Extracts from Tolkien’s Letters concerning Tom Bombadil

[Letter 19 in December 1937 was written to Stanley Unwin, Tolkien’s publisher, after a request for material to serve as a follow-up to the success of The Hobbit. The following is an extract.]

...But I am sure you will sympathize when I say that the construction of elaborate and consistent mythology (and two languages) rather occupies my mind....Mr Baggins began as a comic tale among conventional and inconsistent Grimm’s fairy-tale dwarves, and got drawn into the edge of it—so that even Sauron the terrible peeped over the edge. And what more can hobbits do? They can be comic, but their comedy is suburban unless it is set against things more elemental. But the real fun about orcs and dragons (to my mind) was before their time. Perhaps a new (if similar) line? Do you think Tom Bombadil, the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside, could be made into the hero of a story? Or is he, as I suspect, fully enshrined in the enclosed verses? Still I could enlarge the portrait....

[Letter 144 (April 1954) was written in response to questions posed by Naomi Mitchison, who had been reading page-proofs of the first two volumes of The Lord of the Rings. The following is an extract.]

...Tom Bombadil is not an important person – to the narrative. I suppose he has some importance as a ‘comment’. I mean, I do not really write like that: he is just an invention (who first appeared in
the Oxford Magazine about 1933), and he represents something that I feel important, though I would not be prepared to analyze the feeling precisely. I would not, however, have left him in, if he did not have some kind of function. I might put it this way. The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness, tyranny against kingship, moderated freedom with consent against compulsion that has long lost any object save mere power, and so on; but both sides in some degree, conservative or destructive, want a measure of control. But if you have, as it were taken ‘a vow of poverty’, renounced control, and take your delight in things for themselves without reference to yourself, watching, observing, and to some extent knowing, then the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control might become utterly meaningless to you, and the means of power quite valueless. It is a natural pacifist view, which arises in the mind when there is a war. But the view in Rivendell seems to be that it is an excellent thing to have represented, but that there are in fact things with which it cannot cope; and upon which its existence nonetheless depends. Ultimately only the victory of the West will allow Bombadil to continue, or even to survive. Nothing would be left for him in the world of Sauron....

[Peter Hastings was manager of the Newman Bookshop (a Catholic bookshop in Oxford). He wrote to Tolkien in 1954 asking whether he had not ‘over-stepped the mark in metaphysical matters’. He queried Tolkien on a number of issues, one of which was whether Goldberry’s description of Tom Bombadil (‘He is’) implied that Bombadil was God. The following is an extract from Tolkien’s draft reply (letter 153)]

...As for Tom Bombadil, I really do think you are being too serious, besides missing the point. (Again the words used are by
Goldberry and Tom not me as a commentator). You rather remind me of a Protestant relation who to me objected to the (modern) Catholic habit of calling priests Father, because the name father belonged only to the First Person, citing last Sunday’s Epistle—inapposisitely since that says ex quo. Lots of other characters are called Master; and if ‘in time’ Tom was primeval he was Eldest in Time. But Goldberry and Tom are referring to the mystery of names. See and ponder Tom’s words in Vol. I p. 142 [I.7:129].

You may be able to conceive of your unique relation to the Creator without a name—can you: for in such a relation pronouns become proper nouns? But as soon as you are in a world of other finites with a similar, if each unique and different, relation to Prime Being, who are you? Frodo has asked not ‘what is Tom Bombadil’ but ‘Who is he’. We and he no doubt laxly confuse the questions. Goldberry gives what I think is the correct answer. We need not go into the sublimities of ‘I am that I am’—which is quite different from he is.* She adds as a concession a statement of part of the ‘what’. He is master in a peculiar way: he has no fear, and no desire of possession or domination at all. He merely knows and understands about such things as concern him in his natural little realm. He hardly even judges, and as far as can be seen makes no effort to reform or remove even the Willow.

I don’t think Tom needs philosophizing about, and is not improved by it. But many have found him an odd or indeed discordant ingredient. In historical fact I put him in because I had already ‘invented’ him independently (he first appeared in the Oxford Magazine) and wanted an ‘adventure’ on the way. But I kept him in, and as he was, because he represents certain things otherwise left out. I do not mean him to be an allegory—or I should not have given him so particular, individual, and ridiculous a name—but ‘allegory’ is the only mode of exhibiting certain functions: he is then an ‘allegory’, or an exemplar, a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and nature, because they are ‘other’ and
wholly independent of the enquiring mind, a spirit coeval with the rational mind, and entirely unconcerned with ‘doing’ anything with the knowledge: Zoology and Botany not Cattle-breeding or Agriculture. Even the Elves hardly show this: they are primarily artists. Also T.B. exhibits another point in his attitude to the Ring, and its failure to affect him. You must concentrate on some part, probably relatively small, of the World (Universe), whether to tell a tale, however long, or to learn anything however fundamental—and therefore much will from that ‘point of view’ be left out, distorted on the circumference, or seem a discordant oddity. The power of the Ring over all concerned, even the Wizards or Emissaries, is not a delusion—but it is not the whole picture, even of the then state and content of that part of the Universe....

*Only the first person (of worlds or anything) can be unique. If you say he is there must be more than one, and created (sub) existence is implied. I can say 'he is' of Winston Churchill as well as of Tom Bombadil, surely?