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THE MIRROR OF TOLKIEN: THE NATURAL WORLD
AND COMMUNITY IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS

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In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the interrelationships between the natural world and the "Free Folk" (I 367) ¹ displays a philosophy similar to those of the person-planetary paradigm and Taoism. Thus, landscape surpasses its traditional role as setting and becomes both the medium and the message of the tale. Because Tolkien's fiction reflects an environmental philosophy, which is a reflection of his own personal philosophy, *The Lord of the Ring* is, therefore, an environmental work which addresses the problems of our ever-increasing technocratic society of this, the Fourth Age of Middle Earth. ²

To understand the vital role played by the natural world in the life of J.R.R. Tolkien is to understand the essence of *The Lord of the Rings*, the product of his life's work and unshakable convictions. His respect for the natural world was an early and lasting motivational force in his life. As an adult, Tolkien, who possessed a self-professed "passionate love of growing things" (Carpenter 212) ³, proclaimed:

I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and have always been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals. (Carpenter 220)

Tolkien's belief in the "aliveness" and in the intrinsic value of the natural world leads us to accept these qualities within the secondary world of Middle Earth. Natural beings and objects "come to life" in the tale as he anthropomorphosizes ⁴ plants, animals and even the land itself. These elements of the "living earth" (II 128), together with the Free Folk of Middle Earth, are bound by their common membership in a tightly-knit community. The essence of this community's philosophy is an emphasis on an interrelation with and respect for the natural world. Through *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien offers this philosophy as an alternative to the technocratic paradigm prevalent in this, the Fourth Age of Middle Earth.

Tolkien recognized that in its pursuit of industrialization, modern society is in danger of becoming alienated from the natural world. Therefore, in *The Lord of the Rings*, he illustrates the choice facing us all, to be as those characters in tune with the interrelationships of the living world, or to be as those who attempt to elevate themselves above other beings and, as a result, eventually to cease to exist within the realm of this world.

Tolkien infused his mythology with his belief in the intrinsic value of beings of the natural world; thus, many of the Free Folk are closely linked with Nature. Sam observes that the Elves, for instance, "seem to belong [in Lorien]...Whether they've made the land, or the land's made them, it's hard to say" (I 468). From Tolkien's depiction of the Elves, we can categorize them as a hunting and gathering society as defined Drengron. They possess an

ecological intelligence (AP 2) 5 in their recognition of the intelligence of the whole [natural world] as its Great Spirit [i.e. Iluvatar] and this same intelligence they [see] in all things. Even stones have power, and one can converse with them in a certain kind of way. Learn from them. The animals have much to teach as well. (AP 2)

Similarly, Hobbits are beings "entirely without non-human powers, but are represented as being more in touch with 'nature' (the soil and other living things, plants and animals)" (Carpenter 158).

The Ents represent the ultimate union of Free Folk and Nature; Treebeard and the Ents are "the oldest of living rational creatures" (emphasis added) (Carpenter 160). They comprise a forest to which the phrase "living tree" is repeatedly applied. In the following passage, Treebeard articulates not only the Free Folk's respect for the intrinsic value of all beings, but also the flouting of this respect by the technocratic forces in the tale. In this passage, it seems that the voices of Treebeard and Tolkien become one when Treebeard declares, "nobody cares for the woods as I care for them" (II 89). As Treebeard mourns trees destroyed wantonly by Saruman and "his foul folk," Tolkien's despair at their loss as beings with intrinsic value is felt:

Curse him, root and branch! Many of those trees were my friends, creatures I had known from nut and acorn; many had voices of their own that are lost forever now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves. (II 91)

Although human characters do join the cast of the Free Folk, they do not dominate the mythology. Tolkien explains:

Men 6 came inevitably; after all the author is a man, and if he has an audience they will be Men and Men must come into our tales, as such, and not merely transfigured or partially represented as Elves, Dwarfs, Hobbits, etc. But they remain peripheral - - late comers, and however growingly important, not principals. (Carpenter 147)

The role of Men in *The Lord of the Rings* is, therefore, to integrate with the other natural races of the tale, to act as part of an intricate web of cooperation

and mutual respect. The tale depicts at once a unity and a diversity of races, not a Great Chain of Being, in which each race is ranked above or below the next. Rather, all are part of a circular, holistic community in which they are valued equally for their own characteristics, abilities and contributions. The quest is not the struggle of one character, but has cosmic implications including even the struggles of the Free Folk in the First and Second Ages. Each member of the Fellowship begins the tale alone, unable to destroy the Ring, but with their union, the desired goal of the quest becomes possible.

