Tolkien-on-sea

The view from the shores of Middle-earth

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"I do like to be beside the seaside." That traditional time-honoured lay used to typify much of the character of England and the English. It calls up, for those who experienced the reality, memories of the English people on holiday in the days before their habits were radically changed by charter air travel; images of muddy (Weston-Super-Mare), or shingly (Eastbourne) beaches; concerts or entertainments on piers or bandstands; sticks of rock (Blackpool or others), and, of course, seaside boarding houses and their formidable landladies. These traditional pleasures were very much part of Tolkien's own lifestyle, as a glance at the biography by Humphrey Carpenter (Carpenter, 1977), or at John and Priscilla Tolkien's memoir in photographs, *The Tolkien Family Album* (Tolkien & Tolkien, 1992), will confirm.

Note, however, that the song hymns the pleasure of being *beside* the sea, not *on* it. Indeed the expression, 'all at sea', signifies something very different. England, Scotland and Wales have always, it is true, been regarded as sea-faring nations *par excellence*, and they like to think of themselves as such. In reality, though, only a small minority of their populations, principally, of course, sailors by profession, have otherwise than in time of war regularly, "gone down to the sea in ships, and carried on their business in great waters." Serious or extensive voyaging has always either been the prerogative of the wealthy, or has fallen to those whose employment or profession required them to travel far overseas. "Messing about in boats", on lakes or rivers, is, and has been, the province of most of the ordinary people of this country; and one will recall that even this was too adventurous and dangerous a pastime for the majority of hobbits. The genre of .'sea-stories' on the other hand is a well established one, as represented, for instance, by the Captain Hornblower series, and has perhaps helped to foster a self-image of the English as natural sailors. Whether it was at all to Tolkien's taste, I don't know. He did make one long sea-voyage in his life, but as he was only three years old at the time it can hardly have represented a formative experience for the rest of his life. His subsequent sea-going experience seems to have been confined to occasional crossings of the English and Irish channels, either in the course of transport in the First World War, or made necessary in the course of holidays in Europe or Ireland. (As anyone who has exerienced the old steamer trip from Fishguard to Rosslare - and the Holyhead-Dublin one wasn't all that much more enticing - could recall, it was anything but a romantic or life-enhancing sea-going experience.)

All this was natural enough for Tolkien; having, as he did, a large family to bring up and educate, he didn't have any opportunity of extensive sea travel in any case. In the easier circumstances of his retirement he could no doubt have afforded it, but he doesn't seem to have been in the least interested in the possibility of it as far as one can see.

The point I am trying to make is that, interpreting the significance that the lore, legend, and presence of the sea assumes in Tolkien's world, it is the seashore, the sea's margin, that represents reality; the sea itself is a symbol. The actual practice of seafaring, or sailing, and of life aboard ship, are not Tolkien's, or our, concern. Even the exploits of the Numenoreans are seen from a distance, and largely in a critical, sometimes highly critical, spirit. The sea stands for everything that divides the real world from the unseen, imagination from reality, the unconscious, dreaming mind from waking experience, myth from history, and above all, this life from the hereafter. I want to consider how this crucially important image of "the sundering sea" arises and develops in the course of Tolkien's life and work, and also to set it somewhat in the context of romanticism, looked at more widely over the previous century.

It is not Tolkien's first writings, however, but his early drawings and paintings that provide a starting point. Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull, in their study of Tolkien's paintings and sketches, have shown how thoroughly his artistic work, as it developed during the course of his life, is bound up with his writings and his developing conceptions of his, 'sub-created', world. And in the beginning, his early art stands in front of the gateway which leads to that world. Seashore related subjects make an early appearance in the water colour of two boys on a beach (dated by Hammond and Scull to 1902), (1995, op cit. pl. 5) and of a ship at anchor, evidently produced somewhat later.(Hammond & Scull, 1992, op cit. pl. 6). More subjects, from Lyme Regis or Whitby, (Hammond & Scull, 1995, op cit. pls. 8 & 9) occupy him later on in his teens. There is nothing at all surprising about any of this while he is on holiday. But a highly significant stylistic change makes itself felt when, at the age of twenty-two, he tackles the Cornish coast instead.

