

Tolkien, the Author and the Critic

Vincent Ferré

► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Ferré. Tolkien, the Author and the Critic: Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth and The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien, the Ring goes ever On, Aug 2005, Birmingham, United Kingdom. p. 162-168. halshs-00772173

HAL Id: halshs-00772173

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00772173>

Submitted on 10 Jan 2013

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Cet article a paru dans les actes du colloque de Birmingham : Sarah Wells (ed.), *The Ring Goes Ever On, Tolkien 2005. Proceedings*, Londres, The Tolkien Society, 2008, vol. 1, p. 162-168.

Tolkien, the author and the critic:

*Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth
and The Lord of the Rings*

It is a well known fact that Tolkien is the author of fictional and non-fictional texts, among which the most famous are *The Lord of the Rings* and *On Fairy-Stories* or “*Beowulf: the monsters and the critics*”. The latter are frequently referred to by critics, to explain or comment the former. It is useless to recall at length that Tolkien not only taught medieval literature but also edited medieval texts – such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Ancrene Wisse* –, that he translated *Pearl* (a 14th century poem), and wrote important articles on *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain*. A common feature of these articles, collected in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*¹, is the claim for originality: Tolkien asserts that he takes the opposite view from his predecessors. And his reflexion on medieval literature seems, over twenty years, extremely coherent concerning heroism and war. Moreover, what seems important to him in these texts corresponds to important elements in his fiction.

These might seem commonplaces, but, if the relation between fiction and non-fiction is examined in *itself*, more globally, Tolkien’s works appear to present us a peculiar relation between fiction and essays or articles (his critical comments on medieval literature). This relation I will sketch, in the limits of this article, evoking *Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*.

Indeed, it is important to notice that, on a general level, Tolkien uses the ancient opposition between fiction and non fiction, when he makes a distinction between *mythology* and *reason*, *mythos* and *logos*, in a letter to Major R. Bowen: “I am sorry if this all seems dreary and ‘pompose’. But so do all attempts to ‘explain’ the images and events of a mythology. Naturally the stories come first. But it is, I suppose, some test of the consistency of a mythology as such, if it is capable of some sort of rational or rationalized explanation.” (25 June 1957, *L*:260²). In the same way, he writes, in his notes on Auden’s review of *The Return of the King*: “Most encouraging, as coming from a man who is *both a poet and a critic of distinction*. Yet not (I think) one who has much practised the telling of *tales*” (June 1955, *L*:239, emphasis mine). Poetry and criticism on one side, fiction (tales) on the other: nothing surprising in the western conception.

And this opposition is embodied in the two figures of Lewis and himself: a letter to him (January 1948) begins with a distinction between the two spheres of literary writing; then a note makes more explicit this distinction and the contrast between the two men when Tolkien speaks not only of himself, but gives a general definition:

I am *not* a critic. I do not want to be one*. I am capable on occasion (after long pondering) of ‘criticism’, but I am not naturally a critical man. [...] For I am usually only trying to express ‘liking’ not universally valid criticism. [...]

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien, London, HarperCollins, 1997, 240 p. Referred to hereafter as *MC*, followed by the page reference.

² *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, London, HarperCollins, 1995, 463 p. Referred to hereafter as *L*.

[note:] * I think ‘criticism’ – however valid or intellectually engaging – tends to get in the way of a writer who has anything personal to say. A tightrope walker may require *practice*, but if he starts a theory of equilibrium he will lose grace (and probably fall off). Indeed (if I dare yet venture on any criticism again) I should say that I think it gets in your way, *as a writer*. You read too much, and too much of that analytically. But then you are also a born critic. I am not. You are also a born reader. (L:126)

The subjectivity of his ‘criticism’ (the inverted comas are *his*) is not a weakness, but is the parallel of the subjectivity of his fictional writing. This statement seems very interesting, because it compels us to keep in mind this distinction when applying Tolkien’s essays to his fiction, or when we see that, most often, Tolkien combines fiction with nonfiction, or substitutes one to the other, when he speaks of himself (and not on a general level).