The interrelation and respect found among the Free Folk embody the basic tenets of the person-planetary paradigm, as this has been outlined by Alan Drengson:

Person-planetary philosophy, with Kant, regards community as primary. Through its paradigm observer and observed are united in reciprocal processes of interresponsiveness. The boundaries of community extend to include the other beings of our home places. We affect and are affected by this broader community of life. Our societies are living processes within it. The person-planetary paradigm attempts to locate the constraints of human activities in the principles of ecology. (SP 232)

Rather than adhering to the belief, held for centuries by Western culture, that the "rightful position of man is to be the ruling creature on this planet, to administer it in the best interest of all the local creatures" (Rogers 75) 7 , Drengson recognizes that we cannot totally understand and thus manipulate the natural world:

ecosystems are more like organisms than machines. The interrelationships between organisms within an ecosystem are not completely specifiable, unlike the case of a machine. There are elements of variability and unpredictability. Various elements of balance are so complexly interrelated that they intersect and double back on themselves, form pyramids in symbiotic complexities that magnify [Rome] and also minimize [other] effects. (SP 232)

This interrelatedness extends beyond the ecosystem; "the dominant organic paradigm of the person-planetary stresses the interrelatedness of the biosphere" (SP 232). As part of the ecosystem, Humans today are part of the living body of the biosphere, just as all the races of Middle Earth are part of the intricate web linking themselves to one another and to the natural world.

Drengson's summary of the key features of the person-planetary paradigm in the "Shifting Paradigms" can be directly applied to the lifestyle of the Free Folk in *The Lord of the Rings*:

[I]nternal principles of order and the importance of homeostasis and balanced development; symbiosis and mutual interrelationships, decentralization, diversity and unity, spontaneity and order, freedom in community; intrinsic value in being itself, biospheric egalitarianism; human experiences as value-laden; creative, ecologically compatible design of human activities; collective responsibility and the unique value of individuals; personal knowing, intersubjective experience and diverse consciousness; organisms as wholes which interact with other organisms in spheres of interpenetration; the planet as a whole as a living organism. (239)

"Internal principles of order" are achieved after Aragorn assumes the throne. His rule advocates a "diversity and unity" where, although the Shire is part of his kingdom, no Man may set foot, just as the Forest of Druadan, also of his kingdom, is given "to Ghan-buri-Ghan and to his folk, to be their own forever...[with] no man [entering] it without their leave." (III 307) "Freedom in community" is embodied in the system of rule in the Shire, where the only political office is that of the Mayor, whose chief duty is to preside over banquets. The only peace officers are the shirriffs, whose main duties are "more concerned with the straying of beasts" (I 29) and with "walking round the country and seeing folk, and hearing the news, and knowing where the good bee [is]" (III 341). "Intrinsic value in being itself" exists among the Free Folk, even under the threat of Sauron; so with Aragorn's ascension to the throne, it would certainly continue, as would "biospheric egalitarianism." "Collective responsibility and the unique value of individuals" are embodied in the selfless acceptance of the burden of the Ring by Frodo and in the loyalty of his fellows of the Company. "The planet as a whole as a living organism" fills the entire tale as trees, beasts, mountains and entire landscapes are anthropomorphized.

