

ECOLOGY in MIDDLE-EARTH

Patrick Curry

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In a Foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (*TLoTR*), J.R.R. Tolkien condemns allegory as the attempt by an author to dominate readers, but he applauds what he calls ‘applicability’ as the freedom of readers to find what meanings they would. A quarter of a century ago, I availed myself of the idea of applicability in order to suggest that Tolkien’s great work presented itself in three overlapping spheres: community (the Shire), the natural world (Middle-earth), and spiritual values (the Sea). As the story begins all three are in severe crisis, but by the end it has been resolved, albeit only just, and at great cost.

In this talk, I want to concentrate on the second aspect, nature. The observation that Middle-earth is a character in its own right has now become a truism.¹ But there’s a truth behind it, an important one: it’s the difference between a character and a stage-prop. And the most fundamental characteristic of the more-than-human natural world of Middle-earth is that it is non-modern.² It has not been made over by or for us, not forcibly converted, either culturally or materially, into an inert set of ‘natural resources’ for industrialism to consume or ‘ecosystem services’ for it to exploit. This is not to say that nature isn’t *used* by the peoples living there, of course; it is no paradise. But for the most part, it is used sustainably, in culturally-reinforced ways, rather than brutally destroyed or ruthlessly exploited.

But even where that is happening – which we shall get to in a moment – the key point is that the natural world of Middle-earth is *alive*. And my conjecture is that that sense, as it comes through the pages of the story, appeals to the collective memory (often deeply buried, it is true) of a living natural world – the one that humans have lived in for much the greater part of their history on Earth. So it reminds us of what that feels like, and maybe even suggests that it might still be possible.

I don’t mean alive in the idealist sense of being a single, unified, super-natural entity. Nor do I mean it in the scientific sense of biologically, that is, technically alive – a criterion which leaves most the Earth dead. I mean that Middle-earth itself possesses the interlinked properties of agency, subjectivity and personality, which manifest through and as its parts.

At various times and in various ways, not only its non-human animals but the rivers, mountains and forests we encounter also act that way. Not a single one is generic, or merely an ‘environment’: that is, a backdrop to the all-absorbing human drama. The word ‘encounter’ should also remind us that those properties are not universally or necessarily true, in the manner of so-called laws of nature, whether they are construed materially or spiritually. Rather they unpredictably come true in the lived experience of the people, both human and nonhuman, who make their way through Middle-earth, and for the readers making their way through the tale.

Tolkien declared that ‘In all my works I take the part of trees against all their enemies’.³ The mood (and I use the word advisedly) of Mirkwood, from *The Hobbit*, is dark and

¹ See the second paragraph of

<http://www.patrickcurry.co.uk/papers/Review%20of%20Forest%20&%20City%20-%20PCs%20final%20edit.pdf>

² ‘More-than-human’: from David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage, 1997). And non-modern more than pre-modern; the latter term tends to distract by facilitating fruitless debates about periodization.]

³ Letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* (30 June 1972); J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2006) 419.

unfriendly. The trees of the Old Forest too ‘do not like strangers. They watch you.’⁴ Old Man Willow deliberately targets the hobbits. Lothlórien is also unique but in a very different way. It is, in Aragorn’s words, ‘the heart of Elvendom on earth’, and the Elves themselves are exemplars of natural enchantment.⁵ Most of the species of plants of Tolkien’s own creation grow in Lothlórien: *mellyrn* or mallorn, *elanor* and *niphredil*.⁶

Fangorn Forest is fully realised in the Ents who live there and mind it, particularly Treebeard; and the Ents are compelling not because they are humanoid (‘a non-human creature with human form or characteristics’) but precisely because they are sentient and mobile *trees*. In other words, we don’t meet them as honorary humans in tree-form but on the wild and levelling common ground of shared more-than-human sentience. (Sometimes I think truly understanding nature could be summed up as, ‘It’s not about us.’)

On another occasion, when Aragorn breathes upon and crushes two leaves of *athelas* or king’s foil for Faramir, ‘straightway a living freshness filled the room, as if the air itself awoke and tingled, sparkling with joy.’⁷

But trees, forests and other plants are not the only beings in Middle-earth with agency; some are non-organic. The mountain Caradhras *actively* prevents the Company of the Ring from crossing the Redhorn Pass by bringing down on them storm and snow, stopping only when that intention – what Aragorn calls its ‘ill will’ – has been accomplished. And on the stairs of Cirith Ungol, when Frodo laughs in that dire place, ‘a long clear laugh from the heart... To Sam suddenly it seemed as if all the stones were listening and the tall rocks leaning over them.’⁸

That ‘seemed’ could be misleading. Consistent with Middle-earth’s non-modernity and, I believe, with Tolkien’s own intentions, I think we should take completely seriously the forest’s mood, the mountain’s malice, the air’s joy, the stones listening. To quote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (a great opponent of scientism), ‘If everything behaves as though a sign had meaning, then it does have meaning.’⁹ More specifically, it has the meaning it ‘seems’ to have. That is the most economical, respectful, and truthful assumption to make.

