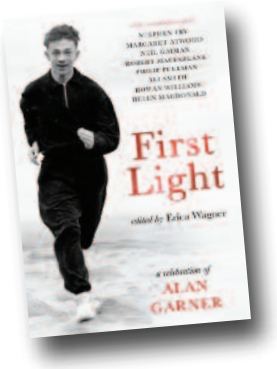

A review of

First Light

Maureen Kincaid Speller

In 'At the Edge', his contribution to *First Light: a celebration of the life and work of Alan Garner*, David Almond notes that 'The importance of proper making is everywhere' (12). Almond is here particularly discussing *The Stone Book Quartet*, its detailed descriptions of the work performed by Garner's own ancestors, the emphasis that is placed on things being done well, and on the need to find the thing that one will do well, perhaps better than anyone else. We see it in Joseph's anxiety about choosing the right trade, not simply following his grandfather as a mason. In *Tom Fobble's Day* Joseph may sigh over the things his grandson Robert doesn't know, yet the reader sees Robert collecting objects and stories about objects, and may guess what is to come. Joseph may have made Robert a 'new' sledge but it is composed of things that have stories reaching far back into time. Like Garner's fiction, it is the physical result of 'proper making', yet it is also a metaphor for the way in which that fiction is constructed.

While many of the contributors to *First Light* talk of Garner's fierce engagement with his family's history, as many turn to his equally fierce engagement with the Cheshire countryside where he grew up, and in which he has embedded all his fiction. Frank Cottrell Boyce speaks for many of Garner's readers when he talks of his own explorations of Cheshire, describing it wonderfully as a 'two-storey county with a double reality', before going on to recount a walk across Alderley Edge with Garner himself, from Seven Firs to Stormy Point. At the end of that walk, Garner shows him some of the archaeological finds that have been made around Garner's own house, the much-storied Toad Hall and Old Medicine House, including the stone axe that features in more than one novel, including *Red Shift* and *Boneland*.

The ritual walking of the story is here combined with Garner's own rituals of show-and-tell. More than one contributor to this collection tells a similar story of being shown various objects significant to Garner's fiction or to Toad Hall, and more than one wonders if they hadn't been set some kind of test, which they presume they must have passed. John Prag and Richard Morris, both archaeologists, attest to Garner's deep preoccupation with the history of Cheshire and his own particular patch. Prag once again tells the story of the young Garner locating a Bronze Age shovel he'd seen at his primary school and then carrying

it with him until such time as he could convince someone of its authenticity. Morris talks of visits to Toad Hall and the various discoveries made in its environs. Mark Edmonds, who works on the archaeology of landscape, in turn makes the connection between archaeological discovery, tools and fiction, praising the clarity with which Garner makes the argument for the ways in which objects are invested, and re-invested, with story and meaning. We are never far from a discussion of story in this collection: storytellers like Ben Haggerty, and writers like Philip Pullman, talk of Garner's influence on their storytelling, while the historian Ronald Hutton discusses the ways in which Garner himself uses myth to tell a new story. The repurposing of story is constantly if implicitly reiterated throughout this collection.

And yet, for all the reaching back, there is also fresh material here, some in the form of criticism (Amanda Craig's 'The Still Foot of the Compass: Alan Garner's Siblings' and Neil Philip's 'Beyond the Singularity', a succinct but illuminating discussion of the layerings of time in Garner's work), some in the form of original work written in response to Garner's writing. Strangely, the majority of the personal responses to Garner and his writing, almost all on a theme of 'how I first read Alan Garner', seem rather weak by comparison, perhaps because we all have our 'Alan Garner' moment, and no else's can quite compare. Two that do stick in my mind, however, come from John Burnside, who describes how reading Alan Garner made him understand that his habit of keeping the fantastic 'in a separate box from the "real"' (30) was damaging his ability to imagine, and from Elizabeth Wein, who shares a joyous diary entry written after she found the mechanical street map that sets the story of *Elidor* in motion. Margaret Atwood's story seems as much out of place as Cornelia Funke's artwork, and I was similarly underwhelmed by Robert Macfarlane's 'word map'.

The poetry, of which the best, by far, is Rowan Williams' 'Alderley: For Alan Garner' seems to work rather better. One ponders the irony of a man best known for prose being most effectively celebrated in poetry, though it should be noted that Garner is himself no mean poet.

Unexpected pieces include a brief essay by Andrew Hodges on a hitherto undiscussed link between Garner and Alan Turing, both runners, and Richard Ovenden's 'A Ghost Book: The "Stone Book"', exploring how it was that Alan Garner and Paul Caponigro did not in the end collaborate on a book of Caponigro's photographs of megaliths, something I've wondered about over the years.

Rather as Garner is an unconventional writer, so this is an unconventional celebration of his work. It is, perhaps unsurprisingly, most successful when it is at its least hagiographic; while the contributors inevitably struggle to grasp the complex whole of Alan Garner's work, their individual pieces nonetheless create a fascinating tapestry of thoughts and ideas, emphasising the extraordinary interconnectedness of Garner's various interests, yet showing how, in the end, they all come back to the place where he started, the Hough, Alderley Edge, and to the past generations of his own family, known or intuited.

To come back to David Almond's words, as they once turned 'the things of the earth into constructions of strength and grace', so Garner has turned 'the words of the earth into such constructions, into art' (13). That Alan Garner is a proper maker as they were before him cannot be doubted.