At this time, his artistic output is beginning to comprise, besides topographical or realistic subjects. semi-abstract or imaginary scenes or 'visions', which he describes as "ish-nesses." It is instructive to observe how the fantastic, sea-sculpted rock-scapes that provide the subject-matter of two of his topographical works of this period merge into and prepare one for some of the 'visionary' works of the same period, notably a 'seashore' type of vision like 'Water, Wind and Sand'. (Hammond & Scull. 1995, op cit. pl. 42). This latter work is associated with the early poem "Sea Chant of an Elder Day," written, according to Carpenter, (1977, p74) on December 4, 1914. and based on memories of the Cornish holiday of a few months earlier. The poem included the following lines:

I sat on the ruined margin of the deep-voiced echoing sea
Whose roaring foaming music crashed in endless cadency.
On the land besieged for ever in an aeon of assaults
And torn in towers and pinnacles and caverned in
great vaults.

These lines are interesting in that they introduce the motive of the sea as on impersonal force, alien and disruptive, and in doing so they provide a link with Tolkien's childhood dream image of "the great wave towering up and advancing ineluctably over the trees and green fields, poised to engulf him and all around him." This latter image will make its importance felt later on when the layer of the mythology first introducing Numenor comes to be laid down. At this stage in Tolkien's development, the imagery of the poem and the paintings just mentioned. is linked closely with *The Book of Lost Tales*, especially with the similar imagery which surrounds the 'Shoreland Pipers', the Solosimpi, the early counterpart of the Telerin Elves of the more developed mythology. The Solosimpi take up residence in Tol Eressea, once that "floating island" has been anchored to the sea bed by Osse (in defiance of Ulmo, his nominal superior).

In *The Book of Lost Tales*, considered as a whole (except the final Tale, which I shall come to in a moment), the sea does not carry any particular significance, beyond contributing to the whole scheme of mythological imagery; it does not, in effect, provide anything more than a picturesque part of the scenery. All three branches of the Elvish peoples, including the Solosimpi, are transported by "floating islands", the others to Valinor itself, by Ulmo, or in opposition by Osse, as above. The sea only represents a subordinate part of the mythic scheme at this stage, and to begin with the realism that would be aroused by references to actual ship-building or sea voyaging is quite absent. Nevertheless when the Solosimpi are settled in Tol Eressea they are instructed by Ulmo in the arts of shipbuilding and navigation, and they become distinguished by their skill in and mastery of them, especially when they also are transported to Valinor .

All the same, they don't appear to do very much in terms of seafaring or substantial voyaging; nor do their successors the Teleri: at any rate if they do we don't get to hear anything about it. Their delight in sailing perhaps merely expressed itself in what might a little frivolously be interpreted as a series of glorified pub-crawls around the coasts of Aman and the Lonely Isle; a sort of mythic ancestor of the sailing weekends that the Northfarthing Smial used to (and perhaps will again) enjoy about the Suffolk and Essex coasts.

It is with the last of the Lost Tales, which deals with the efforts of Eriol, now in his character of Ælfwine of England, whom we encountered at the very beginning, at 'The Cottage of Lost Play' in Tol Eressea itself, to reach the Lonely Isle, that the sea, and with it the seashore, begins to take on a significance transcending that of mere stage scenery.