At this point someone might be tempted to wheel out the usual armoury of modernist defences used to police nature and protect human privilege – you *thought* or *imagined* these things but *actually*, you were *projecting* them onto what is incapable of them; you may even be guilty of *anthropomorphizing*. To them I would say: check your epistemological privilege! Those weapons are based on a set of assumptions and values (originally Platonic, latterly Cartesian) which are deeply problematic. Indeed, comparing them to the indigenous and aboriginal human baseline of a *living* nature, which is far deeper and older, reveals them as what they always were: not an ‘objective’ scientific account but a set of recent and aberrant interventions in the service of what the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood defined as the over-arching project of modernity: the mastery of nature, including human nature.¹⁰ In other words, they are intended to *bring about* what they purport to merely describe: an inert nature,

⁴ *TLotR* 110. (All references are to the paperback edition of 2012.)

⁵ *TLotR* 352. On the Elves and enchantment, see J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2006) 146.

⁶ See Dinah Hazell, *The Plants of Middle-earth: Botany and Sub-creation* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2006) and Walter S. and Graham A. Judd, *Flora of Middle-earth: Plants of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Legendarium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁷ *TLotR* 865.

⁸ *TLotR* 712.

⁹ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001 [1921]) 3.328.

¹⁰ *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1992).

which can be commodified, controlled, exploited or destroyed at will. (Considerations of ethics don't arise for objects, you see; only for other subjects.)

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Tolkien ultimately wrote as an artist crafting a tale. He naturally put his own values into it but they were a mixed bag, as for all of us, and he rightly felt no obligation to be logically consistent, as if he were writing an allegory or tract. Thus there are several different attitudes and practices towards nature in *TLotR*. Let's see what they are.

One is what I have just been describing. Its extreme expression in *TLotR* is Sauron's Mordor. Here the attitude to nature is entirely instrumental and power-over; it is *only* regarded as something to be used. Tolkien accurately portrays the inevitable result:

Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about. High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light.¹¹

Almost indistinguishable is the brutal utilitarianism of Saruman, in imitation of Sauron. As Treebeard describes him, 'He is plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment.'¹² But the terminus of the two is identical. When Saruman rules the Shire, in Farmer Cotton's words, 'They're always a-hammering and a-letting out a stench... And they've fouled all the lower Water, and it's getting down into Brandywine. If they want to make the Shire into a desert, they're going the right way about it.'¹³

Yet this attitude goes beyond exploitation to encompass a hatred of natural beauty and vitality as such. As Cotton adds, 'There's no longer even any bad sense in it.'¹⁴ Treebeard points to 'orc-mischief': 'Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot'.¹⁵ And Legolas observes of Orcs that 'No other folk make such a trampling. It seems their delight to slash and beat down growing things that are not even in their way.'¹⁶ Tolkien puts his finger here on a perversely malevolent knot in the human psyche – perverse because it is self-destructive, too.

The strongest possible contrast is, of course, with the love of nature, especially by the Elves. Tolkien describes them as 'natural, far more natural than [humans]', with 'a devoted love of the physical world, and a desire to observe and understand it for its own sake and as "other"... not as a material for use or as a power-platform.'¹⁷ He also refers to their chief motive as 'the adornment of [the] earth, and the healing of its hurts.'¹⁸

Tolkien defined enchantment itself as 'a love and respect for all things, "animate" and "inanimate", an unpossessive love of them as "other"'.¹⁹ Note how that understanding,

¹¹ *TLotR* 631.

¹² *TLotR* 473.

¹³ *TLotR* 1013.

¹⁴ *TLotR* 1013.

¹⁵ *TLotR* 474.

¹⁶ *TLotR* 419.

¹⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988 [1964] 10; *Letters* 236.

¹⁸ *Letters* 151-52.

¹⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major*, extended edition, ed. Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins, 2005) 101.

including the lack of any sharp distinction between animate and inanimate, returns us to the living non-modern nature with which we started. (The only modern place in all of Middle-earth – with a centralized state, highly-developed bureaucratic administration, heavy industry, slave-based agriculture, intense military apparatus and aggressive foreign policy – is of course Mordor.)

The Elves' love of the Earth is not necessarily simple, however. There are two variants, both of which are recognised in contemporary environmental (or as I would rather say, ecological) philosophy. The first is usually called *stewardship*, and it is largely of Christian provenance (or has come to be seen that way), drawing its warrant from Genesis 1:24 and 2:15. In its simplest terms, since the Earth and all its creatures are God's creations they share something of His value, so it is humanity's responsibility to take care of them. Stewardship exists in tension with the *dominion thesis*, which draws its warrant from Genesis 1:26, 28, according to which humanity has 'dominion over' all creatures and therefore – in the commonest interpretation, whether or not it is the 'correct' one – we can basically do whatever we want with them or to them.

