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The *Kalevala* as the Germ of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien’s Legendarium

The *Kalevala* is now regarded as one of the most powerful and interesting world epics. Its present shape was the effect of work done by Elias Lönnrot, who in the nineteenth century wrote down many cantos or *runos* that had been preserved in the Finnish oral tradition. It is worth mentioning that *runar* (* *runo-*) is an old Germanic and Celtic word which originally denoted magical mysteries; in the Gothic language it had precisely the meaning of ‘a mystery, a secret decision’, later the word appeared in the Finnish language, yet here *runo* related only to magical or epic songs.¹ One should stress the importance of the fact that fragments of the *Kalevala* existed in many versions that changed not only with every singer but also throughout ages; what is more, they often differed to such an extent as to become contradictory or inconsistent. Although the *Kalevala*’s sources lie in the Finnish folk oral traditions, the epic’s texts which were finally published were heavily influenced by Lönnrot and his affiliation to the Romantic Movement. It cannot be denied that Lönnrot’s work was “a massive labour of assembly that involved not only stitching poems together, but patching some with scraps of others”.² He welded into a coherent whole fragments of spells, heroic tales and more lyrical songs and incantations that were traditionally attributed to women. He was so skilled in his editorial work that many did not notice the corrections he had made to the text and, in addition, some thought that he had managed to reconstruct the nearly forgotten and almost lost national epic. Given all his efforts to preserve the national oral

¹ G. Dumézil, *Bogowie Germanów*, tłum. Anna Gronowska, Warszawa 2006, s. 65.

² K. Bosley, *Wstęp [do:] Kalevala*, E. Lönnrot, *The Kalevala*, tłum. Keith Bosley, Oxford 1999, s. xxxii.

poetry, it is not surprising that in Finland Lönnrot is regarded as “a single man, [who] by scurrying about, has created a heritage for us [the Finns]”.³ Taking into account the above-mentioned quotation, one can draw a parallel between Lönnrot and J. R. R. Tolkien who started working on the legendarium of Middle-earth with the intention of creating a mythology for his own homeland; his work, however, grew from some few loosely connected stories into an intricate mythology that may be regarded as a universal one thus surpassing the initial intentions of the author himself.

While still at King Edward’s School, Tolkien began reading the *Kalevala* which enraptured him with the sheer strength and eeriness of its imagery, displaying a world that seems to be older than the one presented in *Beowulf*. Even though one may identify in the epic undeniably Christian elements, these religious motifs are pushed to the margin (only in the last canto they form the main theme, namely the appearance of a new God, which was the reason for the departure of old deities). Magical incantations and spells evoke a pagan, basically primeval universe, which had a strong appeal for Professor Tolkien. What is more, his interest in the epic was so intense that as he wrote years later in a letter to his son, “Finnish nearly ruined my Hon. Mods, and was the original germ of the *Silmarillion*”.⁴ As almost everything in Tolkien’s writings, it started with his fascination with the language. The Finnish tongue belonging to the Ugro-Finnish language family and therefore possessing a foreign prosody and words (with regard to this part of the continent), became the foundation of Tolkien’s aesthetics of language. For him the sounds of a given language were as important as the meaning of words or the grammatical intricacies of a sentence. In consequence, Quenya, the oldest language of the Eldar, has a striking resemblance to old Finnish, not only in its sound structure, but also in the use of suffixes and similar word patterns.

The Finnish epic was the source not only of the melodious Elven language, but it also inspired Tolkien to create some of the most interesting and complex heroes inhabiting Middle-earth. One of the protagonists of the *Kalevala* is Väinämöinen, a character whose true nature and identity have not been pinned down. “He has been variously explained as a wizard, shaman, and nature god, without any explanation ever gaining full acceptance”.⁵ In the personality of

³ Cyt. za: V. Flieger, *A Mythology for Finland: Tolkien and Lönnrot as Mythmakers*, [w:] J. Chance, red., *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, Lexington 2004, s. 279.

⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, red. Humprey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, London 1995, s. 87.

⁵ D. E. Gay, J. R. R. Tolkien and the *Kalevala*: Some Thoughts on the Finnish Origins of Tom Bombadil and Treebeard, W: J. Chance, red., *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, Lexington 2004, s. 297.

Väinämöinen are combined so many features that they seem only to dim the overall picture; even his behaviour does not give any straightforward clues as to who he really is. By way of analogy, *The Lord of the Rings* presents an equally enigmatic character, Tom Bombadil a unique being. Väinämöinen as well as Tom Bombadil are the only creatures who existed before everything else. They are not creators, yet they know the origin of things because they witnessed their birth. "I am old. Eldest, that's what I am [...] Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn"⁶ – with these words Tom describes himself and the very knowledge of the beginning gives him supremacy over everything that surrounds him. One finds a passage similar in tone in the *Kalevala*, from which the reader can deduce that Väinämöinen was already present –

when this earth was made
when the sky was built
when the sky's pillar was fixed
when heavens arch was borne up.⁷

It should be noted that the antiquity and experience of the heroes not only distinguish them but also significantly influence their bearing. Accordingly, Väinämöinen does not like being treated with disregard or disrespect, jealously guarding his prominence; Tom on the other hand appears not to care about it, he behaves as if it was not even worth mentioning. He says little about himself and his words seem like riddles to the hobbits and readers alike. Tom Bombadil's appearance is thoroughly misleading as to his nature; clothed in bright colours, merry and carefree, at first he strikes one as a person of no importance not only to the quest, but also to the existence of Middle-earth. Nevertheless, it is quickly revealed that behind these qualities is hidden a deeper wisdom and a mighty power. Only Goldberry attempts to supply some further explanation, yet her words just strengthen the mystery. She laconically answers: "[h]e is" as if Tom's sole existence provides the answer, which, in fact, it does since "[h]e is the Master of wood, water, and hill".⁸ One ought to stress the fact that Bombadil is the Master in the sense that he is fearless, nothing and no one has yet threatened his domain. His home appears to be a peaceful and safe haven for he is able to ward off the danger; hence "nothing passes door and window here save moonlight and starlight and the wind off the hill-top".⁹ Tom Bombadil just like

⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, New York 2002, s. 129.

⁷ E. Lönnrot, *The Kalevala*, tłum. Keith Bosley, Oxford 1999, s. 29.

⁸ *The Fellowship of the Ring*, s. 122.

⁹ *Ibid.*, s. 123.

Väinämöinen is not only an integral part of his world, but is also able to dominate over it; his unbelievable though hidden power and importance may be fully appreciated when one bears in mind the fact that he emerges as the only being that will be able to face Sauron at the end of all things and then perish as if marking the end of Middle-earth – “if all else is conquered, Bombadil will fall, Last as he was First; and then Night will come”.¹⁰ Correspondingly, Väinämöinen’s sailing away in the last canto of the *Kalevala*, which is somehow inevitable, indicates the end of the old world of magic and wonders. For that reason the heroes appear to be the sustainers and preservers of their universes even though their role is not made explicit.

Väinämöinen’s fearlessness and courage are exceptional, in all the cantos one will not find a hero who would equal him. He is the only one who goes to dark Tuonela, the Land of the Dead in order to find spells to build a boat. Even Tuoni’s maid is astounded by his daring:

[...] You come
without cause to Tuonela
undiseased to Death’s abodes!¹¹

Although Väinämöinen did not get what he needed, that is to say the knowledge from the master of the Dead Land, he somehow managed to get back alive to his domain without suffering any loss in the bold undertaking. The “everlasting old man”¹² came back from the underworld without any harm. By comparison, Tom appears to be only longlasting, bound to Middle-earth for as long as evil is kept at bay; if evil triumphed, Bombadil would perish along with everything good and beautiful.

