



BOOK REVIEW:  
*The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R.  
Tolkien*

*Paula Lobato Díez*

Sherwood, Will, and Julian Eilmann, editors. *The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Zurich and Jena, 2024 (Cormarë Series 51). ISBN 978-3-905703-51-1.

*The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, a collection of articles edited by Will Sherwood and Julia Eilmann, manages to make a statement even before the reader turns the first page. As Sherwood vividly explains in his introduction, the cover, designed by Jay Johnstone, openly echoes David Caspar Friedrich's magnum opus "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog" (1818). As the editor notes, Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) also paid homage to this enigmatic painting, but it now seems to acquire a different undertone. Both the original artwork and its cinematographic rendition depict a *Rückenfigur* (back-figure) – be it a man or two hobbits – admiring a vast land that expands before their very eyes, granting them the unique perspective that the heights provide. However, the most striking detail about Johnstone's cover is that the figures are darkened despite their foreground placement and they are found in the depths of a foggy valley, overlooked by the peak of an imposing mountain. Instead of gaining clarity, the heroes in this case stand before the mighty representation of Romanticism itself, which is white and covered in snow, while they remain in the shadows. But what exactly is Romanticism? And how is Tolkien Romantic? These are the questions that the book poses, and the hero's climb to cognition is arduous.

The book is organized thematically into four main sections: "Nationalisms, History, and the Other," "Language, Art, and Music," "Imagination, Desire, and Sensation," and "Nature and Travel." The first section opens with Valentina P. Aparicio and Elliott Greene's essay, a

compelling explanation of the relation between the horseback knights from the city of Rohan and indigenous American tribes. By referring to John Hunter's studies on the "Nordic Renaissance" and theories of stadial history, the chapter manages to explain how Tolkien's work can be viewed as Romantic: the Rohirrim present mythical qualities which, after being adapted to "European taste" (15), were attributed to "ancient Britons by comparative observation with Native Americans" (12) in the Romantic period – such as stoicism, passionate speech-making, love of liberty, and a taste for poetical recounting of heroic deeds. Since Tolkien strove to compose an English epic and the Saxons and the Norse had begun to be considered the authentic root of English people following Thomas Percy's earlier attempts of cultural legitimation of the British, Native American tribes were regarded as the closest representation to what life might have been in Anglo-Saxon times as they "existed at a 'younger' stage of society" (9) in the eyes of 19<sup>th</sup> century British scholars.

In the next essay, Lynn Forest-Hill seeks to answer a question opposite to Aparicio and Greene's: how does Tolkien's work *transcend* the Romantic Movement? While the study is well-researched and profoundly illustrative, its discussion unfortunately shifts back and forth between periods in a way that does not manage to make a clear separation between Romantic heritage and the original medieval sources. Nonetheless, the author makes an important contribution by contending that while both medieval and Romantic influences are present in Tolkien's oeuvre, "by drawing on genuinely medieval sources, [his] work avoids the political inauthenticity of the Romantics" (38) in their depiction of medieval times. In doing so, Tolkien detaches his work from courtly love tropes and the Romantics' nation-building agenda and adopts more historically accurate modes such as the ironic, elegiac, and epic.

Sharin Schroeder's chapter focuses on the influence of Sir Walter Scott, examining how his impact on Tolkien is not easily recognized because of an interwar political trend of eliminating Scottish authors from the canon and fewer people accessing Scott's texts as a result. To address the question of Scott's influence, Sharin compellingly discusses the fleeting nature of popularity in literary traditions, which may eventually turn against even Tolkien. Chapter four closes the first section with Mariana Ríos-Maldonado's cross-border analysis of Dark Romanticism and the uncanny in Tolkien's oeuvre when contrasted with the German author E.T.A Hoffmann's. Ríos-Maldonado's excellent parallelism between the characteristics of Freudian uncanny in Hoffmann's work, as opposed to Tolkien's, exemplifies how the English author not only agrees with Hoffmann's vision of *the Fäerie* but also radicalizes his Romantic depictions of the monstrous. This is something he achieves through the portrayal of a Manichean source of evilness: Sauron and his realm. Ríos-Maldonado contends that Mordor's creatures are meant to resonate closely with Victorian and Edwardian societies; the worlds which Tolkien's contemporaries inhabited. Hence, Mordor as a source of fright relies heavily on the reader's instincts about realities they almost seem to recognize as their own.

The second section of the collection takes a multifaceted approach to understanding how Tolkien is Romantic by contrasting his work with other artistic fields. The section opens with Verlyn Flieger's chapter on the interconnectedness of Owen Barfield and Tolkien's creative production, categorizing Tolkien's Romanticism as "centered on words" (131) and placing it

in conversation with real-world ideas such as English nationalism or the terrors that the First World War caused to Tolkien's generation. This is a clever choice for an opener since it bridges both sections of the collection. In Tolkien's works, Edmund Burke's ideas on 'the sublime' and the human threat of war are brought together in a particular brand of Romanticism which dwells on the bareness of daily communication. After all, beyond refined elven tongues, ordinary everyday English is what enshrines real English mythology.

