

THE ROMANTIC SPIRIT IN THE WORKS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN

Review by Nancy Bunting

The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Will Sherwood and Julian Eilmann; Walking Tree Press, 2024. 422 pp. Paper, \$35.20 from Amazon.com.

Sherwood's introduction gives a brief overview of the evolution and changing meanings of "the Romantic" and Romanticism. Because this behemoth is crammed with fifteen articles, the most helpful approach, I think, is to direct the reader to the articles that might be of the most interest.

I will whittle down the field by elimination. Two articles acknowledge they are mostly speculation: Bertoglio's "Horns, Bullets, and Rings: Tolkien's 'extreme fondness' for Carl Maria von Weber" (150) and Rogers's "Indirect Artistic Influences: The Visual Art of J.R.R. Tolkien and William Blake". (202) There is lots of information about Weber and Blake so that might be appealing to some. Neikirk's article, "Tolkien and Coleridge: Act and Desire in The Silmarillion", uses the springboard of Coleridge's philosophy to explore metaphysics and ontology (but no epistemology as seemingly he has no interest or questions about how we come to know these things) leading to a "more or less Plotinian reading of the metaphysical interrelation of real and virtual objects in The Silmarillion". (283) Somehow, he does not seem concerned about the known limitations, liabilities, and problems of Plotinus's philosophy, but for those who are itching for a deep dive, it is here. (Plotinus was a third century AD philosopher who is considered the founder of Neoplatonism.) Forest-Hill's essay, "Tolkien, Medieval Romances, and the Romantic Spirit" is like walking into the middle of a graduate level seminar where fascinating things are being said, but one (like myself) does not have the background to comprehend what is going on. This is a very dense discussion that seems pitched toward other knowledgeable academics and gives the latest on the medieval romance, Sir Bevis of Hampton. At the other extreme, Flieger appears to be delivering a very accessible, introductory lecture to a freshman undergraduate class on the basics of myth, language, Barfield, and Romanticism, as illustrated in Tolkien's writings.

There is a cluster of essays that elucidate how Tolkien is an exemplar of various strands of Romanticism. Maldonado's "A Dark Romantic Gaze: Otherness and Evil in Hoffman and Tolkien" offers the spicy Freudian "uncanny" applied to Melkor, trolls, orcs, spiders (including Shelob) and the "double"/doppelgänger of Frodo/Gollum. Lippold's "Walking into Mordor: Tolkien and Romantic Travel Writing" compares male and female Romantic writers of travelogues to Tolkien's writing. She does an excellent job of giving concrete examples of this comparison. She sees the typically feminine acknowledgement of difficulties and struggles on journeys in Tolkien, but it seems to me that this maybe just as likely to have been derived from the popular World War I literature of the trenches. Groom's "The Ghostly Language of the Ancient Earth': Tolkien, Geology, and Romantic Lithology" is an essay drawing and building on "Speculative Realism" (SR)/"Object-Oriented Ontology" (OOO) to "enable[e] the non-human perspectives of objects" (400), as well as Romantics, like Wordsworth and Coleridge. This motif is found in Orthanc, the *palantiri*, the Stone of Erech, Caradhras, the Paths of the Dead, the Barrow on the Downs, the Glittering Caves, and more. Wills and Hagan's "Tolkien's Romantic Gusto" explores the Romantic concept of "Gusto", as defined by William Hazlitt, and as seen in Keats's use of the term attempting to view it as equivalent to the pleasure that the Inklings and Hobbits take in eating and drinking. Keats's use of the term is complex, but the discussion sidesteps spelling out the details that would make this convincing.

The other essays deal with the literary theory of the Romantics and its history. I thought the two history essays presented exceptional original material, namely: Aparico and Greene's "'Anglo-Saxons on Horseback' or 'Mail-Shirted Sioux or Cheyenne'? Romantic Native Americans and Tolkien's Rohirrim" spells out the fascinating impact of Native Americans on Europeans' concepts, and Schroeder's "J.R.R. Tolkien, Walter Scott, and Scott-ish Romanticism" delineates English attitudes of superiority to Scotland and all things Scottish, as found in T.S. Eliot and Edwin Muir, and how that sets up Muir's reviews of The Lord of the Rings. Holmes's "Romantic Imagination, Fancy, and *kalymma* [κάλυμμα] in Tolkien's 'On Fairy-stories'" highlights how Tolkien's use of philology, his background in Catholicism, and the influence of Barfield's Poetic Diction all impact Tolkien's dialogue with Coleridge in that essay. Freeman's "'The Back of Trees': Tolkien, the British Theological Romantics, & the Fantastic Imagination" defines the group of British Theological Romantics as Ruskin, Morris, MacDonald, and Chesterton and sees illustrations of their views in Tolkien's writings. Smith's "'living shapes that move from mind to mind': Tolkien's Visual Romanticism" has a citation of Goethe's Scientific Study: "Phenomena" on visual perception that lands a direct parallel to Gandalf's speech on the breaking of white and the leaving "the path of wisdom." Smith does not consider how this knowledge of Goethe was probably mediated by Barfield as Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophy was a platform for Goethe's science and Steiner's advocacy of Goethe included designing and naming the main building of Anthroposophy in Dornach, Switzerland, the Goetheanum. Smith then uses Goethe's concept of the *Urbblatt* ("original or primal leaf") and Goethe's poem, "Cupid as a Landscape Painter", in understanding "Leaf by Niggle". He examines the role of the perceiver/reader in creating the experience of the Romantic sublime.

This book is a smorgasbord which might have essays to stimulate and pique the appetites of a wide variety of individual readers.

TOLKIEN SCRAPBOOK

Article in Spanish by Juan Manuel Grijalvo on ferries uses illo of the Buckleberry Ferry by Mace Aragorn. European Maritime Heritage Course, <https://maritimum.wordpress.com/2024/06/05/>

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