

Sleeps a song in things abounding  
that keep dreaming to be heard:  
Earth's tune will start resounding  
if you find the magic word.

Joseph von Eichendorff

### **J.R.R. TOLKIEN: ROMANTICIST AND POET**

Review by Nancy Martsch

J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet by Julian Eilmann; Walking Tree Publishers, 2017. Paper, \$32.00 from amazon.com. (6 3/16 x 9 1/4" (15.7x23.5 cm), 478 pp.) Cover: lavender, with Anke Eissmann's watercolour "Tuor looks out onto the sea" (recalling Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting "Monk by the Sea"). Four sections, Bibliography, Index.

The famous poem by Joseph von Eichendorff (1788-1857) [above] encapsulates the German Romantic ideal: that there is more to the world than science can measure, a "song" which sometimes we sense - especially in nature; one which a sensitive person, a poet or artist, may be able to put into art or words (the "magic word"). Not only can the poet translate the "song" to us: like a magician, the poet/ artist. through the use of his imagination can create new worlds for us. Thus the Imagination, disparaged during the Enlightenment as unrealistic, becomes paramount; and the fairy-tale, due to its fantastic nature, becomes the best medium to convey the Romantic experience. And after an encounter with the transcendent, we are better

able to recognize the marvelous in everyday life. But the moment of transcendence is usually brief, leaving us forever in search of it. Thus Desire, the longing for the unattainable marvelous, becomes a characteristic of Romanticism.

If some of this sounds familiar it should. Tolkien set forth some of the same ideas in his essay "On Fairy-stories": on the importance of the imagination; on the actions of the poet-magician ("sub-creation") and how they affect the reader ("enchantment"); the realm of enchantment (Faërie); and on looking at the world with new eyes ("Recovery"). Tolkien's poet-magicians are the Elves, who reveal the world of the marvelous to mortals; and with Frodo and Sam we experience a moment of transcendence in Lothlórien.

Julian Eilmann first noticed the element of Romanticism in Tolkien's work when reading The Book of Lost Tales, especially in the story of Eriol and The Cottage of Lost Play. And he wondered why this was so little remarked upon by English Tolkien scholars. Part of the problem, I think, has not only been the language barrier, but also the cultural barrier: English scholars, for the most part, are not sufficiently versed in German history and literature to write with authority on Romanticism. Eilmann has a degree in Tolkien and Romanticism, and he has published extensively in Germany on the subject. This book is his attempt to remedy this omission.

J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet is divided into four parts. In Part I ("Introduction"), Eilmann shows how influence upon a writer can be determined. Part II ("The Romanticist") defines "Romanticism" as it will be used in the book (other aspects of Romanticism - the ironic, erotic, horror - are not treated); the philosophical underpinnings of German Romanticism, especially the idea that pagans (and early Christians) were closer to nature - and to God - than people today, so we need to recover their understanding (through the poet); Fichte's ground-breaking suggestion that the world exists only through the medium of our senses, thus validating personal experience (the "I") and the importance of the imagination. German Romanticism as a literary movement existed from about 1790-1850. But it spread throughout Europe, if interpreted differently: English writers Shelley and Coleridge expressed the Romanticist ideal. Eilmann points out these ideas in Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories" and fiction, as noted above.

Though the "Romantic" movement was of limited duration, Romantic ideas continued afterwards. Eilmann next analyzes three English stories in detail, to show their Romantic elements: Lord Dunsany's The King of Elfland's Daughter and George MacDonald's Phantastes (both of which Tolkien read) and Kenneth Morris' "Sion ap Siencyn". (It helps if you have read these, too.) In The King of Elfland's Daughter, Alveric marries the King's daughter, but she goes back to Elfland, leaving Alveric and his son to a lifetime of searching for her; eventually she persuades her father the King to return Elfland to mortal lands, and all are reunited. Dunsany's descriptions of Elfland resemble Tolkien's depictions of Faërie. (Though Tolkien does not use Dunsany's poetic language.) "Sion ap Siencyn" is a tale of a man who listens to an enchanted song (the Birds of Rhiannon), while the years pass by around him. And MacDonald's Phantastes is an elaborate tale of Anodos' adventures in fairyland. (It can also be read as a Christian allegory.) MacDonald (1824-1905) provides a direct link between Tolkien and German Romanticism, because (in addition to his stories) MacDonald was an expert on the German Romantic writer Novalis, translated his works into English, and quotes from Novalis at the chapter headings to Phantastes.

Tolkien admired MacDonald's work in his youth but disliked it in his age. Eilmann's perceptive study suggests reasons why Tolkien may have turned against MacDonald. Nevertheless Tolkien's last story, Smith of Wootton Major - though written as a reaction against MacDonald's "The Golden Key" - still contains many Romantic elements. And Tolkien's youthful poetry and his Book of Lost Tales are very Romantic. Eilmann discusses the Romantic elements in Tolkien's later work, too. Tolkien's fiction fits the Romantic category of Desire (but not erotic desire), especially through nostalgia: nostalgia for the past (often noted in Tolkien studies), and the nostalgia Mortals feel for something beyond the world (in Tolkien's pre-Christian world an existential longing, as shown in the "Athrabad Finrod ah Andreth"). Also Tolkien's early poetry is very Romantic: the poem "Goblin Feet" may be much maligned today, but the final lines "O! the music of their feet - of their dancing goblin feet! O! the magic! O! the sorrow when it dies." display the very essence of the Romantic transcendental experience, followed by insatiable longing thereafter. Eilmann has demonstrated quite conclusively that JRR Tolkien's writing fits within the Romantic tradition.

Since the mediator of the Romantic experience is the poet, Part III, "The Poet", analyzes Tolkien's poetry, in The Lord of the Rings and (less extensively) The Hobbit. How do the peoples of Middle-earth use (and compose) poetry? Since Middle-earth is for the most part an oral culture, poetry is used to transmit knowledge: thus poetry and history become the same. A poem can provide advice in a particular situation, as loreth's rhyme in the Houses of Healing. Poems also link past history to the present (and to the reader), and provide information about the singer and the circumstances. Hobbits, especially Bilbo, draw upon a collective fund of folk songs for their poetry, often modifying well-known songs to suit the circumstances. Elves, the poet-magicians (and also Tom Bombadil), can enchant the listener so that he feels that he is within the song. Can this power be misused? The dichotomy between Enchantment and Magic/ Power is briefly discussed.

Eilmann also notes that the people of Middle-earth are very good at extemporizing poetry,\* perhaps due to Arda's having been created through the Music of the Ainur. And this Music still lingers in the sound of water, which links water imagery to poetry. Eilmann also touches on poetry in The Hobbit: although this book is different in tone (it is, after all, a children's story) the poems serve some of the same functions, especially extemporization, exposition, and commentary.

The fourth section, "Conclusion and Outlook", summarizes the three preceding sections, and suggests that the continuing appeal of Tolkien to his readers rests in part upon its Romantic element - the longing for the marvelous and unattainable.

J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet is an important book. The term "ground-breaking scholarship" may be much overused these days, but in this case it is truly justified. I hope Tolkien scholars will take note. There is enough material here for many studies. This book is not a quick read - Romanticism itself is not an easy subject, and the Romantic writers cited tend to be long-winded. (The inclusion of all citations in the original German adds to the length of the book.) But Eilmann writes well, and Evelyn Koch's English translation is excellent. He makes his case with great thoroughness. This is a worthy addition to Tolkien scholarship.

\*Discussed in Nancy Martsch's "Middle-earth Improv: Songwriting and Improvisation in Tolkien's Works" in Music in Tolkien's Work and Beyond, forthcoming from Walking Tree.