

Tree by Tolkien

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Introduction

This paper started life as a contribution to the conference at the University of Zurich on 15 March 2025 on 'Environmentalism in Tolkien's World'. I would like to qualify that term, as it applies to my paper, in two ways. With respect, I am wary of the words 'environment' and 'environmental'. Both etymologically and very often in its usage, the word describes that which merely surrounds, like a stage-set, the star of the show: human beings. And that tendency, already implicit in the word, is itself part of the ecocrisis; human exceptionalism, to say nothing of narcissism. For this reason I prefer 'ecology' and 'ecological', which denote relationships, both within and between communities, whose members include us. So they encourage, at least, a self-understanding as the embodied, embedded, interdependent and, however remarkable, limited creatures we actually are.

Another point to note is that while I will indeed be addressing the different kinds of 'environmentalism' and their implications in Tolkien's work, I am equally concerned with the effects of that literary artifact in and on what gets to be called 'reality'. Indeed, they can hardly be separated. Middle-earth is part of the great world – of course – which in turn what what populates and animates Middle-earth.¹

The final preliminary calls us to question how we should, and should not, talk about a theme or motif in Tolkien's fiction when it is neither philosophical as such, nor analytical, theoretical, or theological, let alone prescriptive or normative. The answer lies in Tolkien's defence of 'applicability': the ability and right of a reader to find the story meaningful in terms of their own life and experience. The contrast he draws, of course, is with 'allegory': the attempt by the author to restrict the meanings of their text to certain pre-determined ones, and to impose them, so far as possible, on the reader.² This is not necessarily to impugn allegory; it is a kind of applicability, after all, and without it, we wouldn't have *Animal Farm*, for example, or *Pilgrim's Progress*. But there is little question that allegory is a more restricted and restrictive mode; even, arguably, less creative.

Favouring applicability ties in with another of Tolkien's preferences, namely 'a point too often forgotten: that is the effect produced now by these old things in the stories as they are', such things being 'a particular use in a particular situation' of any motif.³ This focus he contrasts favourably with the scholarly search for origins, sources and influences. Again, I am not going to cast aspersions on the latter and its treasure-trove of findings. But I happen to agree with Tolkien, and intend to heed his call.

¹ My initial foray into this topic was *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*, rev. 2nd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004 [1997]).

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: HarperCollins, 2012): xxii.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988 [1964] pp. 9-73: 32; J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Revised and Expanded Edition, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2023): 587.

In this paper, then, the theme or motif is nature in Tolkien's fiction, and its meanings, resonances and implications for contemporary readers.⁴ Or rather than 'nature' we might, following David Abram's lead, call it the 'more-than-human natural world', meaning a natural world which includes that animal the human being but also vastly exceeds us.⁵

As I mentioned a moment ago, however, it matters how we go about analyzing and discussing such motifs. Here what matters is that for the literary practice of fiction – including, obviously, *The Lord of the Rings* (*TLoR*) – in both its creation and its reception, the story is paramount. Therefore it must also be paramount in how we treat it. On pain of reductionism, particularly of reducing the story to a kind of philosophical allegory, the relevant idea (such as 'nature') is to be understood as inhering in the story as a whole and its elements ('Fangorn', say), and dependent – or supervenient, a philosopher might say – on them, not the other way round. The story is not a 'vehicle' for the idea. Rather, as Seamus Heaney says of a successful poem, 'the movement is always from delight to wisdom and not vice-versa.'⁶ But such an approach does not entail the absence of discursive or theoretical ideas, even though they are only implicit in the story. Nor does narrative primacy mean that such ideas cannot be stated as, broadly speaking, propositions.

Unsurprisingly, Tolkien himself was sure of the primacy of story, including his own – 'I neither preach nor teach'.⁷ So sure, in fact, that he could allow himself to describe it in terms which, without such an understanding, could easily lend themselves to reductionism: for example, regarding magic and enchantment, '[t]he Elves are there (in my tales) to demonstrate the difference'; 'my "elves" are only a representation...of a part of human nature'; and 'The Hobbits are, of course, really meant to be a branch of the specifically human race...'⁸ But once narrative primacy is granted, it is safe to analytically distinguish the theme of the natural world of Middle-earth, and the different kinds of relationships to it in the story, as an important part of what so many readers of the story are apprehending, and to which they are responding.