One should not overlook the fact that songs and singing play a prominent role in the *Kalevala* because they are regarded as elements of magical practice. In the Finnish epos singing was equated with casting spells, which, in turn, was characteristic only of the most powerful heroes. Väinämöinen as well as Tom are presented as often chanting or singing for the sheer pleasure that this activity gives, yet it ought to be emphasized that some of their songs also show their vast knowledge and skills, and thus reveal their magical abilities. Väinämöinen is challenged to a song contest by a young and overconfident man, who is easily vanquished and made to taste the bitterness of his defeat, which was caused by Joukahainen’s inability to tell the “deep Origins/ of eternal things”.¹³ In a simi-

¹⁰ Ibid., s. 259.

¹¹ E. Lönnrot, op. cit., s. 194.

¹² Ibid., s. 24.

¹³ Ibid., s. 27.

lar manner Bombadil asserts his supremacy over Old Man Willow by threatening to “sing his roots off”.¹⁴ Gay observes that “[f]or both Väinämöinen and Tom Bombadil power comes from their command of song and lore rather than from ownership and domination”.¹⁵

Although the heroes' wisdom is undeniable, they are not devoid of comic traits. Bombadil sings jolly songs which often do not carry any serious meaning but resemble something just a little more elaborated than a chant:

Hey dol! merry dol! ring a dong dillo!
 Ring a dong! hop along! fal lal the willow!
 Tom Bom, jolly Tom, Tom Bombadillo!¹⁶

His verses are rhythmic, they contain traces of alliteration and they do rhyme, yet only the longer ones go beyond these features and comprise elements of a simple story, a welcome or warning, never becoming actually serious or dark. The songs along with his clothes utterly overshadow his puzzling nature. Yet, as Noel observes, his “power lay primarily in his unquenchable gaiety and in his sung spells”.¹⁷

When set beside Tom, Väinämöinen is presented in equally humorous situations. He loses some of his sombreness while wooing subsequent maids without success. Their mothers seem well pleased as he is so renowned and mighty, but their daughters after seeing him are repelled by his old (almost ancient) age, which they are not afraid to voice openly. Thus Väinämöinen, “the everlasting old man”, is unable to find a wife and remains alone despite all his craft and riches. He is the one who gains no wife, even though he manages to complete all the tasks assigned to him. It is worth mentioning that the typical pattern noticed by Vladimir Propp in folk stories (and later applied also to myths, legends and other kinds of narratives) is somehow reversed. The unchangeable element – function – which for Propp meant “an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action”¹⁸ is still present, as Väinämöinen is set various tasks that have to be fulfilled so that he should gain the maid; nevertheless, although he succeeds in completing them, he is never granted the bride.

¹⁴ *The Fellowship of the Ring*, s. 117.

¹⁵ D. E. Gay, op. cit., s. 298.

¹⁶ *The Fellowship of the Ring*, s. 116.

¹⁷ R. S. Noel, *The Mythology of Middle-earth*, London 1977, s. 127.

¹⁸ Cyt. za: S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, London and New York 1983, s. 20.