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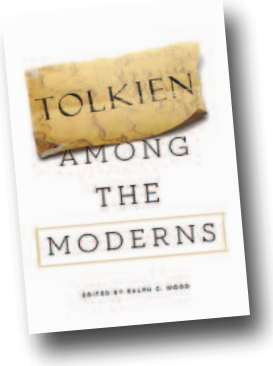
Maureen Kincaid Speller



A review of

Tolkien Among the Moderns

Siddharth Pandey

The strength of this splendid anthology lies, first and foremost, in the preposition underscored by its title: 'among'. 'Among' signals a relation that is not tenuous, but it is also not clearly discernable. If someone or something is situated *more* or *less* in relation to other entities, then its affiliation can be characterised as 'among'. The collection's nine essays subtly explore the tensions and complexities inherent in the preposition, both on account of the great fantasist's own composite literary vision, as well as the baggage of connotations usually associated with the otherwise endlessly elastic term, 'modern'.

This is not to suggest that the contributors are unsure of Tolkien being regarded as a modern. Far from it. The subtleties to which the articles masterfully pay attention only spur the shaping of a uniquely modern status for Tolkien, a recognition that expands our own notions of 'modern' (generally linked to key writers of the post-Enlightenment era and in particular, to modernism). By proving Tolkien's literary output as uniquely – if idiosyncratically – modern, the collection provides a sophisticated legitimacy to the writer's genre, advancing a strong case for the larger inclusion of fantasy in university courses on modern literature and philosophy.

The essays chiefly attend to the bracing ethical, linguistic, and artistic concerns uniting the writer's creative vision, which in combination may well be termed as wholly *Tolkienesque*,

since they stand at variance with several of modernism and modernity's tenets, in effect reflecting a freshly hewn understanding of 'making it new'. Parallels, contrasts and biographical similarities punctuate the anthology. Thus we have essays by Michael D. Thomas and Scott H. Moore matching Tolkien with Miguel de Cervantes and Iris Murdoch. Thomas ably demonstrates how 'despite the differences in their narrative techniques, tone, and style, Tolkien and Cervantes share a common desire to expose the perils and horrors of advancing modernity' (92). Moore on the other hand sheds light on Murdoch's partaking of Tolkien's literary techniques, particularly the 'eucatastrophe' (the fairy tale's sudden joyous turn at the end), further showing how this appropriation was achieved in an atheistic garb in contrast to the fantasist's religious stance. One of the pleasures of reading this essay is its interrogation of Murdoch's own thoughts on imagination vis-à-vis fantasy. The piece demonstrates how nuanced literary comparisons can not only reveal connections and contrasts but also expose the instabilities and contradictions within a particular critic's thought. This is also true of the collection's first essay by Germaine Paulo Walsh, which elucidates Tolkien's modern response to Plato's famous debate between poetry and philosophy, and in doing so, finds the classical thinker's own understanding of poetry similar to philosophy rather than different (against popular interpretation).

While building their critique, both Moore and Walsh sensitively engage with Tolkien's theory of fairy stories and fantasies, a concern that is generously explored by the remaining essays that calibrate the fantasist's vision against those of Joyce, Nietzsche, and Levinas, as well as prevalent discourses on free will, predestination, and grand narratives. I particularly enjoyed these pieces for their intellectually rewarding links and dissonances, assuredly woven in stimulating prose. The two superb reflections on Tolkien's deviation from Joyce's aesthetics by Phillip J. Donnelly and Dominic Manganiello should be read together (indeed, they are placed one after the other), for they incisively draw attention to Tolkien's resistance of the presiding modernist impetus for aggressive individuality and contingent creative novelty. This is achieved by focusing on the writer's refined advancement of ethical concerns such as humility, self-awareness, pity, and trust in collectivity. Tolkien's regard for an ethically creative, augmentative, and reflexive vision becomes even more amplified when paired with the philosophers'. As Peter M. Candler, Jr establishes in his critique of the 'allusive [philological] affinity' (96) between Tolkien and Nietzsche, the two responded to modernity through antithetical stances on their discipline: philological reconstructions for Nietzsche amounted to 'expressions of will to power' (109) and therefore had to be destroyed to create something new; for Tolkien, however, philological constructs held their own truths and genuine claims to novelty, whose destruction was not required. Nietzsche's presence looms in other essays too, like Joseph Tadie's, where the nihilist philosopher's stance is shown as opposite to that of Emmanuel Levinas. The essay expertly details the latter's moral position on the notion of release from rational bondage via humility, which finds sympathetic resonance in Tolkien. It is remarkable how minutely Candler, Jr and Tadie tread the terrain

of language as central to their understanding of Tolkien's ethical vision, reminiscent of other recent critiques that have also creatively scrutinised language for different results (see for instance Louise Joy's essay on Tolkien's language in the 2013 anthology *J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Peter Hunt). Though not placed alongside each other, I recommend reading Candler, Jr and Tadie's studies together.

The uniqueness of Tolkien's modernity shines in Helen Lasseter Freeh's reflection as well, which treats the fantasist on his own terms by locating his handling of issues like free will and predestination in his legendarium *The Silmarillion*. By clearly identifying the book's complex reconciliation of freedom and fate through a close analysis of three myths, Freeh shows how, unlike much of 20th-century modern literature, Tolkien succeeds in providing a redemptive response 'to [modernity's] hopelessness caused by a sense of fated entrapment' (52). This ability to holistically envision a principle of order against modernity's coercions and addictions finds approval in the final essay of the anthology, which provocatively argues that Tolkien 'anticipated many of the concerns of the postmodernists' (248). Written by the editor Ralph C. Wood, this claim is illustrated by Tolkien's opposition to metanarratives and his 'refusal of modernist and foundationalist accounts of reason' (253), among other positions.

But for all the lauding, the anthology is not a hagiography, as the contributors are aware of the limitations of Tolkien's vision (for instance, as Wood points out, Tolkien's cultural pluralism is unabashedly Christian), an awareness that only enriches this collection and makes it resource-worthy.

Editor: Ralph C. Wood.

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Siddharth Pandey