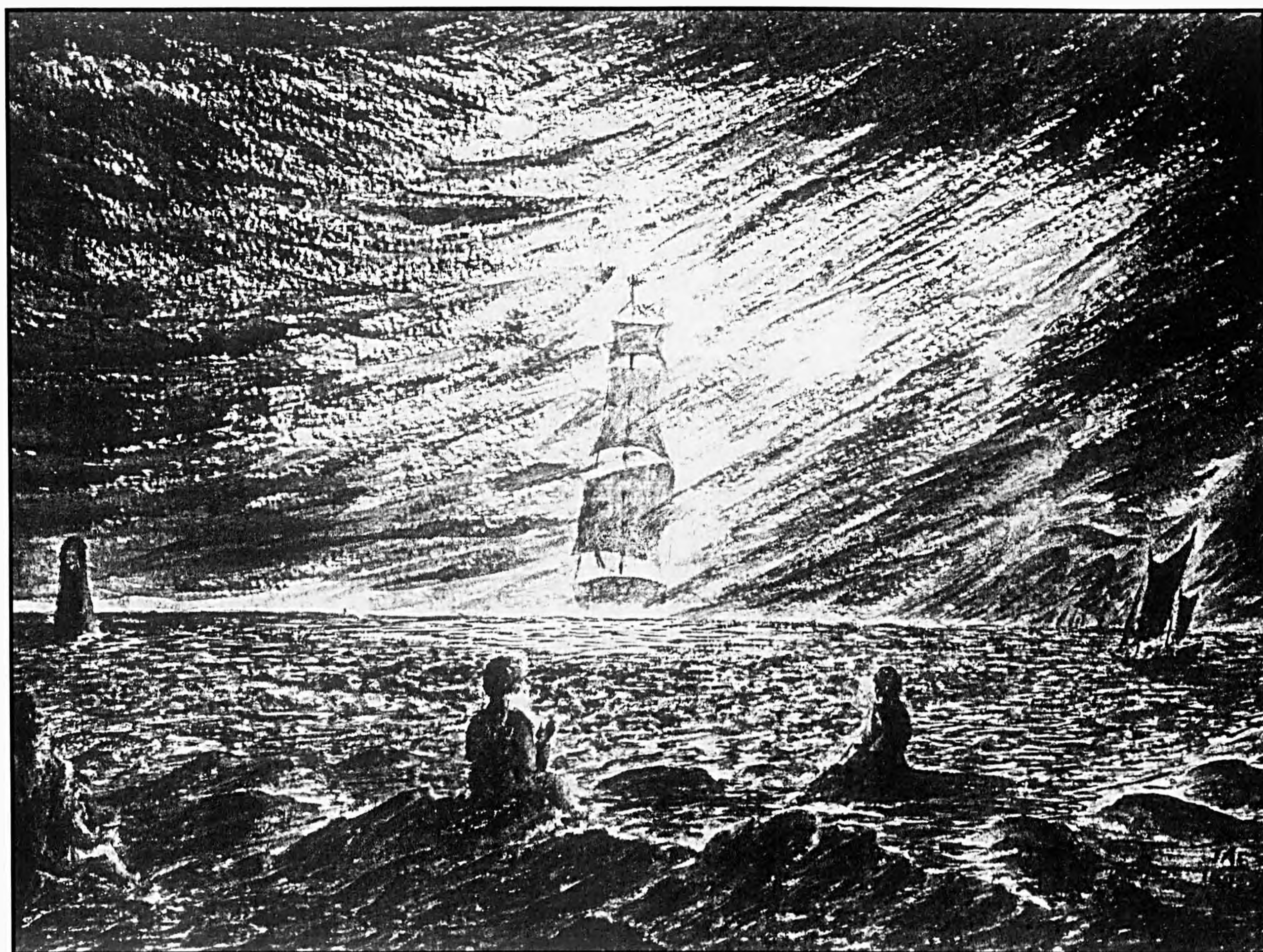
He now appears in a new tale, as a voyager from a far distant land, Belerion (Britain), battered and frustrated the perils and setbacks of the journey. Belerion is overrun by the Forodwaith, the men from the north, who may be equated with the Vikings of historical record. Ælfwine takes ship from the far south-west - in other words, Comwall. Even though all this is overlaid with layer upon layer of legend, there is underlying reality in the idea of Ælfwine as a migrant from our own world, as his Anglo-Saxon name makes clear. Therefore a structured contrast has been set up between 'our world' corresponding to Tolkien's in its guise as 'feigned history', and the mythology proper. It is hardly possible to overstate the importance of this stage in the evolution of the "legendarium" as a whole; that is actually an imprecise term because so much of it will eventually be presented in the guise of 'feigned history', the convention accepted by readers that the material simply represents a distillation of actual 'historical records', which by accident have been handed down to a later Age of the World. It is not too much to say that the confusion of 'myth' with 'history' is the driving force throughout Tolkien's 'sub'-creative life, and that the sea represents the boundary line dividing them.

