

DEEP ROOTS IN A TIME OF FROST

Review by Nancy Martsch

Deep Roots in a Time of Frost: Essays on Tolkien by Patrick Curry; Walking Tree Publishers, 2014. Paper, \$24.01 from amazon.com. 6 1/8 x 9 1/4" (15.6 x 23.4 cm), 261 pp. Cover: photo of hollow tree stump covered with green moss, very creepy-looking. Contents: Introduction, 14 entries, composed from 1992-2014: 2 talks, 2 book reviews, 10 essays, plus Index, grouped into 4 sections: "Nature", "Enchantment", "Criticism", and "Varia".

Curry's theme is the contrast between "Enchantment" and "Magic", terms derived from Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories": "Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose. Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary world... It is not an art but a technique; its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things and wills." (OFS 49-50, Curry 66) Enchantment is rooted in Nature; it is the province of the Elves. (Hobbits and the Shire are associated with culture, the Sea with death, that which goes beyond our world.) The antithesis of Enchantment is Magic, in Middle-earth epitomized by the Ring. But in our world the agent of disenchantment, the destroyer of Nature, is "modernism": "Modernism in this sense can be seen to comprise three interlocking empires: international financial capital, state-power, and modern science and technology... For brevity, let's call this programme 'scientism', the cult of science." (238) Modernism seeks to subsume all knowledge under one universal Truth. Monotheistic religion, while slightly less objectionable than modernism, also insists on One Truth. But Enchantment is pluralistic, admitting to multiple gods and "truths"; it also contains animism (the non-anthropocentric: for example, a sentient mountain - or trees). To combat modernism we must return to our roots in Nature, to re-enchant our selves. Tolkien's work (primarily The Lord of the Rings - Curry isn't enthusiastic about The Silmarillion) retains its popularity because it offers Enchantment.

While Curry uses "modernism" to a considerable sense as a literary construct, this is not wholly the case. Curry is an environmental activist, and refers to his stand against the construction of a road in England, for example, or to political events in England and the Continent (which may be unfamiliar to American readers).

Curry's theme, to a greater or lesser extent, is contained in *every single essay* in the book.

Curry is not particularly interested in analyzing Tolkien's work. Aside from "On Fairy-stories", he makes very few specific references to the texts. A familiarity with Tolkien's work is assumed. Nor is Curry interested in the literature of Tolkien criticism (though he is familiar with it). Instead he employs Tolkien's work as an ally in his crusade against modernism. Because most of these essays were written for a variety of non-Tolkien audiences, each of which needs must be informed of Curry's theme, the collection is *very* repetitious. On the other hand, Curry is very widely read in the literature of literary criticism and philosophy. Several essays begin with a statement of the theme, followed by summaries of those writers who agree with (or occasionally, disagree with) his premise, and conclude with a vague, almost interchangeable, paragraph about how Tolkien's work provides Enchantment against modernism.

Curry is better when dealing with Tolkien's critics. "Tolkien and his Critics: A Critique" and "The Critical Response to Tolkien's Fiction", survey in detail literary theory and the negative critical response to Tolkien's work: "...the dominant critical reception of Tolkien's fiction consistently shows two characteristics...: a visceral hostility and emotional animus, and a plethora of mistakes..." (208) Critics, as adherents of modernism, cannot or will not understand Tolkien. (Indeed, modernism - the term was "Modern" at the time, as in Modern Art, Literature, etc - was all the rage in the mid '50s when The Lord of the Rings was published.)

Unfortunately, Curry has placed the most extreme expression of his views at the very beginning of the book, in the Introduction and the first entry, a talk titled "'Less Noise and More Green': Tolkien's Ideology for England"; a poor choice, in my opinion, because it may repel certain readers. Certainly it repelled me. A better introduction might have been the second and fifth entries, "Modernity in Middle-earth" and "Magic vs. Enchantment", which present the theme in a less antagonistic manner. One line from the Introduction will suffice:

"For example, a shaman and a wildlife management biologist both want to ensure the well-being of a population of animals. But the former does so through techniques of focussed empathy and draws upon local knowledge and tradition which respect these animals as fellow-subjects and independent agents, whereas the latter works through objectifying the animals and drawing upon scientific knowledge (statistical, biological, ecological) that treats them as purely instances of universal laws." (4)

At which point the logically-minded reader might wonder, "Does Curry *really* think the shaman's chant would have been more effective against Mabel Tolkien's diabetes than scientifically-derived insulin?" Curry explains his ideas later, and, to his credit, he does try to separate the pastoral ideal from the reality of country life, and even admits that occasionally a benefit can derive from modern technology. But the offended reader may have already decided to read no further.

Should one buy Deep Roots in a Time of Frost? Curry writes well, and is usually free from jargon. If taken two or three at a time, his essays (most of them) are informative and interesting. And he provides a good survey of the critical and philosophical literature. Because the essays were published in multiple venues, some of which may be hard to find, it might prove useful to have them gathered together under one cover. But Curry's "visceral hostility and emotional animus" toward modernism, combined with a "plethora" of omissions, makes trying to read the entire collection akin to listening to a trumpet blare the same notes over and over. The reader wishing to learn Curry's views might be better advised to read his Defending Middle-earth*. And a very brief summation of his theme can be found on his website at www.patrickcurry.co.uk

But opinions differ, so if another reader would like to review Curry's book I will be glad to send it you.-Nancy Martsch

* Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity by Patrick Curry; Houghton Mifflin, paper. #44236, \$3.98 + \$7.95 shipping from Daedalus Books, PO Box 6000, Columbia, MD 21046-600; 800-395-2665; salebooks.com