If we choose to quote in priority the *Letters*, in which Tolkien expresses his ideas in a form close to his essays, the famous letter written to Milton Waldman (L:144) probably in 1951, gives an example of that combination: “I was an undergraduate before thought and experience revealed to me that these were not divergent interests – opposite poles of science and romance – but integrally related’ (*science* refers here to linguistics, of course related to criticism in Tolkien’s academic writings). But even more enlightening is this letter to Houghton Mifflin of June 1955, referring explicitly to the invention of languages (Elvish) *but* implicitly going beyond the opposition between fiction and philology as a whole (that is the kind of critical texts he wrote): “The authorities of the university might well consider it an aberration of an elderly professor of philology to write and publish fairy stories and romances, and call it a ‘hobby’ [...]. But it is not a ‘hobby’, in the sense of something quite different from one’s work, taken up as a relief-outlet. The invention of languages is the foundation.” (L:219) If languages are “the foundation” of the fictional universe (you will remember the *Lord of the Rings*’s foreword), we may say that writing non fiction is “the foundation” for writing fiction³. As for substitution, let us mention an early and very striking statement about *Farmer Giles* (July 38, L:38), when Tolkien explains that he “read it to the Lovelace Society in lieu of a paper ‘on’ fairy stories” and “was very much surprised at the result”: “It took nearly twice as long as a proper ‘paper’ to read aloud; and the audience was apparently not bored.”

To quote the title of a collection of articles, Tolkien was at the same time a *Scholar and storyteller*⁴: he began to write *The Lord of the Rings* in December 1937, the year after his conference on *Beowulf* (1936); the one on *Gawain* was given in April 1953, just before the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*; the same year, in December 1954, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, was broadcast on the BBC. His fictional masterpiece is thus “framed”, surrounded, by non-fiction – which casts a light on it, as the examples *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* and the essays on *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain* will show.

“*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics”

The thematic echoes between the most famous of Tolkien’s critical comments on medieval literature, “*Beowulf*, the monsters and the critics” (originally, a paper for a 1936 conference)⁵ and his fiction have already been commented upon, like the importance of the

³ And when Tolkien, going back to *The Lord of the Rings* in July 1946, explains to Stanley Unwin (L:118) that he has first “to study [his] own work”, he adopts the position he usually adopts when studying the texts of other people for his academic work. The permeability, the porosity between the two attitudes is obvious here.

⁴ Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (ed.), *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller : Essays in Memoriam*, Ithaca (N.Y.)-London, Cornell university press, 1979, 325 p.

⁵ See *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, and *Beowulf and the critics*, edited by Michael D. C. Drout, Tempe (Ariz.), Arizona center for Medieval and Renaissance studies, 2002, xix, 461 p.

monster (Grendel and Gollum) – Tolkien is the first critic to examine this question – and the fight with the hero, or the identity of the latter⁶. As I showed, the most important point seems the ‘key’ that Tolkien’s essay gives us in its representation of death and the mortality of man, which *The Lord of the Rings* clearly echoes, through the opposition between Men, who must accept their mortal condition, and Elves⁷. I will not sum up my conclusions here, but quote a letter of November 1957 (L:262, to Herbert Schiro): “the tale [*The Lord of the Rings*] is not really about Power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness. Which is hardly more than to say it is a tale written by a Man!”⁸

Indeed, I would rather underline not the motives and the themes, but the very gesture of the ‘writers’ (even if this word is too be used carefully in the case of *Beowulf*) in their relation to sources and authenticity, which appears as a literary effect but is misinterpreted by many readers in both cases.