In the last of the 'Lost Tales', therefore, the hostility of 'the cruel sea' has finally been awakened. Ælfwine only reaches Tol Eressea after protracted voyaging and repeated false landfalls. The sea separating Belerion from Tol Eressea and Valinor has become, very nearly, an impassable barrier. The pursuing Forodwaith, who have taken over Belerion, likewise experience shipwrecks and extreme perils. It is nevertheless a notable feature of the Tale that it contains the barest minimum of reference to the actual practice of sailing, its labours, dangers, and frequent disasters. There are descriptions of arrival or departure, but none of actual days at sea.

This will remain characteristic of Tolkien's writing throughout the remainder of his life; there is no single major scene in any of his writings actually set on board ship. The practice of seafaring is the mainstay of Aldarion's existence in the (unfinished) tale of the failed relationship with Erendis that provided a turning point in the history of Numenor. Yet while we are told about his long absences at sea, and his departures from and returns to Numenor, we hear nothing about his life as a sailor and sea-captain, or the lives of his crews. To the connoisseur of the genre of sea-stories, that would have been the most interesting thing about him.

The next major section of Tolkien's creative life represents the periods covered by volumes III and IV of Christopher Tolkien's *The History of Middle-earth*, namely *The Lays of Beleriand*, and *The Shaping of Middle-earth*. These display, conspicuously, a progressive weighting of the material in favour of the history of the Elves of Beleriand and, indeed, concentrate on an extremely limited span of time at the end of which nearly the whole of Beleriand has been overrun by Morgoth. This is reflected in the respective chronologies of Valinor and Beleriand; the former being given in multiples of years. Such events as the departure of the Elves from Valinor, their long march northwards, and their arrival and establishment on the far north-west of Middle-earth, though superficially appearing to occupy a relatively brief space of time, must correspond in mythic terms, to a *Volkwänderung* extending over perhaps several hundred years. Tolkien is being imperceptibly pulled away from his original understanding of his world purely and simply as mythology, towards something more complex and ambiguous.

Nevertheless, because so much of the *Quenta Silmarillion* is concerned with events and peoples within Beleriand itself, away from the sea, there is little opportunity for the sea, or the sea-longing, to develop as a motive in its own right, and likewise the *Lays of Beleriand* themselves do not provide anything in the way of subject-matter or scope. There are, however, two important instances where the sea does play, whether expressly or by implication, a major role; the episode of the Kinslaying and the subsequent theft of the ships of the Teleri, and that of the crossing of the Helcaraxë and the subsequent burning of the ships by order of Feanor. These episodes are associated with the curse of the Noldorin exiles proclaimed in "The Prophecy of the North," which will resonate throughout the First Age. The Helcaraxë once crossed, the Noldor, unrepentant, are (until the eventual mission of Earendil to the Valar) excluded from returning to Aman. The sea that separates Aman from Middle-earth, from having been initially an impassable barrier, or virtually so, is in the process



John Ellison ***Towards the Uttermost West (after Caspar David Friedrich)***

of becoming an impermissible one.

The next stage in the sequence consists of the early account of the Fall of Numenor contained in volume V of the *History of Middle-earth* series, *The Lost Road*. (Tolkien,1987). If one looks retrospectively at Tolkien's writing from beginning to end, this appears as a watershed in his creative life as much as *The Hobbit* does, written as it was at very much the same time as the latter was published. Christopher Tolkien has shown (Tolkien, 1997, pp 7-10) that the inception of the 'Numenorean' complex of tales arises directly from the agreement Tolkien made with C.S.Lewis that they would write, each respectively a story about time travel and space travel. The essentials of the story of Numenor and its fall of course are familiar. Those among Men who have aided the Elves ahd the Valar in the war against Morgoth are rewarded with "The Land of Gift", the island, Numenor, in the seas west of Middle-earth; they are forbidden to sail to the west, initially beyond Tol Eressea but finally, out of sight of their west coasts. After many generations they rebel against the ban, at the instigation of Sauron; in consequence Numenor is overwhelmed, and Tol Eressea and Valinor are removed from the circles of the world; sailors to the west can now only reach fresh lands and eventually return to their starting point; the world is 'made round' and the former 'straight road' to the uttermost West only remains in legend, permitted only to those Elves who are leaving Middle-earth for ever. The sea, therefore, has become a total and impassable barrier between the seen and unseen worlds.