Nature in Tolkien's Middle-earth

Do I really need to make a case that the natural world is tremendously important in *TLoR*, and was to Tolkien himself? It's tempting to think not, but let me supply a few reminders. Taking only trees as a metonymic stand-in for all nature, I could mention the fact that like virtually all the places in *TLoR*, out of which the story is made and the beings who live there are constituted, in, from, and as – Elves and forests (or what Amber Lehnig calls 'Celtic wilderness'), Dwarves and mountains (which she calls 'Germanic wilderness'), and hobbits and their well-ordered countryside of the Shire ('English wilderness'), not to mention Ents and Fangorn – Middle-earth's forests are never generic.⁹ Rather, each one – Fangorn, the Old

⁴ For an essay on how this theme relates to others in *TLoR* – primarily death, power, wonder, and fate – see my as yet unpublished paper 'Understanding *The Lord of the Rings*' (originally 'Themes in *TLoR*').

⁵ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

⁶ He is paraphrasing Robert Frost: 'A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom'.

⁷ *Letters* 581.

⁸ *Letters* 205, 209 and cf. 265; *Letters* 219.

⁹ Amber Lehnig, *The Map of Wilderland. Ecocritical Reflections on Tolkien's Myth of Wilderness* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2022). See also Jeffers (ref. 17), Campbell (ref. 36), and the essays by Andrea Denecamp, "'Transform stalwart trees": Sylvan Biocentrism in *The Lord of the Rings*', Magdalena Mączyńska, 'On Trees of Middle-earth: J.R.R. Tolkien's Mythical Creation', and Doris McGonagill, 'In Living Memory: Tolkien's Trees and Sylvan Landscapes as Metaphors of Cultural Memory', pp. 1-28, 119-138 and 139-170 respectively in Martin Simonson (ed.), *Representations of Nature in Middle-earth* (Zurich: Walking Tree Books, 2015).

Forest, Mirkwood, Woody End, and Lothlórien – has a distinctively unique personality. And that last word, in this context, is apposite; we often experience many of the places in *TLotR* as living, sentient personalities, just as we sometimes do in our own personal encounters with nature. So the principle of parsimony alone demands we take that experience seriously – and all the more so when the dominant culture attempts to preserve human privilege just by denying personhood to anyone or anything not technically alive, and even then to only the supposedly most sentient or ‘advanced’ beings (which just happen to be us). Tolkien himself defines ‘life’ as ‘the community of living things’ – *all* living things – and his work reflects that truth.¹⁰

Then there are all the individual trees who figure so importantly in the story (again, I say ‘who’ not ‘which’ deliberately, in recognition that they figure, both in the story as a whole and to the characters within the story not as objects or things but as non-human, and specifically dentritic, *persons*: the Two Trees of Valinor (Telperion and Laurelin), the Party Tree, Old Man Willow, The White Tree (Galathilion) and, of course, Treebeard, who is clearly not anthropomorphic, an honorary or sentimentalized or disguised human being, but a *sentient tree*.¹¹ There are also Tolkien’s several invented (or imaginally discovered?) species of plants, including, of trees, not only the Two Trees and the White Tree but, unforgettably, the *Mallorn* of Lothlórien.¹²

Inclining to the same point are Tolkien’s confession to being ‘much in love with plants and above all trees’, and to having always taken ‘the part of trees as against all their enemies’.¹³ Then there are the Black Pine in the Oxford Botanic Gardens that he loved, and the Birch Tree in his front garden which he described as his ‘totem tree’.¹⁴ More tantalizing still is his reference to *TLotR* as ‘my own internal Tree’.¹⁵

I won’t take any more time to tell you what you already know, so let me turn to what I see as the principal orientations and ways of living in relation to the natural world in Tolkien’s fiction. (I shall concentrate on *TLotR* as Tolkien’s most successful work, both in literary and popular terms.) And let me say that although my own preferences are probably clear, I see *all* these perspectives and values at work in *TLotR*, with none dominating to the point of excluding any other.