In a similar fashion, Chiara Bertoglio provides a multidisciplinary comparison between Carl Maria von Weber's operas and Tolkien's oeuvre, contributing further to the pattern of connections between Germanic art and Tolkien in this collection. In her essay, she presents a world of contrasts: Catholic doom and providence, a love of nature, and fear of technology. This ultimately showcases a rather gothic awareness of the darkness which can reign in the world, a product of the experienced realities in the interwar period. Annise Rogers follows this with a chapter that considers William Blake's artistic legacy as a way of moving from music to pictorial art and discerns a substantial amount of *indirect* connections which at the same time are unavoidably influenced by their rich written production. Commendably, Rogers actively discusses artistic movements such as the Pre-Raphaelites or Art Nouveau and also chooses to engage with the term 'Romanticism' itself. In doing so, instead of narrowing the horizons of the Romantic, she manages to open new paths for future research.

The editors have carefully chosen David Smith's chapter on Tolkien's visual Romanticism as a culmination of this section, as he engages with the ideals of other artists such as Blake and Coleridge while focusing his analysis on "Leaf by Niggle" (1942). Smith manages to provide his own definition for Tolkien's Romantic imagination, one that prioritizes the treatment of "a greater unity surpassing individuality" in favor of Romantic values which defended "a necessary self-effacement in favor of a naturalistic interconnectedness" (231), and which, despite Tolkien's prolific works full of verbal and literary art, was placed upon visual art. Hence, transcendence, which is at the core of all artistic activity, could be achieved potentially through the use of visual imagery.

The third section of this volume provides yet another turn in the understanding of Tolkien's Romantic tendencies, ranging from earthly pleasures to the most elevated philosophic contemplation. Kacie L. Willis and Christopher Hagan deftly interact with Keats's Romantic "gusto" through the lens of psychology and cultural studies in both Tolkien's published work and private letters. They conclude that Tolkien's literary representation of food and drink ultimately symbolize his profound appreciation for a sense of community which, due to historical circumstances, was at times denied to him. Ascending in the gradation of human pleasures, Adam Neirik turns to Platonic metaphysics and Coleridge's notion of sensuality and Reason to read *The Silmarillion*. Hence, by explaining the human process of apprehension and cognition through aesthetics, his essay showcases how good and evil are not absolute forces in Tolkien's work. On the contrary, he examines how Tolkien presents them as rather affected by individual contemplation and the predetermined Ideas, in Plato's terms, that each subject holds. John R. Holmes's chapter then recedes from the suspension of disbelief in classic authors such as Coleridge to unearth less popular Romantic tenets which are latent in Tolkien's work. Holmes's study is a real *tour de force* in this book;

although shorter than the other essays, his work manages to encompass many ideas concerning fantasy discussed in the preceding essays while providing a fresh perspective on the topic. This is followed by Austin M. Freeman's investigation on Tolkien's inspiration for the poem "Mythopoeia" in the school of thought of a group of fantasists which he calls British Theological Romanticism. This section is concluded by Brandon Wernette's chapter that offers a delightful analysis on the power of Wordsworth's sublime in the creation of songs – which are essentially poems, too – and the relationship between nature and the author. In Wernette's reading of Tolkien, the pervasive effect that aesthetics has in his legendarium is what makes it undeniably Romantic.

While the first three edges of the Romantic polyhedron are well balanced out, it is striking that only two essays are found in the concluding section, "Nature and Travel." Eva Lippold's chapter opens an interesting dialogue between Romantic travel literature and the multiple journeys which Tolkien's characters follow in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. While it is vital to introduce the genre of Romantic travel writing and present it as the cornerstone of this section, Lippold's study leaves the topic open for a multiplicity of more specialized essays which would have bolstered the impact of the collection. Nick Groom's "The Ghostly Language of the Ancient Earth': Tolkien, Geology, and Roman Lithology" then concludes the volume by approaching Tolkien's Romanticism through an understudied theme: the soil and rocks. In analyzing Wordsworthian visions of the inanimate, Groom sees these lithic forms as an Otherness central to the storytelling and conception of Tolkien's world and to the many realities that abound in it – as many as there are characters and readers.

I find this collection of great relevance and interest for the field, although its density also poses challenges. However, as Sherwood already claims in his introduction, this book is by no means to be understood as the ultimate guide to Tolkien and various strands of Romanticism, but rather as the opening of new pathways to be explored. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, this volume will interest both scholars who aim to deepen their knowledge, and admirers of Tolkien's work who enjoy specialized reading. I would definitely welcome a second volume which provides a more prominent platform to some of the most poignant or understudied themes, such as the aforementioned travel literature. As the characters on the cover still have a long way ahead, their steps shall take the readers on a never-ending journey towards the many peaks of Romanticism.

*Biography:* Paula Lobato Díez is an English philologist and certified English teacher with a MEd in TEFL. She earned a MA in British Studies from the Centre for British Studies at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany, and she is currently based in Madrid where she obtained her BA and is now working on her PhD. She serves as Academic Editor at the Journal of Artistic Creation and Academic Research (JACLR) and has published and taught on the Gothic, myth-criticism and feminism. In the winter semester of 2023 she conducted a series of discussion lectures for undergraduate students at University of Bologna. Her current scholarly interest revolves around nationalisms and the role of mythical heroes in neo-narratives of Romantic and Gothic inspiration. ORCID: 0000-0002-6054-0098