The successive texts embodying the legend, as we now have them laid out for us in The History of Middle-earth, reveal the remarkable series of changes and variants which Tolkien introduced into the outline of the story as it evolved, especially at a time, seemingly early in 1946, when *The Lord of the Rings* still lay unfinished, and *The Notion Club Papers* had been conceived. In the end, later on in his life, with the Akallabeth, Tolkien largely returns to the original conception of the Fall of Numenor but also incorporates the new and additional material that entered the story with the Drowning of Andunie texts of the period of *The Notion Club Papers*. Christopher Tolkien interprets (Tolkien, 1992, pp 505- 7) all the inconsistencies and contradictions between these successive rewritings of the basic story as indicating that Tolkien had come to regard them as co-existing in that they could represent varying traditions surviving in the Third Age, especially traditions among Men of varying groups and origins. A letter (quoted by Christopher Tolkien here), (Carpenter, 1981, No.151, p186) illustrates this position further.

"Middle-earth ... lay then just as it does. In fact, just as it does, round and inescapable. The new situation, established

at the beginning of the Third Age, leads on eventually and inevitably to ordinary History, and we here see the process culminating. If you or I or any of the mortal men (or Hobbits) of Frodo's day had set out-over sea, west, we should, as now, eventually have come back (as now) to our starting point. Gone was the 'mythological' time when Valinor ... existed physically in the Uttermost West, or the Eldaic (Elvish) immortal isle of Eressea; or the great Isle of Westernesse (Numenor-Atlantis) ... etc."

The especial significance of the passage, and the ultimate form of the Akallabeth, is that they complete the transition from mythology to history; 'feigned history', of course, but, as the passage indicates Tolkien thought of his 'History' as leading straight on towards 'real' history. We have, in the course of journeying through *The History of Middle-earth,* turned our stance through one hundred and eighty degrees; instead of regarding mythology as a prelude from which history will ultimately evolve, we are now, as it were from the other end, looking backwards through ages of history towards the distant prospect of myth. And the essential symbol of this is the sea, not the everyday sea which encircles the 'world made round', and which has no special significance, but the former sea, now "the sundering sea", which marks the boundary that separates us from myth, the attainable from the unattainable.

The time of writing of *The Notion Club Papers* is very much that of transition between the two extremes, and it has several interesting accompaniments:

