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## Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives, ed. by Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo.

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*Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives*. Edited by Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbaro. Lexington, Kentucky: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1981. 175 pp. \$10.50.

Review by David F. Curtis

*Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives* — the title is apt. For in this modest-sized collection, Isaacs and Zimbaro have chosen to print essays devoted primarily to the writer at work: Tolkien developing an aesthetic philosophy, Tolkien articulating a poetics of fantasy, Tolkien worrying about Europe industrialized, Tolkien excoriating materialism; Tolkien rhetorician, Tolkien mythopoeist, Tolkien exemplary Christian. The miracle, one feels, is that Tolkien gave Frodo, Aragorn, and Gollum any life at all, that they don't exist merely as emanations of some theory of art.

A dozen years ago Isaacs and Zimbaro compiled another Tolkien collection (*Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings"*), a splendid group of essays which illuminated the trilogy by showing how *it* worked. Of course in 1968 Tolkien studies were a relatively new commodity, and the editors had the good sense to draw from the early review essays of *The Lord of the Rings*. What they came up with were provocative, lucid essays by critics like C.S. Lewis, W.H. Auden, Roger Sale, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and others. Yet it wasn't the writers' names that made that Tolkien collection special, but rather the way those writers went about their business. Those contributors concentrated on the work itself. Characters were studied, themes defined, motifs discovered, images and symbols examined. Poetry, philology, and myth were not ignored. One read on with the pleasure of uncovering layer after layer of meaning. And a delightful work of art proved to be profound and even more delightful.

Somehow this new collection takes the fun out of Tolkien studies. And maybe that is precisely what the editors want to do. For one of the avowed purposes in bringing forth this new collection is to drive the faddists out. Why Tolkien cannot have a variegated readership is never quite made clear, though. If bad criticism on the

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trilogy can get itself published, who is really hurt? Not Tolkien surely. And not, I think, those who are scratching about in search of Jungian archetypes or Renaissance patterns. There is, it seems to me, much snobbery here; and we who teach literature for a living might do well to remind ourselves that there is a kind of "high" faddism from which our favorite authors need saving as well as a "low."

But if this collection is more dryly academic than its 1968 predecessor and if it strays often from the art to the artist, still it has its excellencies too. Essays by Verlyn Flieger, Rose Zimbardo, and Lionel Basney are superb. Flieger's concept of "crossing motifs" in the trilogy provides literary sanction for the passing of Frodo in the midst of Aragon's triumphant return, and her view of Gollum as Monster is refreshing. Her reading of *The Lord* is dark, but justified and just. Zimbardo sees the pattern of restoration in the trilogy as consonant with the *discordia concors* of the late medieval, early Renaissance world, whereby a willing surrender of one's self into the All insures regeneration through the processes of cosmic harmony. Basney describes several dualities which impart "structural and tonal integrity" to the trilogy — chief among them, myth and history — and demonstrates the evolution of the half into a fully realized whole.

These three essays explicate *The Lord of the Rings*, and their success derives in part from the protean greatness of that work. It stands, as Isaacs writes in his introductory essay, "head and shoulders above the rest of his [Tolkien's] creative corpus. But it is not his only work worthy of attention." And as he writes, Isaacs edits. *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*, the short tale "Leaf by Niggle," and especially Tolkien's critical essay "On Fairy-Stories" all receive treatment in at least one essay. The last, in fact, fairly dominates the collection (or would have done had not the pieces on *The Lord* been so compelling). "On Fairy-Stories" is everywhere and so is its language. Subcreations, Primary Worlds, Secondary beliefs, and eucatastrophes abound. And so do favorite critical passions. Patrick Grant, for instance, runs the trilogy through his Jungian apparatus; Daniel Hughes aligns Tolkien with English Romanticism; and Henry B. Parks manufactures a dialogue on the theory of fiction between Tolkien and Northrop Frye. As I said, some of the fun has gone out of Tolkien studies.

If esoteric, however, these essays are intelligent and serve the cardinal function of criticism — to illuminate. The same cannot be said, alas, for the two pieces devoted to *The Silmarillion*. Admittedly, that book is only recently published; criticism would be scant. Furthermore, the essays printed here purport to be no more than reviews. Yet need they have been so extreme, so uncritical? It is Isaacs himself, after all, who emphasizes the importance of its publication in terms of the need for this new collection of essays:

Indeed, now more than ever, with the publication of a variety of material assembled by Christopher Tolkien under the title *Silmarillion*, the distinctions between the stuff of a cult and the objects of critical literary investigation should be brought sharply into focus.

Accept this, and one must conclude that Isaacs and Zimbaro did not choose well. For there is no “critical literary investigation” in the essays of Joseph McLellan and Robert M. Adams. Instead, one finds extravagant and wholly unsupported praise on the one hand and equally extravagant condemnation on the other.

*The Silmarillion*, McLellan unblushingly announces, compares favorably with “*The Iliad*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Genesis*.” (Not to worry, I blushed for both of us.) He does not tell us why, but in four and one-half pages, maybe that would have been difficult. For Adams, *The Silmarillion* is “an empty and pompous bore,” and the whole of the Tolkien canon is a “Disneyized cycle.” This kind of quip may pass for “critical literary investigation” in some quarters, but seems terribly out of place in a serious collection. Mean-spirited and shallow, Adams’ essay makes a bizarre ending to a book otherwise so scholarly and generous.

Of the twelve essays (I discount Isaacs’ “Introduction”) that make up this collection, seven are original contributions. They and the other five are decidedly welcome, for despite my carping about the quality, intention, and subjects of some, one fact remains. *The Lord of the Rings* (and to a lesser extent Tolkien’s lesser works) affects me

as no other book does. I am simultaneously charmed yet awed, troubled yet soothed, delighted yet frightened by it. Reading it is an experience. Like one of Sherwood Anderson's heroes, I want to know why. And *Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives* helps me begin to find out.