One of the most remarkable ideas of Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-stories” is his plea for verisimilitude and coherence in the creation of a tale. That is illustrated, for instance, in *The Lord of the Rings* by the treatment of marvel, which does not clash with more realistic elements, or by the precise chronology of the course of events (Tolkien rewrote chapters because of the different phases of the moon), but also by the reference to imaginary sources like the Red Book and to the past (Beren and Lúthien, Moria), and by the style itself. Indeed, Tolkien rejects tushery and mock-archaism in this case, which is a less known fact than the other features. To Hugh Brogan, who had criticized the style of the chapter “The King of the Golden Hall” in *The Two Towers*, Tolkien replies in September 1955 (L:225): “The proper use of ‘tushery’ is to apply it to the kind of bogus ‘medieval’ stuff which attempts (without knowledge) to give a supposed temporal colour with expletives, such as *tush*, *pish*, *zounds*, *marry*, and the like.” He then proposes variations of the same sentences in “archaic” or modern modes, and condemns the latter, concluding: “there would be an insincerity of thought, a disunion of word and meaning. [...] I can see no more reason for not using the much *terser* and more vivid ancient *style*, than for changing the obsolete weapons, helms, shields, hauberks into modern uniforms.” (L:226)

Verisimilitude is thus related to the perception of History, and Tolkien seems sensitive to this aspect in *Beowulf* as well as in his fiction, since he explains to his son Christopher that he is moved “supremely” in *The Lord of the Rings* by “the heart-racking sense of the vanished past” (L:110, January 1945). A statement which clearly echoes his essay, when Tolkien rejects the idea that *Beowulf* is a ‘primitive’ poem:

it is a late one, using the materials [...] preserved from a day already changing and passing, a time that has now for ever vanished, swallowed in oblivion; using them for a new purpose [...] its maker [...] expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote. If the funeral of Beowulf moved once like the echo of an ancient dirge, far-off and hopeless, it is to us as a memory brought over the hills, an echo of an echo.

⁶ See the seminal article by Verlyn Flieger, “Frodo and Aragorn, the concept of the hero” (in N.D. Isaacs, R. A. Zimbardo (ed.), *New Critical Perspectives*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1981, 175 p.) or Tom Shippey’s reflexions on heroism in *The Road to Middle-earth* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1982, xii, 252 p.) and *J.R.R. Tolkien, Author of the Century* (London, HarperCollins, 2000, xxxv, 347 p.).

⁷ See Vincent Ferré *Tolkien : Sur les Rivages de la Terre du Milieu*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 2001, 353 p. (with reference to *Beowulf* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *Une Mort très douce* (“All men must die, but for every man his death is an accident”...)).

⁸ Which is quite close to a statement in his essay : “Beowulf is not, then, the hero of an heroic lay, precisely. [...] *He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy*” (emphasis by Tolkien ; MC:18)

But the consequence of this desire to achieve a high degree of verisimilitude is that Tolkien experiences the same misinterpretation he denounced in the case of *Beowulf*: a confusion, a simplification of the relation between fiction and reality.

His essay opens with a criticism against the reading of the Old English poem by his predecessors: “*Beowulf* has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art”, “And it is as an historical document that it has mainly been examined and dissected.”⁹ But his romance is treated in the same way, and Tolkien has to remind his readers – like Peter Hastings, who had gone too far in reading *The Lord of the Rings* “‘too seriously’, or in the wrong directions” – that *The Lord of the Rings* “is not real history”, but “a tale, a piece of literature, intended to have literary effect.” (September 1954, L:188).