In the *Kalevala* Sariola, the dark Northland, is the dwelling of all evil. Its wicked mistress Louhi not only tricks Ilmarinen into making the Sampo, a magical object that could somehow produce and grant happiness and prosperity, but subsequently causes the plight of the main heroes. In the Finnish epos the North is identified as the abode of deadly enemies who constantly endanger the peace of Väinö-land. Analogically, in the First Age of Middle-earth Morgoth made his stronghold, Angband, in the Northwest, where the winters were severe and long and the land defiled by him became barren and deserted. Although the description and exact location of Sariola is vague, Tolkien gives a precise account of the “Hell of Iron”, the dwelling place of the Enemy: “the Iron Mountains, from whose great curving wall the towers of Thangorodrim were thrust forward, defended it upon either side, and were impassable to the Noldor, because of their snow and ice”.¹⁹ Still from this impenetrable fortress the dearest treasure of Morgoth is seized. Beren and Lúthien dare to remove one of the Silmarils from his Iron Crown. They do it with the help of magic, great courage and sacrifice. Not for long, however, do the Elves delight in the possession of the jewel. It has brought them neither happiness nor peace, and finally it goes out of reach of all the races of Middle-earth. Bearing this in mind one has to mention a similar quest that is found in the *Kalevala*. The “everlasting old man”, Ilmarinen the Smith and Lemminkäinen venture the journey North to regain the Sampo. After casting a spell and putting to sleep all inhabitants of Sariola (it should be noted that Lúthien sang a song which brought sleepiness on Morgoth), Väinämöinen and his companions are able to get the Sampo. Whereas the Silmarils are clearly defined objects, the Sampo is a thing that slips any easy classification. Its properties are known (it grinds salt, corn and money, thus it stands for an item found in mythologies worldwide that bestows undisturbed happiness to its owner); they are, in fact, the very reason for which the heroes want to possess it. In canto 10 it is described as a mill (here one can see the influence of the *Poetic Edda*’s song *Grottasöngur*), but scholars identify it also with “an idol (Lönnrot), a chest containing treasure or a document, a world pillar or a tree, a model of the cosmos”.²⁰ The Sampo is eventually shattered and, just as Tolkien’s jewel, irrevocably lost.

Tolkien’s interest in the *runos* of the *Kalevala* seems to be even more obvious when one notices the motifs present in the Finnish epos which he incorporated into his own compositions. The apparent and at the same time main influence on Tolkien’s creative work was exerted by the story of hapless Kullervo. Although the Professor from Oxford started his work with the intention of only rewriting Kullervo’s story in order to eliminate the flaws in the narrative, he

¹⁹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, London 1999, s. 131.

²⁰ K. Bosley, op. cit., s. xlii.

eventually set out to create a tale that became an integral part of his own legendarium. Thus evolved a long, dark and most fatal of all the legends – the story of Túrin Turambar. Nonetheless, one should not overlook the fact that Tolkien expanded Kullervo's story, which is only sketched in the *Kalevala*; his own tale gained intensity, psychological depth and tragic nature. Bosley observes that Lönnrot created Kullervo by joining together several independently existing poems that were not even linked by the same hero;²¹ these different motifs woven together fascinated Tolkien to such an extent that what finally emerged as *Narn i Hîn Húrin* is not a reworking of the Finnish story, but a creative use of several themes which served to build one of the most powerful legends of Middle-earth.

One cannot deny certain similarities between Kullervo and Túrin, which pertain to some traits of their characters, as well as to some crucial facts concerning their histories. Kullervo just as Túrin possesses unbelievable strength and resilience, nonetheless only Túrin is able to use it wisely while fighting Orcs or the hosts of Morgoth; Kullervo remains unaware of his potential and everything he puts his hand to is damaged beyond any possibility of repair. Moreover, he does not seem greatly concerned about the harm which he inflicts. It is beyond doubt that Húrin's son is driven mostly by despair or anger, still he pays more attention to the results of his deeds and, at the same time, is more grief-stricken if they go awry than the Finnish hero. One ought to point out the fact that Túrin possesses important traits that are completely absent from Kullervo's character, namely mercy and pity (even though they seem to be less apparent when he grows up). The illustration that readily comes to mind is the single event when Túrin gives a very precious knife that he got from his father to Sador Labadal, a lame servant whom he loves and treats as a true friend. He does it willingly and with a full awareness of the knife's value – not only material but above all symbolic, as the blade is regarded as a kind of family heritage. By way of contrast, when Kullervo loses a comparably valuable knife, because of human meanness and vileness, he is able to think only about vengeance. He mercilessly kills Ilmarinen's wife who baked a stone into his bread and thus caused the breaking of the knife. He is unmoved while watching her die; to her entreaties for help he answers:

If you are dying, then die,
vanish if you're vanishing!²²

Andrzej Szyjewski rightly observes that Túrin displays Christian virtues that are absent from the generally 'pagan' *Kalevala*²³.

²¹ Ibid., s. xxxii.

²² E. Lönnrot, op. cit., s. 466.

