

2018

J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet (2017) by Julian Eilmann

John R. Holmes

Franciscan University of Steubenville, jholmes@franciscan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>



Part of the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Holmes, John R. (2018) "J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet (2017) by Julian Eilmann," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol5/iss1/4>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Services at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet, by Julian Eilmann. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2017. [x], iv, 474 pp. \$32.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703368.

So far, Anglo-American Tolkien critics (including the writer of this review) have, with a few exceptions, done a fairly thorough job of ignoring important work on Tolkien in Germany. If we are lucky, Julian Eilmann's *J.R.R. Tolkien Romanticist and Poet* may begin a reversal of that unfortunate trend.

Published in the prime breeding ground of German Romanticism (Jena) and based on a dissertation completed in 2016 at the Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena (home of the *Frühromantiker* Tieck, the Schlegel brothers, and Hölderlin), *J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet* builds a connection between German Romanticism and Tolkien that most Tolkien scholars have ignored, a few have hinted at, but none have studied systematically. With this volume, Julian Eilmann hopes to turn that tide.

But that may be a tall order. Even the primary readings of German Romanticism—the poetry, fiction, and theoretical essays of Novalis, Eichendorff, Tieck, Wackenroder, Friedrich and A.W. Schlegel, Uhland, Brentano, Heine, Hoffmann, Jean Paul—to say nothing of the philosophical and theological groundwork of Fichte, Schelling, Feuerbach, and Schleiermacher—are daunting enough to keep real work from being done in this area on the Yankee side of the Atlantic. These dozen names wash like white noise across the consciousness of English and American readers—except for the better-known operatic and balletic perversions of Hoffmann's *Nutcracker*, *Coppélia* and *Tales of Hoffmann* that the French have given us. These Romantics should be as well-known in English-speaking circles as their later contemporaries the Brothers Grimm, but the fact is they are not, and familiarity with such a catalogue does not come easy, even in the era of Google and Wikipedia. If only there were a single source in English to summarize the work of the great German Romantics, particularly in terms that engage the work of Tolkien.

Wait a minute. That's just what the translation of Eilmann's book turns out to be. Readers seeking a crash-course in German Romanticism could do worse than reading the first two-thirds of this book. Not that doing so is easy. It is not just the mass of pages (nearly 500 of them) but the density of the material that makes *Romanticist and Poet* a hard read. It is, after all, a dissertation, and a German one at that. At times the reader of Eilmann's volume can feel the strain of the external requirement of comprehensiveness, tracking each idea back to its ultimate source and forward to its logical conclusion. But when the Tolkien-oriented reader encounters Romantic motifs like creation of the universe through music,

inexplicable longing for the sea, the dream of a new mythology, the hope of re-enchanting a world deadened by the so-called “enlightenment,” a new quadrivium of Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation—and all of these motifs from writers two centuries older than Tolkien—the labor may seem worth it.

The brief “Series Editors’ Preface” by Thomas Honegger—perhaps the most familiar name in German Tolkien scholarship to English-speaking readers—acknowledges the origins of the book as an academic exercise—“yet we hope to have made it as accessible as possible.” Walking Tree Publishers may well have succeeded, but “accessible as possible” is a relative expression. It will still take some digging to release the gems. I think it was the *Zwergromantiker* Gimli who said, “That *mithril* isn’t going to mine itself.”

One of the gems that Eilmann has unearthed for us is the epigraph for the entire volume, four brief lines from Joseph von Eichendorff’s *Wünschelrute* (“Magic Wand”), which resonates throughout Eilmann’s work:

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

This quatrain as a summary of the Romantic notion of Fantasy, particularly as manifested by J.R.R. Tolkien, has been percolating in Eilmann’s critical imagination since his 2005 essay in *Hither Shore*—the bilingual, English and German scholarly journal that is itself a testimony to (and an archive of) the strength of German Tolkien scholarship. By the quotations alone from the great German Romantics in Eilmann’s book (with the German original always given, either parenthetically or, for longer quotes, in footnotes) a fair crash-course in *Romantik* could be garnered.