All the Free Folk of Middle Earth possess an "ecological intelligence" (AP 2). They are all ecosophic beings whose goal embodies the person-planetary paradigm. "Ecosophy" represents:

a state of ecological wisdom, not just a form of discursive knowing, but a state of harmonious relation with the earth....[it] unites one's smaller self with the larger "Self" of nature and even the ultimate source of nature, the "Grand Ultimate" as it is sometimes called when not personified — God when it is. (RE 1-2)

The unadventurous Hobbits thus grow from their smaller, figuratively myopic selves in their cozy Shire, into farther-seeing, more unified and thus greater selves as they come to understand that they are undeniably part of a larger living world. They leave their "static state" and become part of a great "dynamic aliveness" (RE 2). Frodo's decisions, first to leave the Shire and second to set out for Mordor alone, reflect the ecophilosophical ideal which "involves transcending

narrow self-identification to extend one's love to all things and one's self as part of all selves" (RE 2). Frodo's love for Middle Earth and its beings is greater than the fear of danger and death promised by such decisions. The "unifying concept" (RE 3) of ecophilosophy is evident in the Council of Elrond and the subsequent forming of the multiracial Fellowship.

The aspect of ecosophy which bears particular significance to *The Lord of the Rings* is that

It is a state in which the other is respected for its intrinsic value, and as such, it is within the circle of love that binds all together as an ongoing creation process. In this respect, then, it is a sacred state.
(RE 3)

This ongoing creation is embodied in the ever-unfolding Music of the Ainur which created Arda, its races and their history. As Yavanna, creator of all living beings of Middle Earth, told her fellow Ainur, "All have their worth ...and each contributes to the worth of the others" 8 (*Silmarillion* 52). Middle Earth is a land where the Free Folk live by the tenets of ecophilosophy and seek to achieve a land based on a philosophy like that of the person- planetary paradigm.

The philosophy of the person-planetary paradigm shares many common features with the teaching of the Tao. Po-Keung Ip explains the interrelatedness of all things:

Since Tao nourishes, sustains, and transforms beings, a natural relationship is built between them....Man, being a member of beings, is without exception internally linked to Tao as well as to everything else. 9 (339)

However, Humans, as part of the Tao, are not a dominant force in it. According to Lao Tzu, the Tao "being all embracing is impartial...in the sense that everything is to be treated on an equal footing" (Ip 339). Gandalf's warning to Theoden suggests such a philosophy: "not only the little life of Men is now endangered, but the life also of those things which you have deemed the matter of legends" (II 191). Drengson explains the danger of deviating from The Unity of vision shared with Taoist philosophy:

The trouble begins when we start to separate ourselves from [the great natural] order. We do this first by passing judgements which attempt to elevate ourselves over other beings. The human impulse to manage the world is an expression of the judgement that we know best how the natural world should run. Ironically, we find every day that we do not know enough, and probably never will know enough, to prevent the unfortunate consequences of attempting to manage too much. (SP 233)

Within Philosophical Taoism, the intrinsic value of all living things is respected. Conversely, in technocratic society, they are considered solely on the basis of their instrumental or resource value. Unable to see the forest for the timber, Humans today have deemed it more economical to harvest via clearcut a stand of trees than to leave the ecosystem intact for the sake of "Aesthetic values, species values, recreational [or] habitat...values" (SP 235). The use of trees by Saruman and Sauron resembles that of technocratic society. Saruman allows his Orcs to wantonly hew Treebeard's people and Sauron's domination of a land means almost certain death for any green living thing. Both tyrants also turn trees to their own destructive purposes. The forces of Isengard attack Helm's Deep with "two trunks of mighty trees" (II 169) used as battering rams. Grond, the great battering ram of the forces of Mordor, is fashioned after "a great forest-tree" (III 119).

This lack of respect for the intrinsic value of the natural world is the basis of Sauron's rule in *The Lord of the Rings*. The epigraph to the tale embodies the tale's conflict: the desire for power by an unnatural force threatens the integrated lifestyles of the natural beings of Middle Earth. The temptation of the Ring's promised power, and the devastation it wreaks in the natural world, reveal the Ring to be a disruptive, anticomunal force which must be exorcised from Middle Earth.