²³ A. Szyjewski, *Od Valinoru do Mordoru*, Kraków 2004, s. 64.

It needs to be emphasized that both protagonists were all too soon left fatherless with no one to guide them. The *Kalevala* stresses the importance of rearing a child in goodness, love and wisdom, the lack of which is held responsible for Kullervo's unrestrained behaviour; this fact is also highlighted in *Narn i Hîn Húrin*. Although Túrin knew his father who tried to hand down his knowledge to his son, after the battle of Nirnaeth Arnoediad Turambar was under the influence of his proud and ambitious mother; it cannot be denied that she has had a chief influence on the shaping of his character. Thus seen Morwen may be held responsible for only embittering and darkening his nature. In addition, both heroes grew up in thralldom, suffering injustice and scorn, yet here their histories stand noticeably apart, i.e. Kullervo is sold as a slave to Ilmarinen the Smith, whereas Túrin is sent to Thingol 'Grey-mantle' who treats him as his foster son. From now on Túrin is not denied his kingly descent, but owing to Morwen's wrong decisions and his own hot temper, he is unable to stay within the boundaries of Doriath under the King's protection.

The motif of separated families, siblings that have never seen each other, yet whose meeting is inevitable though ill-boding, finally resulting in involuntary incest, is present both in Tolkien's legend and the *Kalevala*. Even though this plot line is not elaborated in the Finnish epos, it forms the very core of *Narn i Hîn Húrin*; Tolkien chose this particular motif to be one of the most important themes in this legend. What is more, he made the tragedy of the siblings even more piercing by accentuating the fact that they grow to love each other with a feeling that is almost desperate in its intensity; the mutual dependency is based on the protagonists' ability to dispel the darkness that veils the other's thoughts, as only together they are able to achieve peace of mind and even uncover glimpses of a new hope. Nienor clings to Túrin because he appears to her not only her saviour, but also the sole purpose of her life. On the other hand, Turambar in her presence finds rest and temporary oblivion of all that haunts him. He admits that he had his darkness "in which dear things were lost; but now I have overcome it, I deem".²⁴ Bearing this in mind, one notices that they have no one else to turn to simply because all that has befallen them resulted in their inability to rely on other people. When the dragon's spell is finally lifted from Nienor's mind and everything comes back to her, she perceives with horror that her happiness is not only forbidden but also impossible to sustain. The brittle peace, being in fact the result of the evil spell, is shattered. Therefore, Nienor's suicide does not come as a surprise, but appears to be the only solution, the only choice that is left to the great heroes of ancient tragedies facing such unbearable truth. Just like Kullervo's unhappy sister, she casts herself into the

²⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, red. Christopher Tolkien, London 1999, s. 159.

roaring waters. In a similar manner the son of Húrin takes his own life after learning about his sister's desperate end. These last scenes in *Narn i Hîn Húrin* seem to mirror those of the Finnish epos. Túrin's dialogue with Gurthang strikingly resembles the words uttered by Kullervo, who asked his sword whether it had "a mind/ to eat guilty flesh/ to drink blood that was to blame?".²⁵ The answer is in the affirmative: "[y]ea, I will drink thy blood [...] I will slay thee swiftly".²⁶ Suicide is generally regarded in Tolkien's legendarium as trespassing against the laws of Ilúvatar, the One who created all. Unlike the Norse mythology, it was not an act that could be regarded as bravery or a characteristic of an unyielding will, but it was ascribed to the heathen kings of old. This attitude can be easily noticed in Gandalf's answer to Denethor, the Steward of Gondor: "only the heathen kings, under the dominion of the Dark Power, did thus, slaying themselves in pride and despair".²⁷ Therefore, heathen in Middle-earth means those who fell under the dominion of Morgoth or Sauron, those like the Easterlings or Haradrim who had no contacts with the Elves and knew nothing of the power of the Valar. Nonetheless, in *Narn i Hîn Húrin* there is no trace of any moral judgement pertaining to the way of death of Túrin and his sister. The exceptionality of their plight could not be compared with anything that had happened during the long ages of Middle-earth, therefore their passing away was the reason of bitter grief for both the Elves and Men, the cause of lament for those who were finally broken by forces which they could neither control nor utterly defeat.