Anthropocentrism 1

The first such is *anthropocentrism*: that is, human-centredness. And right away, let me clear up a common, not to say vulgar, misunderstanding. Of course we must apprehend, value and so on *as* human beings. But it does not follow that *what* we apprehend or value can only be human. As David Wiggins puts it, ‘The human scale of value is by no means exclusively a scale of *human* values.’¹⁶ Indeed, in the case of anthropocentrism, we might say that its failing, and how it fails both us and the natural world, is just that it is blind to any value but

¹⁰ *Letters* 561. There is a perfectly good word for such a world and approach to it: animism. See Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), and *idem* (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Durham: Acumen, 2013).

¹¹ One could add the Tree in *Leaf by Niggle*.

¹² Plural: *mellryn*. See Dinah Hazell, *The Plants of Middle-earth: Botany and Sub-creation* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2006); and Walter S. Judd and Graham A. Judd, *Flora of Middle-Earth: Plants of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Legendarium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Both are excellent.

¹³ *Letters* 320, 589.

¹⁴ Black Pine: from Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Birch Tree: Clyde S. Kilby, *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976) 21.

¹⁵ *Letters* 454.

¹⁶ David Wiggins, ‘Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values,’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (2000) 1-32: 16. My emphasis.

human (and usually a very limited set thereof). The anthropocentric understanding and treatment of nature is mainly if not solely concerned with human benefits alone, which result from what Susan Jeffers calls ‘power over nature’.¹⁷

Anthropocentrism in *TLotR* comes in two kinds. One is the straightforward, ruthless and instrumental exploitation of whatever can be used, and usually destruction of whatever cannot. Again, there are two varieties of this approach: Sauronic and Sarumanic. The first derives from, and extends, the nexus of Sauron himself, ‘the Lord of magic and machines’, who is possessed of, and by, ‘a lust for domination’ and ‘power in this world’;¹⁸ the Ring of Power, itself a kind of Megamachine¹⁹ concentrating and extending the malevolent will-to-power while restricting it to only one user; and Mordor, a bitter and poisoned wasteland wherein Sauron is rooted in a kind of parody of the way Elves are rooted in forests and Dwarves in mountains, and where the Ring was forged. I need hardly remind you of the consequences of Sauronic anthropocentrism for nature, as evidenced by the desolation before Mordor: ‘a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing – unless the Great Sea should enter in and wash it with oblivion’.²⁰

The second variety of exploitative anthropocentrism is Sarumanic. The mind of Saruman, a renowned wizard, is described by Treebeard as having ‘a mind of metal and wheels’,²¹ thus reiterating the common etymological root, and substantive sympathy between, magic and machines. Now Saruman’s exploitative anthropocentrism apparently differs somewhat from the preceding kind, invoking as it does ‘the high and ultimate purpose’ (with which Sauron no longer bothers) of “‘Knowledge, Rule, Order’”.²² I am reminded of Val Plumwood’s definition of the agenda of modernity: ‘the rational mastery of nature’, including human nature.²³ But I believe this difference is illusory, for three reasons.

One, the terminus is identical; given just a bit longer, it is plain that Orthanc would have become another version of, if not an homage to, Barad-dûr, and Fangorn, when its ‘resources’ were exhausted by Isengard’s military-industrial economy, another Mordor. (‘Resources’, in this context – so apparently reasonable, neutral, straightforward – is a weasel word which almost always signals anthropocentric self-interest at work.) Two, Saruman’s rationality is a sham; he is in fact ruled by an overriding desire is to obtain the Ring of Power. And three, Saruman was a quisling, working in the end for Sauron under the latter’s direction via a palantir. The applicability I take home here is that if we fall for the anthropocentric, technocratic, ‘scientific’ politics of the various Sarumans (whether of the ‘Left’ or ‘Right’), we shall still end up with a lifeless desolation and despair that is at the furthest possible point from the thriving, healthy and promising nature which we and all beings need in order to survive, let alone flourish.