Tolkien understands (without drawing the parallel) that the effect he analyzed in *Beowulf* is producing the same consequences in his book: later, people will see the atomic bomb in the Ring; in March 1955, Tolkien considers “a tribute to the curious effect that story has, when based on very elaborate and detailed workings of geography, chronology, and language, that so many should clamour for sheer ‘information’, or ‘lore’” (to Rayner Unwin, L:210, emphasis mine)¹⁰. Indeed, the words are very close to his analysis of the literary effect of *Beowulf*: “The illusion of historical truth and perspective, that has made *Beowulf* seem such an attractive quarry, is largely a product of art.” (MC:7)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

I could also have mentioned intertextuality and sources, not to propose a catalogue of common elements, but to comment on the analogy between *The Lord of the Rings* and what Tolkien calls “large-scale work[s] of art [...] that are founded on an earlier matter: which is put to new uses – like Homer, or *Beowulf*, or Virgil, or Greek or Shakespearean tragedy!” (to Robert Murray, 4 November 1954, L:201). Here is precisely a strong link between Tolkien’s essay on *Beowulf* and his article on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the 14th century poem: both are “rooted works” (MC:72). But another one is the claim that, here again, the nucleus of the poem is not where previous critics thought it was.

In his article, Tolkien recalls the synopsis of this arthurian poem: during a feast at Arthur’s court, a green knight comes on a green horse, with a green axe, and challenges anyone to give him a blow without resistance; in return, a year and a day later, the challenger will receive a blow without resistance. No one accepts the challenge; when Arthur is going to expose himself, Gawain asks the permission to take up the gauntlet; the blow does not kill the green knight, who leaves the court. Then a year later, Gawain sets out to find him, and risk his life – it is a journey toward death. On his way, he meets a lord (Bertilak) and his lady, who force him to stay a few days with them and act strangely: the lord offers him all the game he hunts daily, but Gawain is expected to give him anything he might acquire; while the lady tries repeatedly to seduce him.

This is precisely the temptation that Tolkien presents as crucial in the poem, as opposed to the views of previous critics. According to him, Gawain tries to reconcile moral rules and courtesy towards the lady as well as the rules of hospitality (towards the lord), also keeping in mind his promise to meet the green knight. The poem underlines the perfection of

⁹ MC:5 and 6.

¹⁰ See a letter to H. Cotton Minchin : “Musicians want tunes, and musical notation; archaeologists want ceramics and metallurgy. Botanists want a more accurate description of the *mallorn*, of *elanor*, *niphredil*, *alfirin*, *mallos*, and *symbolmynë*; and historians want more details about the social and political structure of Gondor; general enquirers want information about the Wainriders, the Harad, Dwarvish origins, the Dead Men, the Beornings, and the missing two wizards (out of five)” (not dated, April 1956, L:248).

Gawain's character: he does not do anything immoral, but only makes one mistake, breaking his promise to the lord. He accepts a gift from the lady, a girdle conferring invulnerability, because he knows that otherwise he will not survive the encounter with the green knight – instead of giving this girdle to the lord. Most important are Tolkien's reflexions about the nature of Gawain's failure, when he "consider[s] in what degree and on what plane he failed, in the author's view" (MC:95): he concludes that Gawain "wished to save his life, a simple and honest motive, [...] and conflicting only with the seemingly absurd and purely jocular pact with the lord of the castle. That was his only fault". A fault for which he receives a stigma, a scar (stanza 93).

When we re-read *The Lord of the Rings* with this analysis in mind as well as Tolkien's acute interest in temptation and fault in *Gawain*, we understand that in his romance, he proposes variations on different modes of failure, especially in Frodo and Boromir's cases.

Boromir is the most obvious character for a comparison with Gawain. He is the archetype of the knight, the leader of the armies of Gondor, the incarnation of strength and pride (on that respect, he is different from Gawain): "a tall man with a fair and noble face, dark-haired and grey-eyed, proud and stern of glance" (LoR I, 314¹¹). But Boromir desires the Ring, to defend his country. His first reaction when he sees the Ring is ambiguous, it is the first sign of his future desire: "Boromir's eyes glinted as he gazed at the golden thing." (LoR I, 324) His nervousness is more and more visible for the reader: "Merry and Pippin in the middle boat were ill at ease, for Boromir sat muttering to himself, sometimes biting his nails, as if some restlessness or doubt consumed him" (LoR I, 501). More and more so, until the moment when he tries to take the Ring from Frodo, to use it against Sauron. And when he thinks his loyalty might be strong enough to protect him against the danger that the Ring represents, it is obvious that the Ring manipulates him precisely by suggesting this strength.