The structure of the book itself looks daunting. Part I, in three chapters, is brief and introductory, posing the research question in the first chapter—Is Tolkien fruitfully studied as a “Romanticist”? (More on that word later)—outlining the methodology of the book in the second chapter, and the research approach in the third.

Part II, the biggest and densest part of the study (roughly two thirds of the page count) is an overview of German Romanticism with particular comparison to various aspects of Tolkien’s work. It is here that the book may lose some of its readers, here where it comes closest to becoming merely a summary of German *Romantik*. But parallels to Tolkien’s thought and work appear just often enough to

justify Eilmann's foundation-building: the reader needs a grammar of Romanticism in order to recognize its presence in Tolkien. The first chapter of part II defines Romanticism—not an easy task, since nearly a century of scholarship has been unable to find a consensus on definition, and has all but lapsed into a kind of nominalism on the subject. In the process of definition, Eilmann acknowledges that Tolkien studies have been reluctant to look at Tolkien as Romantic. Eilmann does an admirable job of clearing up the confusion, always with a respectful stipulative approach to definition (“this is what Romanticism will mean for the purposes of this study”). At the end of this first chapter, Eilmann establishes the hallmark of Romanticism as a yearning for the infinite and the transcendent. Eilmann follows Romantic scholarship in turning to the paintings of Kaspar David Friedrich depicting solitary figures looking at sublime landscapes as emblems of this yearning (*Sehnsucht*). The cover painting for Eilmann's book, “Tuor Looks Out to the Sea” by Anke Eissmann, is an obvious homage to Friedrich.

The second “Romanticist” chapter tackles Romanticist Poetology (another quirky word which we will examine later). Eilmann finds obvious affinities between German Romantics and Tolkien in viewing fairy story as “a window into the infinite” (Section 1), the dream of a new mythology (Section 2), a theory of Fantasy (Section 3), and the desire to re-enchant the world (Section 4).

The third chapter of Part II takes a seeming detour by looking at a continuation of Romanticism into the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. While acknowledging other studies of a whole library of English-language works in the century between the death of Wordsworth and the appearance of *The Lord of the Rings*, Eilmann focuses on three representative “neo-Romantic” writers in England: Lord Dunsany, Kenneth Morris, and George MacDonald.

Having now established a grammar of Romanticist motifs, Eilmann applies them to Tolkien's work in the fourth chapter of Part II. He begins with *Smith of Wootton Major* (Section 1), then the figure of Eriol in *The Book of Lost Tales* (Section 2), the motif of Romantic Nostalgia in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (Section 3), and an exploration of Romantic motifs in Tolkien's poetry (Sections 4 and 5).

The explication of Romantic elements in Tolkien's poetry leads to the last major section, Part III: The Poet. This section, the last 100 pages of the book (but for a 22-page Conclusion), indulges in not only a close reading of Tolkien's poetic works, but also an argument for their literary value, as well as an engagement with the theoretical question of how the verse functions in Tolkien's

fictional realm. Readers with an interest in Tolkien's poetry in its own right may want to skip directly to this section.

While the bibliography of *J.R.R. Tolkien Romanticist and Poet* will demonstrate that Eilmann knows the English and American criticism better than the English-language Tolkienists know the German, there are still some elements in Eilmann's study that will need further "translation" for the British and American reader. The first involves two terms that have already been alluded to. The first term, "Romanticist," appears in the book's title. Why not "Romantic"? British and American critics of the Romantic period have less anxiety over distinguishing "Romantic" from "Romanticist," so the extra syllable may seem foreign and unnecessary to the American reader. The second, "poetology" is the obvious English equivalent of the German neologism *Poetologie* that became popular among German scholars in the 1980's. But since it never caught on in English, the term can puzzle the reader of this book: in most instances, substituting "poetics" will put us on the right track.

