

Ulrike Draesner, *Nibelungen . Heimsuchung*. With illustrations by Carl Otto Czeschka (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2016). Print, 132 pp., €39.95, ISBN: 9783150110058.



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*Review*

Reclam has a new look, and there is surely no better debut for it than this work, a collection of modern German poetry and prose by Ulrike Draesner, in which so many aspects of scholarship converge. Having acquired the rights to the 1908 *Nibelungen* illustrations by Carl Otto Czeschka, Reclam gave free rein to Draesner in the composition of lyric to accompany them in a new publication: a beautiful, hard-cover, 250mm volume with full-page, colour illustrations and prints by Czeschka strategically placed throughout.

As Czeschka's illustrations themselves inspired Austrian director Fritz Lang in the creation of his 1924 epic silent film, so, too did they inspire the at once monumental and lamenting atmosphere for Draesner's composition. However, the medievalist will notice that Draesner also takes inspiration from the Middle High German epic, itself a linguistic and literary monument, as well as an important cornerstone in the understanding of Germanic cultural history. Draesner, who returns to Oxford as visiting fellow at New College, fondly recalled her time as a student in Oxford, and her encounter with the *Nibelungenlied*.

The overarching theme of Draesner's work is Krimhild's foreshadowing dream. As a young woman, her fate is sealed; she dreams of a falcon that is attacked by two eagles, and is told by her mother that the falcon symbolises her future husband, Sigfried. This is highlighted by the chorus of crows, the *Burgkrähen*, who observe the events of the story in a bird-like use of language. Fate and destiny are part of the tapestry of myth and legend that here underpins the individual psychology of the figures, a perspective not apparent in the epic.

The verse is marked by an interplay between language and the senses; the poetry is onomatopoeic and rhythmic, and inspires imagination through images and sound. At times there are words and phrases inserted in English, Middle High German or Latin. Czeschka's images provide a kind of metaphor for the medieval myth of the *Nibelungenlied*, and the smaller portraits of the characters are placed more than once, alone or paired with others, to interact with the text. Some pages feature a line of verse or prose at the bottom in a tiny font, and are reminiscent of a chorus.

The book comprises four sections, each an internalised monologue for the four main heroes of the epic: Krimhild, Sîvrit, Brünhild and Hagen. Krimhild and Brünhild speak as if alone, each in her own mind, of pain, sorrow and shame. Sîvrit speaks at times to himself in the second person, as if in self-portraiture, and embodies the famous hero of the epic, his boldness and self-assuredness marked by direct, less-contemplative speech, and a verse that has been struck through. Hagen's complexity of character comes through in his meandering monologue that is at times introspective, at other times practical, the tragic parts of the epic played out in his lyric: the prophecy crossing the Danube, the journey to Etzel's court, and bloody death.

After the heroes' sections follow some that are set apart. After Hagen's death is a dialogue between Krimhild's sons, Ortlieb and Gunther, speaking in juvenile slang about their mother and 'uncle Hagen' while playing a computer game. Fifteen stories, or novellas, finish the book, each telling the *Nibelungen* story from a different perspective or according to a certain theme, the avian and water memes always central, as is a prevailing elusiveness. This is where Draesner's prose comes to the fore, replete with imagery and sound, light and shadow. The volume concludes with notes, a short piece on Czeschka and a bibliography.

The *Nibelungenlied* material has undergone many transformations in its centuries-long lifetime, incorporating and assimilating local and contemporary

currents from the *Völkerwanderung* and Nordic sagas, to courtly ideals, knightly ethics, and the birth of nationalism and linguistic scholarship. Likewise, art — from woodcut to pre-Raphaelite painting, from opera to Viennese *Jugendstil* and *art deco* cinema — took up the material's haunting themes. Now, in the new century, Ulrike Draesner's volume of lyric monologues and romance novellas is a worthy continuation of that tradition.

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