Then Frodo comes easily to the mind, because of the conclusion of his journey towards death, and his "failure". But he is more interesting than Boromir, and Gawain: it is precisely because he is not perfect, because he succumbs to the power of the Ring that there is (to paraphrase Auden's article) "at the end of the quest, victory". Moreover, if Frodo fails, he accomplishes his promise, made at the Council of Elrond, to bring the Ring to Mordor, in an act of loyalty; he also pities Gollum, and thus respects a moral law; and he resists to some of the Ring's powers, urging him to kill Sam or Bilbo, in a repetition of Déagol's murder. Let us recall here the illusion in "The Tower of Cirith Ungol": "Sam had changed before his very eyes into an orc again, leering and pawing at his treasure, a foul little creature with greedy eyes and slobbering mouth." (LoR III, 221). This scene is foreshadowed by Bilbo's metamorphosis in Rivendell¹². Gandalf's prediction is thus accomplished: the Ring, he said in chapter 2, "would utterly overcome anyone of mortal race who possessed it. It would possess him." (LoR I, 61)

We do not know what the Ring suggests to Frodo to seduce him, literally to make him 'go astray', while we know the temptation experienced by Gandalf and Galadriel, by Sam (to make the world a giant garden) or Gollum (a crave for power, which would mean: "Lord Sméagol? Gollum the Great? *The Gollum!* Eat fish every day, three times a day; fresh from the sea", LoR II, 296). It is all the more interesting since Frodo's temptation is the abstract, the void image of all temptations, of *the* Temptation. I will not comment on the detail of Frodo's failure, when he claims the Ring, but I may instead underline the presence of stigmata, the sign that he broke the rule, like Gawain. His wounds do not heal, his lost finger is a perpetual

¹¹ The edition is : J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, London, HarperCollins, 1999, 3 v. (referred to hereafter as LoR followed by the volume and page reference).

¹² "[...] a shadow seemed to have fallen between them, and through it he found himself eyeing a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands. He felt a desire to strike him." (LoR I, 304).

reminder: as he replies to Gandalf, “I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?” (LoR III, 323)

The several letters in which Tolkien answers to readers accusing Frodo, sometimes harshly, or asking Tolkien about his failure, relativizes Frodo’s, as Tolkien’s analysis relativized Gawain’s failure: he insists on the impossible situation in which Frodo was, the “sacrificial’ situation” which demands of someone “suffering and endurance far beyond the normal, [...] which he does not possess: he is in a sense doomed to failure, doomed to fall to temptation or be broken by pressure against his ‘will’” (to Michael Straight, L:232).

There are many other common points between *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien’s analysis of *Sir Gawain*, but I will now deal with a peculiar text, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*.

The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth

This text is the most interesting example of the link between Tolkien’s writing as a critic and as a writer of fiction, because it seems hybrid. *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* is a dramatic dialogue (18 p.), preceded by an introduction which gives the context and followed by a postscript giving an interpretation of the dialogue (12 p.)

This dialogue is presented, in the introduction, as a “sequel” to the famous and fragmentary Old English poem, *The Battle of Maldon*, 325 lines evoking a battle near Maldon (in Essex), in August 991, between a large number of Viking invaders and Anglo-Saxons. As Tolkien recalls, the Anglo-Saxons, under the leadership of the Duke of Essex, Beorhtnoth, are defeated by the invaders, and Beorhtnoth is killed.