Anthropocentrism 2

The second kind of anthropocentrism is *stewardship*, which Jeffers calls ‘power from nature’. Now the preceding stance above received important, even formative, support from none other than God, in Genesis 1:26: “‘let [men] have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the

¹⁷ Susan Jeffers, *Arda Inhabited: Environmental Relationships in The Lord of the Rings* (Kent: Kent State UP, 2014).

¹⁸ *Letters* 205; *Letters* 212; J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988 [1964] pp. 9-73: 50).

¹⁹ From Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine*, 2 vol. (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovitch, 1967. 1970).

²⁰ *TLotR* 361.

²¹ *TLotR* 473.

²² *TLotR* 259.

²³ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge: 1993).

fowl of the air, and...over all the Earth”’. Then in Genesis 1:28 He goes on to instruct man to ‘replenish the Earth, and subdue it; and have dominion...over every living thing that moveth upon the Earth’. Hence the ‘dominion thesis’. (It’s beyond my pay-scale to say whether this statement merely rationalized and strengthened an attitude and practice already well-established or instituted it, but my money, such as it is, is on the former.)²⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly, stewardship also can claim support from the same august source: ‘And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it’ (Genesis 2:15). The idea here is that since nature was created by God it must be essentially good, so it is humankind’s responsibility to take care of it – as a gardener would, like Samwise from the Shire, where gardeners are held in honour. (Although more generally, looking at the historical record of human-nonhuman relationships, one would have to say that the dominion interpretation of Genesis, unleashing its potential as human domination, has proved much more popular.)

There are clear indications that stewardship plays an important role in *TLotR*, in addition to high place given to gardening. Most obviously, the Ents are the shepherds – that is, stewards – of trees. Secondly, ‘Lothlórien is beautiful,’ says Tolkien, ‘because there the trees were loved’ by the Elves.²⁵ Thirdly, as Gandalf reminds Denethor, ‘I also am a steward’.²⁶ We might also recall Gimli’s touchingly tender attitude to care of the Glittering Caves. These points carry considerable weight.

A genuine and complex question thus hangs over stewardship: is it anthropocentric or not? The same question applies to what Dickerson and Evans term ‘feraculture’. (About their other types, ‘agriculture’ and ‘horticulture’, there is no such question.)²⁷ In other words, do we (if we do) take care of the garden or Earth and its non-human inhabitants because it’s good for *us* to do so, or for *their* sakes? Or, of course, some mixture of the two.

On the one hand, ‘The heart of stewardship is the obligation to care for something which does *not* belong to you’. Then dominion and exploitation can be identified as ‘an abuse of a sound principle’ (as far as it goes, at least).²⁸ However, if we tend to and take care of the natural world primarily because God – in whose image we are supposedly made (Genesis 1:26) – told us to, then the ultimate locus of value and legitimacy is not the intrinsic value of nature itself but a transcendental off-planet deity with a special relationship with humanity alone. This would obviously tip the balance towards anthropocentrism, and arguably dominion again. Which in turn suggests that although it is a distinct improvement on the outright exploitative version, and furthermore has its place in the range of caring responses to the natural world, eventually, by promoting too narrow and short-term a focus with human self-interest at its centre, its long-term results will still fall short of what is needed for nature, including humanity, to flourish.²⁹

²⁴ See the article, still fruitfully provocative, by Lynn White, Jr, ‘Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, *Science* 155 (10 March 1967) 1203-7.

²⁵ *Letters* 589.

²⁶ *TLotR* 758.

²⁷ Matthew T. Dickerson and Jonathan D. Evans, *Ents, Elves and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006). Also relevant is my review in *Tolkien Studies* 4 (2007) 238-244, accessible at http://www.patrickcurry.co.uk/papers/Review_of_EEE.pdf I remain unrepentant of my severity on account of Dickerson and Evans presenting Christian stewardship as an exhaustive account of nature in Tolkien’s work. It is of course undeniable that Tolkien was a Catholic Christian, but that is not all he was, and far from all that his work is.

²⁸ Alf Seegert, personal communication. I am grateful for our discussion of this issue.