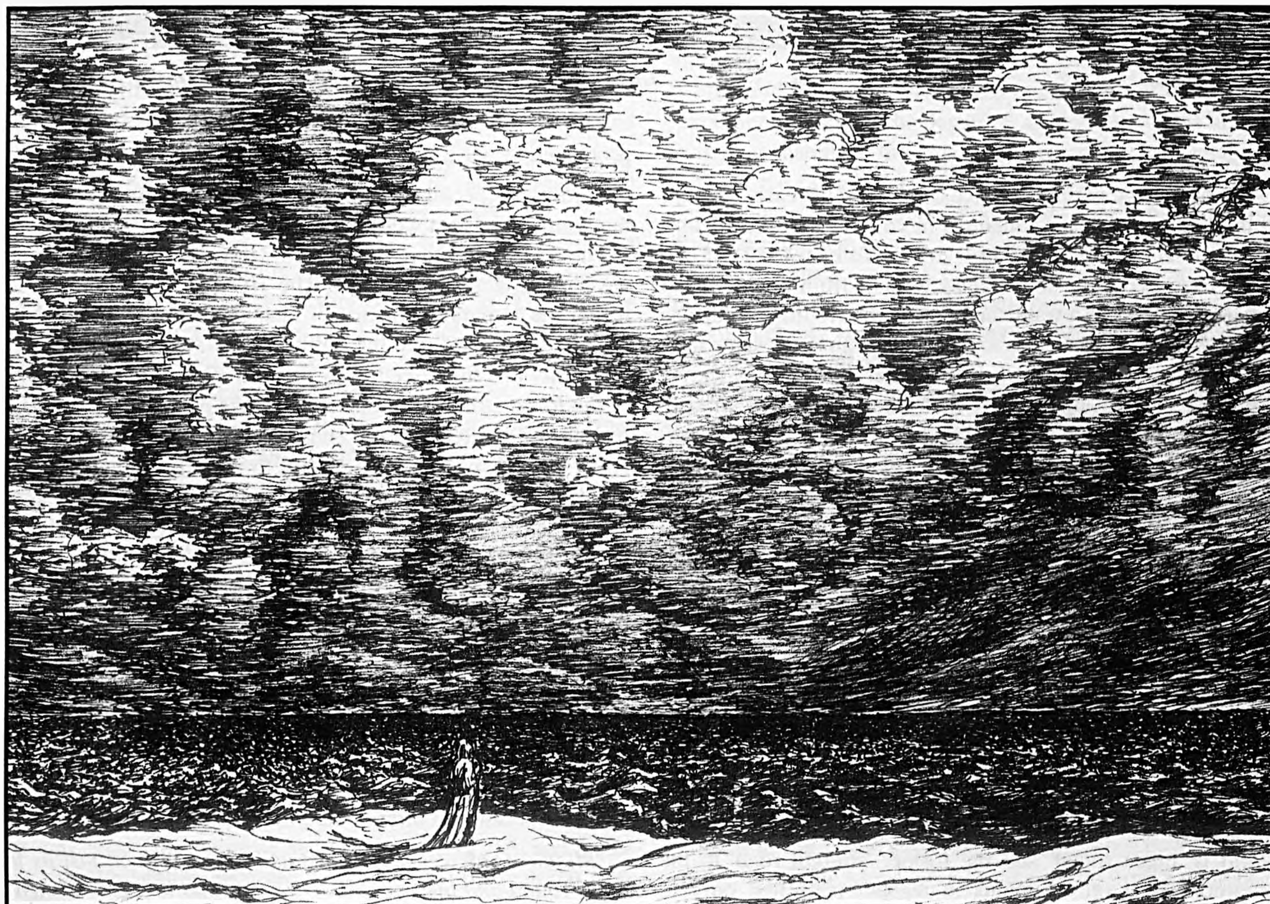
a) Arundel Lowdham's description of his father Edwin Lowdham's sailing away into the Atlantic in 1947 in his boat the "Earendel" and never returning. He had previously sailed extensively about the coasts of Ireland and north-west Europe, and had always been subject to restlessness and "the sea-longing."

b) The great storm described as occurring in 1987, and the narrative of Lowdham and Jeremy, after their disappearance and return, of their travel around the west of Ireland and Scotland and ultimately, back to Porlock in Somerset; incidentally, they appear to have travelled on land for much of the time. The remarkable feature of their story is their description of the great waves, "high as hills", which rolled over the Aran Islands and well inland from Ireland's west coasts, and yet were like phantoms and did no material damage. We are faced with something of an inconsistency here, because while the sea at this point is clearly 'symbolic' and not of the real world, the storm that breaks over Oxford in the midst of which Lowdham and Jeremy disappear, although in one sense a symbolic counterpart of the cataclysm that overwhelms Numenor, is a real storm that does quite a lot of physical damage.

c) The poem *Imram*, and its predecessor, recounting the voyage of St Brendan from the west of Ireland to the far west and the visions he experiences. However, it is the latter, and not the voyage itself, which is the focus of interest, and the saint does not vanish out of sight and mind, but does return ultimately to Ireland, if only to die there.

The mature expression of the concept of the "sundering sea" finds itself most poignantly in the concluding scene of *The Lord of the Rings,*[1] with the image of the waves lap-

John Ellison ***Maglor beside the waves (after Caspar David Friedrich)***



ping on the shores of Middle-earth, in counterpoint with that of Frodo's departure for an inaccessible destination, along the unseen 'Straight Road'. Of course the body of narrative in *The Lord of the Rings* has not provided much opportunity for enlarging the imagery of the "sundering sea" beyond the occasional reference to the departure of the Elves "sailing, sailing," into the west, leaving Middle-earth for ever; or the dream visions of Frodo himself; conversely the very idea of the sea, real or symbolic, is anathema to ordinary hobbits, who turned their faces from the hills in the west. But this final scene with the poem subtitled "Frodo's Dreme", and "The Sea-Bell", completes the progress that had started out with Tolkien's water colours and drawings of his schooldays.