The dialogue is thus a work of fiction, an invention: “in the following poem it is supposed that...” – explains the introduction (TL:123¹³) – “supposed” that two men, the young Torhthelm and Tídwald, servants of Beorhtnoth, are looking on the battle-field for their lord’s body to bury him in the Abbey of Ely. But the text was first published in a volume of essays (*Essays & Studies*) in 1953; and in a letter, Tolkien refers to it as “a dramatic dialogue on the nature of the ‘heroic’ and the ‘chivalrous’” (to Houghton Mifflin, June 1955, L165, emphasis mine); that is a dialogue containing abstraction. Finally, the postscript presents the dialogue as a “comment” on two lines of the original poem (TL:143). Let us retain Tom Shippey’s expression “essay-cum-poem”¹⁴ to describe *The Homecoming*, but let us keep in mind the complexity of the alliance of fiction and non-fiction.

This is all the more complex since the postscript gives an interpretation in the form of an academic exposition on a notion, *ofermod*, central in two lines (89-90) of *The Battle of Maldon*: “then the earl [Beorhtnoth] in his overmastering pride actually yielded ground to the enemy, as he should not have done”. Once more, Tolkien diverges here from other critics who reckon that Anglo-Saxons are all praised in the text for their courage and heroism while, according to Tolkien, a distinction must be made between the leader, Beorhtnoth and his companions, who obey him. In Tolkien’s interpretation, *ofermod* is translated by “overmastering pride”, and not only by “overboldness” (Ker’s translation, quoted by Tolkien – TL:147)¹⁵. The point is not to discuss this interpretation, which is now accepted by many

¹³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, London, HarperCollins, 2001, p. 123 (referred to hereafter as TL).

¹⁴ T. Shippey, *Author of the Century*, p. 294. This expression is better than « essay-poem » (p. 251), given the discussion among specialists on the relation between essay and poem. On the nature of *The Homecoming*, see also Tom Shippey, “Tolkien and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*”, in *Leaves from the Tree, J.R.R. Tolkien’s Shorter Fiction. The 4th Tolkien Society Workshop*, London, The Tolkien Society, 1991, p. 5-6.

¹⁵ In French, André Crépin is even softer : « Le comte alors décida, magnanime à l’excès, de céder du terrain, trop, au peuple haï » (*Poèmes héroïques vieil anglais*, Paris, UGE, 1981, p. 172 (Bibliothèque médiévale, 10/18).

scholars and which Tom Shippey regrets¹⁶, because it is “tendentious and personal to a marked degree”. This is precisely the point: the fact that Tolkien’s perception of the poem, of *ofermod* as an excess, is his own, is very subjective; because it has consequences on his fictional invention.

Consequences can be found in the dialogue itself, first, where Beorhtnoth’s *ofermod* is explained by a desire to imitate Beowulf and old poems (“his pride’s cheated”/ “[...] so keen was he/ to give minstrels matter for mighty songs”; *TL*:137). Torhthelm’s character also presents negative features, as T. Shippey noticed – he is violent, cowardly, wrong in his predictions, and so on¹⁷ – and poetry is questioned. Thus, Torhthelm’s verses are mocked by Tídwald and by reality (*TL*:130). But, secondly, in *The Lord of the Rings*, where poetry, the power of voice, offers two opposite aspects: the voice of Old Man Willow, the voice of Saruman, are opposed to Elvish songs in Rivendell¹⁸ or in Lórien (in memory of Gandalf), to the song of Rohan celebrating Theoden’s feat, as Aragorn and Legolas’s dirge for Boromir’s departure. Then Tolkien is not “attacking Old English Poetry in itself”¹⁹, but the foul use of poetry.