Not surprisingly, given that Tolkien was both a great defender of trees and a committed practising Catholic, stewardship found its way into *TLotR* – explicitly so insofar as, in his own words, 'Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved'.²⁰ And the Ents are themselves stewards to the trees of Fangorn Forest (Treebeard uses the image of shepherds).²¹

This understanding co-exists, however, with a second variant of a loving relationship with nature. It is one which actually resonates more closely with Tolkien's own definition of enchantment as love of all things 'as other', that is, for their own sake rather than for God's, even. Such an attitude entails a recognition and respect for the intrinsic value of the Earth and Earthlings, as opposed to their instrumental, use- or exchange-value. The best overall name for it is *ecocentrism*, as opposed to anthropocentrism, which finds value mostly or even only in humans alone.²² (Theocentrism, where the 'theo-' is the one true God of monotheism, is another contrast; but in practice, since God putatively made 'man' in His own image, it functions overwhelmingly as a place-holder for human-centredness.)

There are at least two clear instances of ecocentrism in *TLotR*. In one, Goldberry, when asked if the Old Forest belonged to Bombadil, replies, almost shocked: "No indeed! ... The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves." And gradually the hobbits 'began to understand the lives of the Forest, apart from themselves, indeed to feel themselves as the strangers where all other things were at home'.²³

In the second instance Frodo, in Lothlórien, 'laid his hand upon the tree beside the ladder: never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within it. He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester' – that is, not even as steward – 'nor as carpenter'. Rather 'it was the delight of the living tree itself'.²⁴ So the tree as itself was what mattered – not what a human could do with it, or even for it.

Finally, there is another term and associated concept, and value. It returns us to my earlier point about way-making: making one's way through Middle-earth, whether as a denizen or a reader (another kind of denizen). *Animism* is the principled habit, as one goes through life, of remaining open to agency and subjectivity no matter where and how they

²⁰ Letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* (30 June 1972); *Letters* 419.

²¹ *TLotR* 468.

²² For more, see my *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*, 2nd rev. edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

²³ *TLotR* 124, 129-30.

²⁴ *TLotR* 351.

manifest, and to any relationship that ensues – often one that results in learning something new.²⁵ So we can think of animism as an important part of ecocentrism in practice.

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I must admit that I have been living with ecocentrism, the idea and the intention, at least, for so long that I am forgetting how to understand its contrary. Why exactly is it so important that everything be for or about us humans? At any event, at the closing of the *TLotR* we are heading into the Fourth Age, or ‘the Age of Men’, which always gives me a somewhat sinking feeling. It has already been named ‘the Anthropocene’, and however dispassionately the term was meant by geologists it has been seized upon with unmistakable triumphalism by followers not of stewardship but the dominion thesis, who seem to think – against all the weight of evidence – that they have not only the right but the *ability* to ‘manage’ the Earth – solely for our benefit, of course.

Did Tolkien foresee this development, as he seems to have foreseen ecological devastation generally (terminating in the desolation of Mordor), genetic engineering (the man-orcs of Saruman), and transhumanist cyborgs condemned to ‘limitless serial longevity’ which they confuse with immortality (the Ringwraiths)?²⁶ I don’t know, but they are there in his book. So too are the seeds of resistance, in line with Elrond’s admonition: ‘There is naught you can do, other than to resist, with hope or without it’.²⁷ And *TLotR* has helped inspire at least two eco-activist movements in the so-called real world.

One was in 1972, when David McTaggart sailed his boat into a nuclear testing zone in the Pacific. This action led directly to the formation of Greenpeace. He wrote, ‘I had been reading *The Lord of the Rings*. I could not help thinking of parallels between our own little fellowship and the long journey of the hobbits into...Mordor’.²⁸

Another instance was the courageous and surprisingly successful movement in the mid-1990s to resist the Thatcher government’s programme of building large, new, intrusive and unnecessary roads in the remaining English countryside. I can personally attest that many, almost certainly most of its campaigners not only knew *TLotR* but were living it. (Proponents of one bypass, set to run through Dartmoor, attacked them as ‘Middle Earth Hobbits [sic]’.²⁹

When he was asked by Merry whose side in the War of the Ring he was on, Treebeard replied, ‘I am not altogether on anybody’s *side*, because nobody is altogether on my side... nobody cares for the woods as I care for them’. But I like to think that even Treebeard would have been impressed by those activists. And he added that ‘there are some things, of course, whose side I am altogether *not* on’.³⁰ For those of us who are also altogether not on that side, the thought of standing alongside an ancient living creature of the forests and the Earth itself should surely strengthen our conviction and our will.

Thank you.

²⁵ See Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) and Graham Harvey (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Durham: Acumen, 2013).

²⁶ *Letters* 267. See my ‘Fantasy in transhumanism and Tolkien’, *The Ecological Citizen* 4:1 (2020) 23-4, accessible at <https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/article.php?t=fantasy-transhumanism-tolkien>

²⁷ *TLotR* 242.

²⁸ Quoted in Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 108.

²⁹ Quoted in Veldman 110.

³⁰ *TLotR* 472; emphasis in the original.