of helpful analyses and observations. In the first section of Chapter 1, for instance, he uses a review and expansion of Shippey's evaluation of Tolkien's professional career in "Tolkien's Academic Work Now" (*Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien* (2007) by Tom Shippey) as a springboard for detailed examination of the fiction in light of "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" (1936) and "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (1953), demonstrating how ideas from those essays appear "productively yet problematically in *LotR*" (32). Thus, for example, Frodo's failure to destroy the Ring can be seen as a rewriting of Gawain's failure to tell Sir Bercilak about the gift of the green sash. The latter episode makes Gawain's "'perfection' [. . .] more human and credible'" (35, citing "*Sir Gawain*") by showing a flaw in his nobility; the former suggests that if even the humble hobbit, who does not share the specific chivalrous flaws of Arthur's greatest knight, can fail, then so will we, and so will any person. Or, in the case of *Beowulf*, "Tolkien observed that some Beowulf critics had faulted the poet for 'placing the

unimportant things at the centre and the important on the outer edge'" (38, citing "*Beowulf*"): whereas in *The Lord of the Rings*, "the most important parts of the book, those that contribute most to its most important ideas, appear at the narrative poles, beginning and end" (39).

Somewhat similarly, in the third section of Chapter 4, Risden treats Andúril, the Sword Reforged, as an antitype of the many swords in medieval literature (and in earlier moments of the legendarium itself) which break, usually in contexts which suggest that they have been misused. (He considers examples from *Beowulf*, *Gisla Saga Surssonar*, *Volsungasaga*, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and *Parzival*, as well as the broken-and-reforged Anglachel/Gurthang from the story of Túrin, 114-119.) The shards of Narsil, long preserved at Imladris as an heirloom of the unbroken royal line of Isildur, suggest that is the human person who wields a weapon, rather than the implement itself, which is of ultimate significance; and when the shards are finally reforged for Aragorn, the sword's most important moment comes not in any stroke he gives in battle, but rather in his showing it to Sauron in the reclaimed palantír of Orthanc—that is, in its testimony to the existence and good faith of an heir of Isildur (119-120).

To consider just one further example, in the first section of Chapter 6, Risden takes a serious look at critiques of Tolkien's treatment of the "other" and shows that, while Tolkien is certainly in many respects an author of his time and place, to read him as casually imperialist, racist, and so forth reflects highly selective attention to the text. "Bad guys" like orcs, trolls, and Haradrim are all "others" from the point of view of the "good guy" elves, dwarves, ents and humans (both Big People and Little): but our point of view for most of the story is more specifically that of hobbits, and from that perspective, most of the "good guys" are also "others" (153). (Though Risden doesn't draw attention to the point, Tolkien also on more than occasion shows us an inverse perspective in which his central characters are the "other": Bilbo's neighbors view him, upon his return, as "no longer quite respectable," even "queer," while in *The Lord of the Rings* we see the amazement of the Rohirrim at meeting strangers who seem to arise out of legend; the surprise of a Gondorian boy at encountering a hobbit who as old as his uncle Iorlas, but only four feet tall; and even the fear of orcs at their projected image of Samwise the elf-warrior, as other to them as the Nazgûl and Shelob.) Neither, Risden points out, is Tolkien's geography a simple matter of "east bad, west good": the Witch-King of Angmar has his seat in the north (as, Risden might have added, both Morgoth and Sauron did in an earlier age), while Fëanor's Noldor and the later Númenoreans (i.e., "Westerners") invade Middle-earth from the west (153-4). Risden concludes,

> [Tolkien] does not give into the errors of twentieth-century orientalism any more than he rejected the value of Classical learning. He created a diverse

array of creatures and peoples in a complex geography with an intricate and interwoven history, all of whom are capable of falling into evil—or resisting it. That point, perhaps, creates his most important theme and warning: mortality weighs on all of us, and we must resist evil within ourselves with all the heroism we can muster. (155)

While I am enthusiastic about this book (and this is probably the point at which to note that I was editor-in-chief of *Tolkien in the New Century*, and have a piece forthcoming in a journal Professor Risden edits), there are some parts that strike me as reasonable but not so stimulating as the examples I've cited above. In the first part of Chapter 7, for instance, Risden briefly describes three contemporary theories of leadership (from James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (1978); John W. Gardner, *On Leadership* (1990); and Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (1977), then argues that Tolkien's depictions of Gandalf and Aragorn anticipate in narrative form the principles the theorists set out in academic prose. Risden certainly makes his case, but it doesn't feel to me as though he sheds very much new light on *The Lord of the Rings* in the course of doing so; indeed (not to put too much weight on syntax) the conclusion to the section is phrased as a comment on the theorists: "They found, like Tolkien, that, while leadership may not bring each of us wealth and power, proper foundational principles may help create more stable and equitable societies. We keep, though— all of us together—the capacity to choose to use those principles to build or destroy" (175).

The Afterword also struck me as a bit labored. It ends with a very affecting paragraph that distinguishes Tolkien from what either the right or the left might wish him to be, and returns to the book's controlling metaphor of landscape:

> I would assert finally that Tolkien succeeds as fiction writer—and even, I dare say, as a thinker—because he treats creatures, ideas, and landscapes with respect, because he cares about and believes in the idea of good, because he couches his ideas in stories that resonate with all sorts of readers from all sorts of background, and because the landscape of his ideas draws us as compellingly as does the physical landscape of wood, mountain, and valley. (210)

On the way to this conclusion, however, the section gives (202-209) an expansive list of sixteen Christian themes in Tolkien's writing, taken from Matthew Dickerson, *Following Gandalf* (2003), Paul H. Kocher, *Master of Middle-earth* (1972) and Marjorie Burns, *Perilous Realms* (2005). The summaries and commentary are all, so far as I can tell, perfectly correct, but the net effect, it seems to me, is somehow less than an equivalent amount of Risden's own thought

would have had.

Taking all the components of the book together, I also feel that the overall sense of audience is a bit uncertain, though this is not so much of a problem for any given section: for example, Chapter 1 takes the trouble to define various parts of a cathedral (55), whereas Chapter 8 assumes at least passing familiarity with the Eighties' furors over revelations about the sado-masochism and AIDS of Michel Foucault and the youthful Nazi sympathies of Paul de Man (199). One might have thought the latter topics the more recherché.

Finally, the book could, it seems to me, have done with one more round of careful editing. There are some dubious tangential assertions (e.g., reference to a "hemispherical dome" arising either above the crossing or above the choir of a Gothic cathedral, when that feature would be more typical of a Romanesque, Byzantine, or even Renaissance church, 35), a few unfortunate substitutions (such as "isles" for "aisles" (55) and "whiles" for "wiles" (76)), and quite a number of purely typographical issues such as missing characters and inconsistent capitalization ("disneyfied (and to some extent Shakespearean) public expectation" 131). The copy I read did not have an acknowledgments page to link the revised sections of the book to their original published forms, but editors at McFarland have promised to correct this oversight in any future editions.

This is a book which it is easy to commend, and one I am glad to own: it is full of gems; or, rather (to risk a second Tolkien-based metaphor), it is like the gift of Master Samwise—a small box of such soil as will nourish new ideas wherever it falls.

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