Once borne, the Ring can corrupt the bearer as absolutely as the power promised. The Ring is such a symbol of power that one does not possess it, but is possessed by it (I 72). Just as Bilbo needs Gandalf's help to leave the Ring behind (I 56 - 58), and as Gollum "could not get rid of it" (I 83), so too Frodo cannot throw the Ring into the fire, either in the comfort of his own Hobbit hole (I 90), or on the brink of the Cracks of Doom (III 269). Clearly, the Ring's only purpose is, as the epigraph tells us, "to rule" and to "bind."

The Ring's seduction of Saruman the White, once head of the White Council, is slow but successful. His initial desire for "power, power to order all things...for that good which only the Wise can see" (I 339) is an early symptom of his corruption. His repetition of the key word "power" is a sign that this is what he seeks more than an order for the good of others. However, his desire denies community with the natural world, the necessity of working together, and respecting the intrinsic value of all living beings. His growing ability to render his own land desolate, and later to destroy the gardens and trees of the Shire, are signs of his growing evil.

The Ring's ability to completely possess its bearer is a reflection of its anticomunal nature. The Ring represents a complete focus of energy on oneself; it is the epitome of consumption. To seek absolute power is to refuse to be part of a whole, to deny fellowship and, as a result, to search constantly but vainly to satisfy oneself. Thus, the symbol of Sauron is a single eye, homonym of "I" and antonym of "we", of the concept of community.

Sauron allies himself with no one; "only one hand at a time can wield the One" (I 340). Although he employs Orcs, Wargs, the Southrons and the Corsairs in his quest for domination, the alliance is one of master and slave, rather than a true partnership as exhibited within the ranks of the Free Folk. However, Sauron's refusal to join himself and to share his power with another is, ironically, the cornerstone of his downfall. When he forges the One Ring, "he let a great part of his own former power pass into it, so that he could rule all the others" (I 78). Therefore, when it is taken from him by Isildur, he suffers a "great weakening of his power" (I 77) and is rendered less than whole. The Ring symbolizes disintegration, not only because it separates Sauron (or any ringbearer) from all other living beings as he seeks to achieve absolute power over them, but also because it is only part of something else itself. Sauron is spiritually incomplete because a part of himself is lost, and because he refuses membership in the community of living beings.

The Human denial that we are only part of the natural world, and the assertion that we are masters of it, is analogous to Sauron or Saruman's belief that they can separate themselves from and control the community of natural beings of Middle Earth. However, such "arrogance of homocentrism" (SP 233) has led to the unnatural and flawed technocratic paradigm, embodied by Mordor.

Because the Ring denies fellowship and community with the natural world, it is unnatural, destroying even the land itself. Says Treebeard, "if Sauron of old destroyed the gardens [of the Entwives], the Enemy today seems likely to wither all the woods" (II 95). Not only is the natural world physically corrupted, but the spiritual wholeness of the characters is also jeopardized by the temptation of the Ring. Destructive to sharing and unity, which are the basis of community, the Ring opposes the holistic philosophies of the person-planetary paradigm, ecophilosophy and the Tao. To oppose integration with the natural world is to be unnatural; therefore, the inherent will of the Ring is destructive to all that is natural and good.

Because the evil influence so permeates the tale, we cannot be certain that, with the passing of the Ring, all evil also passes from Middle Earth. Gandalf warns: "Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again" (I 78). Despite the victory of the Free Folk at the end of the Third Age, the days of the Ents are limited and the Elves must either leave Middle Earth or fade. Upon his return home, Frodo not only finds the Shire occupied by Saruman, but even once order is restored, he has little honour in his own country (III 371) and suffers from a wound which "will never really heal" (III 372). If such troubles occur with victory, they can only serve to foreshadow greater ills yet to come. And the Fourth Age is the time when those greater ills have been realized.

The Ring of Power, portrayed as a highly attractive, yet completely evil, unholistic force threatening the existence of the natural world, symbolizes not only the quest for power over the natural world sought by Humans in the Fourth Age,

but also the unnatural, mechanistic and, ultimately, destructive techniques and tools we use to achieve our goal through the technocratic approach and its machines. By contrasting the technocratic and the person- planetary lifestyles embodied by Sauron and the Free Folk respectively, Tolkien illustrates the choice immediately before us and demonstrates the consequences of the wrong choice.