In a parallel vein, Eilmann's quite sensible decision to concentrate on German Romanticism has nevertheless led him to soft-pedal some major analogues in British Romanticism that will come more readily to the minds of the Anglophone readers of this book. For example, it is understandable for the book to troll the German Romantics for echoes of Tolkien's work, since that is the avowed purpose of the study. But to acknowledge Tolkien's very real echoes of Coleridge and Shelley, yet not so much as mention the other four major British Romantics Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, and Byron seems odd, especially when he twice (pages 9 and 437) assents to Meredith Veldman's assertion that Tolkien and C.S. Lewis "stood in the English romantic tradition." For instance, when Eilmann is discussing Tuor's love of the sea as an existential *nostos* or homesickness (p. 400), he invokes the afore-mentioned Romantic canvases of Friedrich, but not Lord Byron's transcendent embrace of the mighty ocean at the end of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*—the "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean—roll!" of stanza 179, but more so the whole of stanza 184, and its anticipation of Freud's Romantik-influenced concept of "oceanic feeling" in *The Future of an Illusion and Civilization and Its Discontents*.

Similarly, Eilmann's lighting on the word "presence" (p. 84) to capture the subtlety of German Romantic discourse on transcendence, which invokes the Judeo-Christian notions of God without naming Him, would achieve instant recognition by the English or American reader with a passing reference to the same word in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, the "presence" above and beyond the forms the speaker meets in nature.

When Eilmann does cite a British Romantic like Shelley, as when he quite fittingly connects Shelley's assertion in *Defense of Poetry* that "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world; and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar" with Tolkien's concept of "Recovery" (p. 81), the student of English Romanticism will recognize how firmly established the idea already was before Shelley, not only in Wordsworth's "Preface" to the 1802 second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* ("ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect"), and Coleridge's recollection of Wordsworth's agenda in *Lyrical Ballads* to find the supernatural in the natural, but going back to the source of the veil imagery in early Christian and Neoplatonic thought.

In venturing back before the Romantics, German or English, we stumble upon an aspect of Romanticism that is conspicuously absent from Eilmann's book, and that touches Tolkien very nearly: the reason that these writers and artists in both languages were called "Romantic" in the first place. The Romantics had re-discovered and re-valued the medieval romance. Take every note of supercilious scorn spat at medieval romances by neoclassicists, and place it next to Tolkien's modernist critics who just don't get it (Edmund Wilson, Germaine Greer) and critics two centuries apart will seem interchangeable. And leaving that fact out of his evaluation of German Romanticism leaves Eilmann vulnerable to one attack on his "Tolkien as Romanticist" thesis: elements in Tolkien's work that he attributes to Romantic influence could just as easily be traced to the medieval originals Tolkien knew better than the Romantics did. It's rather like Lin Carter's embarrassing assertion that Tolkien got the ring from Wagner.

It is in the evaluation of Tolkien's poetry in Part III that *J.R.R. Tolkien Romanticist and Poet* is most valuable. Eilmann goes beyond the exposition of Romanticism in Tolkien's verse, though that exposition is what links the first two parts of the book with the third. There is in that third part much solid, old-fashioned *explication de texte*; much competent classical metrical analysis—and the author's anthropological study of the verse reveals the underlying culture expressed by Tolkien's legendarium (particularly in the fourth chapter of Part III). Eilmann also unblinkingly presents an honest picture of major Tolkien critics who defend Tolkien's place in literature but are willing to echo the critics of A.E. Houseman's "Terence" when it comes to the "Shropshire Lad's" poetry: "But oh! Good Lord, the verse you make! / It gives a chap the belly-ache!" Tolkien's poetry can be the last refuge for the Tolkien-lover who wants to avoid the appearance of being a Tolkien-idolator: "Yes, evil literati! Tolkien *is* Superman. But his verse is his Kryptonite." Julian Eilmann is not one of those critics. In this book, and in his 2013 collection *Tolkien's Poetry*, co-edited with Allan Turner

(also from *Walking Tree*), Eilmann has resisted that critical temptation. He treats the poetry squarely *as* poetry (and not just an ornament for the fiction) and offers sound reasons for valuing it, even if one doesn't happen to like it.

J.R.R. Tolkien Romanticist and Poet is a hard, dense read, but as a primer on German Romantics and their resonances with Tolkien, as criticism of Tolkien's verse, and as a link to the German Tolkien scholarship that is growing in volume and quality, it is worth having on hand.

John R. Holmes
Franciscan University of Steubenville
Steubenville, Ohio