²⁹ I am not arguing here on the basis of deontological (Kantian) ethics, rather that the ultimately motivating value will have negative (or if you prefer, evil) consequences. Nor, however, am I finally taking a consequentialist or utilitarian position. Rather the axiological context of my approach is a non-modern virtue ethics. See my *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*, rev. 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017) 54 and Chapter 5, *passim*.

Ecocentrism

However, tending the Garden for its own sake, even if the original impetus was self-interested, tips the scale the other way, towards the second major kind of attitude to nature in *LTotR*, which potentially benefits all creatures including, but not only, human beings. This stance is *ecocentrism*, what Jeffers calls ‘power with nature’, in which value and meaning is found in the Earth as a whole and in the places, beings and relationships that comprise it, and from which it is inseparable. (The Earth here is immanent, not a transcendent or abstract entity above or beyond its materiality, although it also exceeds that materiality, something which can be experienced as an ‘geophany’.)³⁰

The kind of value here is not instrumental or utilitarian, which characterizes anthropocentrism, but *intrinsic* value: the value the Earth or Earthling has in, for and as uniquely itself, regardless of their use-, exchange- or market-value, which therefore cannot be measured, quantified or commodified.

Once again, misunderstandings await. One proceeds along these lines: if value exists independently of its apprehension, then nothing meaningful can be said about it; but if value requires apprehension to be real, then it is merely subjective. But this is a false dichotomy. Value requires both a world *and* participation by at least one valuer (not necessarily a human one) to become real. It is both objective – ‘really there’ – and subjective: ‘for us’.³¹

A second error is to assume that things have not moved on in, shall we say, radical environmentalism, since the Deep Ecology movement.³² Now there is little doubt that Deep Ecology laid itself open to charges of misanthropy – as Jeffers puts it, “‘Nature equals good,’ ‘People equals bad,’ and ‘People do not equal nature’”³³ – and elitism, because it gave pride of place to ‘Self-Realization’ by a chosen few attaining ‘ecological consciousness’. In contrast, a succeeding movement, ecocentrism, firmly includes humanity within the fold of more-than-human nature. It also emphasizes not special knowledge (*gnosis*) but the quality of our *relationships*, with others of all kinds and their effects – something for which everyone shares responsibility and, potentially, ability. It follows that ethics is not an optional add-on to metaphysics, as it was for Deep Ecologists, but already present from the start.³⁴

Finally, before returning to Tolkien, some people conflate (and not always by sincere error) wilderness and wildness. Then, since they are almost always anthropocentrics of the academic variety, they argue that since there is virtually no non-human wilderness left – nowhere which hasn’t been *affected* by human activity – humans are, as usual, the only show in town. But Thoreau ventured to say that ‘in wildness’ – not wilderness, extremely important though it is – ‘is the salvation of the world’ And there remains such a thing as wildness: actually a prior and even more important phenomenon, which survives anywhere which has not been *wholly* instrumentalised and made over for human purposes, and thus retains some agency(s) of its own. Why does this matter here? Because in both Middle-earth and ‘our’ Earth, although it certainly seems that ‘it seems that the wind is setting East, and the

³⁰ Tim Robinson, ‘Listening to the Landscape’, pp. 151-164 in his *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara and Other Writings* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1996) p. 164.

³¹ See Curry, *Ecological Ethics*. And cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘there is for us an in itself’, quoted in Samuel Todes, *Body and Mind* (Cambridge MA; MIT Press, 2001) 71.

³² Verlyn Flieger’s paper “Taking the Part of Trees: Eco-Conflict in Middle-earth” pp. 147-158 in George Clark and Daniel Timmons (eds), *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle Earth. Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 89 (Praeger, 2000) suffers from this (in my view) misunderstanding.

³³ Jeffers 201.