In one of his numerous letters Tolkien admitted that "Finnish also provided a glimpse of an entirely different mythological world";²⁸ the wonderful imagery of the *Kalevala* had captured Tolkien's imagination to such an extent that some of its strangeness and magic he wove into his own mythology. It should be emphasized that from this source sprang an equally powerful yet innovative legendarium encompassing Three Ages of Eä.

KALEWALA JAKO ŹRÓDŁO INSPIRACJI
DLA LEGENDARIUM JOHN RONALD REUEL TOLKIENA

Streszczenie

Kalewala – uważana obecnie za jeden z najbardziej interesujących i niezwykłych eposów literatury światowej – swój obecny kształt przybrała dzięki wysiłkom Eliasa Lönnrota, człowieka, który połączył w koherentną całość fragmenty różnych utworów zachowanych w fińskiej twór-

²⁵ E. Lönnrot, op. cit., s. 495.

²⁶ *Unfinished Tales*, s. 186.

²⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, London 1999, s. 145.

²⁸ *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, s. 345.

czości oralnej. Urywki zaklęć, opowieści heroicznycy oraz lirycznych pieśni przekształciły się pod redakcją Lönnrota w epopeję, którą Finowie postrzegają jako swoje dziedzictwo narodowe. Twórczość J. R. R. Tolkiena przyrównać można do działalności Lönnrota, gdyż profesor Tolkien rozpoczął pracę nad legendarium Śródziemia, aby stworzyć mitologię dla swojego kraju. Jednakże jego teksty z kilku luźno powiązanych ze sobą opowieści przekształciły się w złożoną i misterną mitologię, która przerosła wczesne założenia samego autora, ponieważ w swojej ostatecznej formie może być postrzegana jako mitologia uniwersalna. Podkreślić należy fakt, że źródła inspiracji dla swojego dzieła nie szukał Tolkien wyłącznie na gruncie angielskim. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi omówienie wątków, które Tolkien zaczerpnął z *Kalewali*, przy czym szczególna uwaga poświęcona została ich kreatywnemu wykorzystaniu przez pisarza.

Kalewala zachwycała Tolkiena melodyjnością swojego języka do tego stopnia, że rozpoczął on pracę nad pierwszym językiem elfów, którego fonetyka i leksyka wzorowane są na fińskim. W rezultacie Quenya, mowa Eldarów, stała się dla Tolkiena impulsem do rozpoczęcia pracy nad mitami i legendami Śródziemia. Zaznaczyć trzeba, iż *Kalewala* równie mocno zafascynowała Tolkiena siłą i niezwykłością swojej metaforyki, ukazując świat herosów, który zdawał się być starszy nawet od tego odzwierciedlonego w *Beowulfie*, najstarszym zachowanym eposie angielskim. Choć w *Kalewali* odnaleźć można elementy chrześcijańskie, są one zepchnięte na margines, tak iż jedynie w ostatniej pieśni stanowią główny temat, koncentrując się na epoce schyłkowej – odejściu starych bóstw spowodowanym przyjściem jedynego Boga. Niemniej jednak to właśnie formuły magicznych zaklęć i uroków przywołują pogański, prastary świat, który tak mocno zafascynował wyobraźnię samego Tolkiena, że stał się on inspiracją do stworzenia jednych z najbardziej skomplikowanych i niejednoznacznych postaci zamieszkujących Śródziemie. Magia i niezwykłość *Kalewali* posłużyły jako punkt wyjścia dla innowacyjnej mitologii profesora Tolkiena, który w swojej twórczości rozwijał motywy jedynie zarysowane w fińskim eposie, dodawał im głębi i tragizmu, przekształcał tak, aby odzwierciedlały stworzony przez niego samego wszechświat.