Humans appear to be completely possessed by the technocratic mindset as do the victims of the Ring: as a result, all are rendered less than whole. One needs no plantir to see that Human lifestyle today advances the destruction of the environment as we pursue economic and technological "progress." In the Western world, we can no sooner reject the benefits afforded by electricity, plastics, the family car and other technological "necessities" of modern life than Saruman, Gollum and Frodo can give up the mere thought of the Ring. The Ring and the technocratic approach signify the same thing: the epitome of consumption and power-over control. The increasing use of the internal-combustion engine, despite its known destructive effects on the natural world, is similar to the anticomunal and unnatural negligence of Sauron.

Tolkien's message is that as wholeness is achieved in the Third Age, so it can be found in the Fourth. The means to achieve this goal lie within ourselves, but only if we reunite ourselves with the natural world. In doing so, the lifestyle we adopt may be called person-planetary, ecosophic or Taoist, and if we adopt the basic philosophy embodied by these approaches, the threat of the technocratic one signified by the Ring can be overcome.

Notes

1. All references in this article to The Lord of the Rings are made, for the sake of brevity, to the volume number only.

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings: Part One: The Fellowship of the Ring . London: Unwin, 1979.

— -. The Lord of the Rings: Part Two: The Two Towers . London: Unwin, 1979.

— -. The Lord of the Rings: Part Three: The Return of the King . London: Unwin, 1979.

2. The correlation between Middle Earth and our own world was deliberately drawn by Tolkien. After some readers took Middle Earth to be another planet, Tolkien declared, "Middle Earth is not an imaginary world...[it is] the abiding place of Men, the objectively real world, in use specifically opposed to imaginary world...the theatre of my tale is this era, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary." (Carpenter 239).

Yet, few of us meet Elves or Wizards in our daily lives. After the defeat of Sauron, Gandalf explains to Aragorn: "The Third Age of the world is ended, and the new age is begun....And all the lands that you see...shall be dwellings of Men. For the time comes of the Dominion of Men" (III 320). Therefore, we now live in the "Age of Man." The legends of the first three ages are at once a prehistory and a metaphor of our present world. That metaphor is a warning to care for our world and guard it against the ever-present evil of Morgoth and his servant, Sauron.

3. Carpenter, Humphrey, ed. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Boston: Houghton, 1981.

4. The concept of "anthropomorphosis" implies that beings of the natural world are viewed as being alive because they are like humans, defined in human terms. Although Tolkien believed that the natural world is alive in its own right, he anthropomorphized it simply because he was relating his story to humans. Because in our technocratic society the natural world has been viewed as an object to be quantified and exploited, it appears Tolkien cast the natural world in human-like terms (i.e. trees walking and talking) in order to convey a sense of aliveness and intrinsic worth; he related the tale in terms to which twentieth century humans, who are often separated from Nature, could relate.

5. All references made in this article to works by Alan R. Drengson are made, for the sake of brevity, to an abbreviated form of the article's title.

Drengson, Alan R. "Applied Philosophy of Technology: Reflections on Forms of Life and the Practice of Technology." *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 3 (Spring 1986): 1-13.

— -. "Reflections on Ecosophy." *Pan Ecology*: 2 (Fall 1987): 1-4.

— -. "Shifting Paradigms: From the Technocratic to the Person- Planetary." *Environmental Ethics*: 3 (Fall 1980): 221-240.

6. Although I allow the use of such gender specific terminology to stand in quotations and in references to the specific race identified by Tolkien as "Man" up to and including the Third Age in the tale, I use the term "Humans" to refer to the species in the Fourth Age. Also, because he directly labels it so, Tolkien's description of the Fourth Age as the "Age of Man" also stands.

7. Rogers, Deborah C. "Everyclod and Everyhero: The Image of Man in Tolkien." *A Tolkien Compass*. 69-76.

8. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: Unwin, 1979.

9. Ip, Po-Keung. "Taoism and the Foundations of Environmental Ethics." *Environmental Ethics* 5 (Winter 1983): 335-343. p. 339.

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