³⁴ See my *Ecological Ethics*; also the online journal *The Ecological Citizen* (<https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/>).

withering of all woods may be drawing near', it's not over.³⁵ There is still much wildness to love, and fight for, as per Elrond's advice to 'resist, with hope or without it'.³⁶

There are three clear instances of ecocentrism in *TLotR*. Perhaps the most striking occurs when Frodo encounters Lothlórien: he 'laid his hand upon the tree' – a Mallorn – '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 nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself.'³⁷ The second occurrence is when Goldberry, asked if the Old Forest belonged to Bombadil, answers (in shocked tones, it seems): "'No indeed!...The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves.'"³⁸ Finally, we could add Gimli's reproof of Legolas's assumption of Dwarf-centric instrumental greed concerning the Glittering Caves: 'None of Durin's race would mine those caves for stones or ore, not if diamonds and gold could be got there. Do you cut down groves of blossoming trees in the springtime for firewood?'³⁹

A *Tertium Quid*: Fair Usage

I need to briefly qualify this account of ecocentrism so far, including that of *TLotR*. It doesn't deny the unavoidable necessity of using nature, but I would remind you of a pertinent distinction between hobbitic usage, which we might call 'sustainable', and Sauronic or Sarumanic ecocidal exploitation.⁴⁰ An example I have used before but still find apposite is the difference between practices of woodsmanship, such as selective felling, coppicing, pollarding, harvesting and so on, and industrial forestry, with its indiscriminate clear-cut felling of irreplaceable and incomparably rich ancient woodlands and jungle.

By the same token, there is (*pace* Flieger) an important difference between the inhabitants of Bucklebury's defensive action in cutting back the trees of the Old Forest when they threatened to encroach on the hobbits' living space, and the offensive action of Saruman in destroying swathes of Fangorn to literally feed the fires of his industrial-military expansion.⁴¹ That difference is not exhausted by scale, although scale matters. Rather, since ecocentrism rejects any radical split between more-than-human nature and humanity but firmly includes the latter within the fold of the former, it follows that like other animals, humans have a right to self-defence which should not be confused with aggressive imperialism.⁴²

By the same token, the hobbits' relationship to nature, in addition to enjoying and appreciating it, both as woods and, of course, as food and drink, embodies the value of satiation: sufficiency, the ability and willingness to recognize and act on having *enough*. What could be in sharper contrast with the insatiable lust for total power and complete domination of pathological modernity, as per Sauron? (Mordor, let me remind you, is the only modern nation-state in Middle-earth.)

³⁵ *TLotR* 473.

³⁶ *TLotR* 242.

³⁷ *TLotR* 351.

³⁸ *LTotR* 124. I haven't enough room here to mention Bombadil in this connection, but for a good discussion see Liam Campbell, *The Ecological Augury in the Works of JRR Tolkien* (Zurich: Walking Tree Books, 2011) 73-108; also see Lucas P. Niiler, 'Green Reading: Tolkien, Leopold and the Land Ethic', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 10:3 (1999): 276-286.

³⁹ *LTotR* 550

⁴⁰ Defending, 'Afterword', especially 155-57,

⁴¹ 'Taking the Part of Trees', to which I was responding in the previous reference. For a full and nuanced discussion, see Campbell, *Augury* 255-272.

⁴² 'Right' in a primitive sense, which I think is adequate for the case I am making.

We may seem to have left behind the radiant glory of Lothlórien, *Faërie* incarnate and ‘the heart of Elvendom on Earth’.⁴³ But not really. It remains an inextinguishable part of readers’ experience of Middle-earth and, with any luck, however fleetingly and elusively, our own lives in primary reality. It’s just that *we are not Elves*, so we cannot stay or live there for long. But one service it can incidentally perform for us – which hardly exhausts why we should honour it, but is far from negligible – is to safely root and contextualize usage, drawing upon the internal connection between Elvish non-possessive love (which I shall return to in a moment) and the ecocentric intrinsic value of natural items in and for themselves. Natural wonder can act as a potentially vital bulwark against use degenerating into the ruthless and destructive exploitation of a Sharkey and gang.

Nature and Wonder in *TLotR*: a Double

The mention of enchantment provides me with an opportunity to say something which, being a bit slow, I only recently noticed, despite decades of thinking about these things: namely that in *TLotR*, nature – the more-than-human world – and wonder – enchantment or *Faërie* – are a double, each of them distinct but inseparable. Why do I say so?