"The Sea-Bell" is the late, mature version of a poem originally entitled "Looney," that had appeared many years before[2]; it recounts the story of a wanderer who is drawn to voyage west over sea to a distant land of "Faerie", his inability to meet with or communicate with its inhabitants and his eventual return to his own world, where he finds himself still under an impalpable curse, unable to converse or communicate with those around him. The implication is that he has broken some indefinable ban (as the Numenoreans broke the ban of the Valar), in journeying to what seems to be, in retrospect a forbidden land; where its former beauty and inviting aspect turn on a sudden to wintry desolation. However, these overtones of loneliness, and guilt at succumbing to the sea-longing, and journeying to the forbidden land, only enter with the mature version of the poem, which accordingly, like the final scene of *The Lord of the Rings*, displays the development of Tolkien's thought over a long period.

The entire concept of "the sundering sea" a symbolic divide between this world and the hereafter, or, if you like, between reality and the imagination, is a profoundly Romantic one, and it may be of some interest to end by seeking some kind of a parallel within the context of nineteenth century Romanticism in general. Certainly it is very much in tune with the Romantic tendency to identify Nature in all its aspects, and the phenomena of Nature, with the emotions and aspirations of mankind, and in a religious sense, with man's relationship with the divine. Likewise, for instance, German romantic poetry is from time to time apt to celebrate the poet's longing for some 'blessed realm', beyond the confines of the everyday world. It is, though, not very easy to find a close counterpart or parallel for Tolkien's concept of the sea as a purely symbolic barrier. The realities of seafaring, and the attendant dangers, tended to intrude themselves too insistently. J M W Turner painted the sea in its most hostile and disruptive aspects again and again, but he was brought up in London's dockland; his ships are real ships, and he knew what sailing was all about. It is, though, with the work of a contemporary of Turner, another artist, in a way his counterpart, that a kind of precedent can perhaps be found.

The painter in question is Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840)[3] of whom Tolkien almost quite certainly never heard; he was almost unknown in this country until the early 1970s. He was born and brought up in Pomerania, on the Baltic coast, although he spent much of his life in Dresden, where he came into contact with many of the literary circles of the time. His drawings and paintings of the sea-shore, and of ships and shipping do start out realistically and straightforwardly; (as of course in their way do Tolkien's, in the art of his schooldays and up to his 'Cornish' period). He was deeply and profoundly religious and prone to read Christian symbolism into almost every feature or manifestation of Nature that he painted, the moon, rainbows, the seasons, and so forth. The seashore provided a considerable proportion of his subject matter; a famous instance is "A Monk by the Seashore", a strange and visionary conception in which a solitary figure placed on a wide strand stares out at a huge expanse of sea, seemingly into infinity[4]. Others show figures in the dress of the period (or old German costume), including the painter himself, sitting or standing on the seashore gazing on over the sea at spectral ships which advance towards the picture plane or recede from it, and which are thought to symbolise 'the stages of life'[5] (the title of one such painting) (Borsch-Supan 1974, op. cit. illus. pl. 52) or man's relationship with death and the hereafter. I have tried to point the comparison by painting (and drawing) an evocation of the final scene of *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam with Merry and Pippin by the Grey Havens, hearing the sound of the waves lapping "on the shores of Middle-earth," gazing out over the sea, as Frodo's ship, now spectral and removed from the world, bears him away along the straight road.

References

1. See illustration, "Towards the Uttermost West", (after Caspar David Friedrich).
2. In 1934. (Flieger, 1997, pp 208 et.seq.)
3. As to Friedrich, see Helmut Borsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich* (English edition. Thames & Hudson 1974 - originally published in German; Prestel-Verlag, Munich).
4. See the illustration "after Friedrich", "Maglor beside the waves".
5. See also "Moonrise over the sea." (Borsch-Supan 1974, op. cit. illus. pl. 34).

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