More important, in Tolkien’s romance, excess, « overmastering pride », is the mark of many characters, like Denethor, Boromir, Sauron or Saruman. The latter studies too far the Enemy’s thoughts with the Palantir and falls into *hybris*, excess: as Gandalf explains, “Further and further abroad he gazed, until he cast his gaze upon Barad-dûr. Then he was caught!” (*LoR* II, 248). He is quite similar to Denethor, who rejects the advice of all those who are not of Númenorean descent, and is fascinated by Sauron, which leads him to madness and suicide. But other characters may be threatened by excess: Frodo, of course; and Éomer, who thinks Éowyn died during the battle: “his face went deathly white; and a cold *fury* rose in him [...]. A *fey mood* took him. [...] ‘Éowyn, Éowyn!’ he cried at last: [...] Death, death, death! Death take us all!” (*LoR* III, 132-133, emphasis mine). He is visibly seized by madness, and acts like Beorhtnoth in *Maldon*, who is responsible for the slaughter: “The man of battle was furious”²⁰. In the same way, because of his excessive violence (“Over the field rang his clear voice calling: ‘Death! Ride, ride to ruin and the world’s ending!’”), Éomer is then almost killed in the battle: “for fortune had turned against Éomer, and his fury had betrayed him” (*LoR* III, 135). He escapes, contrary to Beorhtnoth, but the meaning is clear: many men may be seized by this excess, and die.

A brief survey of these two essays and his “essay-cum-poem” reveals that Tolkien’s works as a whole present us a peculiar mode of relation between criticism (nonfiction) and fiction. A similar demonstration could be made with other texts, in particular between *On Fairy-Stories* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien himself speaks of the latter as “a practical demonstration of the views that [he] expressed” in his Andrew Lang lecture, *On Fairy-Stories* (lettre to Jane Neave, November 1961; *L*: 310). Thus, it is not surprising to find out that this

¹⁶ T. A. Shippey, « Board and Anger : An Old English Heroic Antithesis ? », *Sources and Relations : Studies in Honour of J.E. Cross*, éd. de Marie Collins, Jocelyn Price and Andrew Hamer, Leeds Studies in English, new Series, vol 16, 1985, p. 220-239.

¹⁷ T. Shippey, “Tolkien and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*”, p. 9

¹⁸ “Almost it seemed that the words took shape, and visions of far lands and bright things that he had never yet imagined opened out before him; and the firelit hall became like a golden mist above seas of foam that sighed upon the margins of the world. Then the enchantment became more and more dreamlike” (*LoR* I, 306)

¹⁹ T. Shippey, “Tolkien and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*”, p. 9

²⁰ *The Battle of Maldon AD 991*, ed. by D.G. Scragg, Oxford – Cambridge, B. Blackwell ; Manchester, Manchester university press, 1991, v 138, p. 25. André Crépin’s translation is more obvious : “La fureur saisit l’homme de guerre.” [lit. *fury seize the man of war*], in *Poèmes héroïques vieil anglais*, p. 174.

text, according to Tolkien, “really do[es] flow together” with “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” and the essay on *Sir Gawain*: “The first deals with the contact of the ‘heroic’ with fairy-story; the second primarily with fairy-story; and the last with ‘heroism and chivalry’” (L:350, to Anne Barrett, Houghton Mifflin, 7 August 1964).

Not only are his conceptions – on heroism, fame, the role of a leader, the use of strength – extremely coherent in texts written in a span of twenty years; but, primarily, these conceptions find an expression in his fictional works, like *The Lord of the Rings*. Is it an *illustration* of theories in his fiction ? An *explicitation* by fiction ? In any case, it is striking to see that, contrary to what we may observe in the case of other writers, non-fiction and fiction do not clash in his work. Contrary to Proust, for instance, where a distorsion between the two has been underlined²¹.

If one remembers the definition of his Valedictory address: “Philology rescued the surviving documents from oblivion and ignorance, and presented to lovers of poetry and history fragments of a noble past that without it would have remained for ever dead and dark » (MC:235), then might we say that *The Lord of the Rings*, and maybe all Tolkien’s works, are “fictional philology” ?

Vincent Ferré
Université Paris 13-Nord, CENEL

²¹ See for instance Vincent Descombes, *Proust. Philosophie du roman*, Paris, Minuit, 1987, 338 p.