I have already discussed nature, so let me say a very few words about enchantment.⁴⁴ First, at its heart is existential wonder, whose contrary is will in all its registers (will-to-power, power-knowledge, system, agenda, programme, etc.) Secondly, its emotional intensity stretches from charm, through delight (which is not to be confused with pleasure), to the full-blown and rare but life-changing joy of radical enchantment. Thirdly, that response is always relational – wonder *at*, enchantment *by* an other; and the more intense it is, the more reciprocal is the relationship, even if the enchanting other is not technically alive. Finally, in enchantment, the intrinsic value of that other is revealed as an ontological truth, not merely cognitive, psychological or epistemological.

I dare say Tolkien knew as much or more about enchantment as anyone else of his time, with the possible exception of his student at Oxford, W.H. Auden. Unsurprisingly, then, one of his definitions of *Faërie* is indispensable: it is, ultimately, ‘a love and respect for all things, “animate” and “inanimate”, an unpossessive love of them as “other”’.⁴⁵ Another definition, equally potent, is of *Faërie* as ‘the realm or state in which fairies have their being’ – and not only fairies or Elves, but all manner of things, including ‘ourselves... when we are enchanted’.⁴⁶ Finally, it is clear that enchantment *qua Faërie* is not some transcendent other place, such as Heaven, but rather here and now transformed. By the same token, however ineffable and mysterious an experience it may be, it is always completely embodied, embedded and situated, as per Max Weber’s definition: ‘concrete magic’...⁴⁷ It is *both*.

What I want to highlight here is the profound common ground shared by the sheer wonder of the more-than-human world of nature, which includes but far transcends human purpose and will, and the nature of wonder, as a moment-and-place which is upstream of the sharp distinction (latterly Cartesian but originally Platonic) between subject and object, mind

⁴³ *TLotR* 352.

⁴⁴ For more, see my *Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2019) and *Art and Enchantment: How Wonder Works* (London: Routledge, 2023).

⁴⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major*, extended edition, ed. Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins, 2005): 101.

⁴⁶ *OFS* 14. See also the valuable discussion by Flieger in Smith, and my ‘Enchantment in Tolkien and Middle-earth’, pp. 99–112 in Stratford Caldecott and Thomas Honegger (eds.), *Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings: Sources of Inspiration* (Zurich: Walking Tree Books, 2008).

⁴⁷ H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991) 282.

and body, spirit and matter, and so on.⁴⁸ It is entirely participatory, but nonetheless real for that; and entirely real in a way that requires participation. And setting a seal on the mutual implication of nature and wonder – personifying it in their very being – are the Elves. For they not only embody the principle and mode of Faërian enchantment, and the unpossessive wonder and disinterested curiosity at its heart, they are also completely natural – compared to whom, as Tolkien says, it is we humans who are supernatural. Unlike humans, Elves are bound to the Earth until the end, or, as Tolkien puts it, ‘strictly co-extensive with the life of Arda’.⁴⁹

It follows from this internal link or elective affinity between nature and wonder that neither can be fully understood, appreciated and valued without taking into account the other. I mean in Tolkien’s fictional world, of course, but also – by applicative implication – in ‘ours’.

Something else I think follows is a similar connection between the obverse: the domestication and suppression of wild nature as so-called ‘development’, on the one hand, and the condition of disenchantment as what is often meant by being ‘adult’, on the other. In both cases, there is a fading, a loss of meaning: what Weber memorably called ‘the disenchantment of the world’.⁵⁰ The Elves are *continually* passing over the Sea, leaving Middle-earth. As Théoden asks Gandalf rhetorically, ‘however the fortune of war shall go’ – whatever the outcome – ‘may it not so end that much that was fair and wonderful may pass forever out of Middle-earth?’⁵¹ There are perhaps personal consolations; Proust, for example, maintains that the lost time of the past is recoverable through art, while Paul Ricoeur argues that the disenchantment being Grown Up, if you don’t get stuck in it, can be succeeded by a seasoned post-critical ‘second naivete’.⁵² But the conclusion both in Tolkien’s story and, I think, ours, is that ‘a sadness that [is] yet blessed and without bitterness’ is the best outcome on offer – the only possible ‘triumph’.⁵³

Now loose ends, with which I conclude. One is the fair question, has Tolkien’s ‘environmentalism’ made any difference out in the so-called ‘real’ world? It is rare indeed that art does so, rather than reflecting it, or articulating it, commenting on it, or standing almost altogether apart from it. There have long been artistic movements with a political agenda, but they have been mainly productive of bad, or at least wonder-free, art. This is hardly surprising, since instrumentalizing art, even for high moral purposes, can hardly be expected to have any other result.⁵⁴ But remarkably, given this plus the fact that Tolkien had no such *intention*, there is evidence that *TLotR* did indeed exert some significant positive influence – a stiffening of the will, at the very least – not once, but twice: in the nascent American and European environmental movement of the early 1970s, perhaps particularly

⁴⁸ See Henri Bortoft, *Taking Appearance Seriously. The Dynamic Way of Seeing in Goethe and European Thought* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2012); ‘upstream’ is his wonderful metaphor (although I disagree sharply with his treatment of Plato). See also my paper ‘The Enchantment of Nature and the Nature of Enchantment’, <http://www.patrickcurry.co.uk/papers/The%20Enchantment%20of%20Nature%20and%20the%20Nature%20of%20Enchantment%20-%20final%20draft.pdf>

⁴⁹ *Letters* 406.

⁵⁰ See Chris Brawley, ‘The Fading of the World: Tolkien’s Ecology and Loss in The Lord of the Rings’, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18:3 (2007): 292-307. Weber, p. 155 in Gerth and Mills (eds): ‘The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world.”’

⁵¹ *TLotR* 550.

⁵² Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, transl. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967): 351-52.

⁵³ *TLotR* 1029. Cf. Michael D.C. Drout, ‘The Tower and the Ruin: The Past in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Works’, pp. 175-90 in Helen Conrad-O’Brian and Gerard Hynes (eds), *Tolkien: The Forest and the City* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), who suggests as much.

⁵⁴ See my *Art and Enchantment*, although its context is not whether artistic agitprop (say) is good art or not but whether it is, *ceteris paribus*, enchanting or not.

among anti-nuclear demonstrators, and again among young activists resisting the British government's programme for new roads and motorways in the early 1990s.⁵⁵

Of course, it hardly needs saying that since it was first published, *TLotR* has given millions of people, troubled and fearful for the Earth, precious personal succor, helping to keep alive the will to live. Beyond that, however, and the two historical examples I've just given, I don't believe Tolkien's fiction has had any direct collective environmental effects. That is not a criticism, because it is unrealistic to expect art to do so.⁵⁶ It is not a tool or technique! Rather art is, like the wonder it can impel, wild; so its effects are real, but they cannot be directed, controlled or managed.

By something like the same token, one of the lessons of *TLotR* is that although the nature-wonder double can indeed *resist* the destructive will-to-power of Sauron, 'Lord of magic and machines', it cannot *overcome* it.⁵⁷ The contributions of Glorfindel and Galdor in the Council of Elrond make that perfectly clear; the light of the phial of Galadriel, oldest and greatest pure Elf in Middle-earth, dies in Sammath Naur, 'heart of the realm of Sauron and ... his ancient might, greatest in Middle-earth...';⁵⁸ and even the resurrected Gandalf acknowledges that Sauron 'remains mightier still'.⁵⁹ So what is left for those who love nature, and wonder, and indeed Tolkien's work? The courage to actively resist, with hope or without it, as Elrond advised, while practicing 'Pity and Mercy', as Gandalf counselled.⁶⁰ That is what leaves the door open for fate, or grace, or luck, to intervene, as it did at the last possible moment in the unlikely form of Gollum. But it would be a good idea not to leave it that late again.

⁵⁵ See my *Defending Middle-Earth*.

⁵⁶ Cf. Auden: 'Art makes nothing happen', although that's not strictly true. The point is rather that the effects of art are real but they cannot be controlled or directed

⁵⁷ *Letters* 205.

⁵⁸ *TLotR* 945.

⁵⁹ *TLotR* 500.

⁶⁰ *TLotR* 242; *Letters* 460. See the discussion of Tolkienian virtue ethics in my paper cited in ref. 4. .