

Animism as an Approach to Arda

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ABSTRACT

Here we examine qualities of what would be thought of as inanimate beings that lend evidence to the position that J.R.R. Tolkien's fictional universe¹ is animistic. Arda is full of life, and natural things in it, such as mountains and rivers, are often alive or conscious. A close look at the qualities of the stars in particular yields further evidence in favor of animism as a foundational ontology of Arda.

Key words: Animism, Ontology, J.r.r. Tolkien

TALKING TREES, GRUMPY MOUNTAINS: (ALMOST) EVERYTHING IS ALIVE

How can we make sense of the agency of the natural world in Arda? Arda is full of life, and even non-organisms in Tolkien's world at times express free will and agency. Will and the domination of will is a central theme in Tolkien; Melkor subverts the will of Ilúvatar in the *Ainulindale*, and his servant Sauron later creates and uses the One Ring to dominate the free will of many. Individual will, whether free or bound by or to the will of others, is central in Tolkien. The question, for example, of whether and to what extent Gollum's free will should be respected develops as a tension between Sam and Frodo, until Gollum's attempt to take the Ring leads to the destruction of both himself and the Ring. Will is a part of freedom and individuality, and free will seems to be generally, if not universally, distributed in Arda. Moments of personification and agency of features of the natural world of Arda may reveal another mode of considering the ontology of Tolkien's secondary creation.

Which brings us to animism. Animism, roughly the notion that even inanimate things have wills, is a good-enough concept to understand Tolkien's ontology. The concept of animism has enjoyed a complex life in the 140 years since Tylor and Comte, and ecological anthropology and ethnobotany have long provided useful language for unpacking various animisms across cultures. The "old animism" (Harvey, 6-7) of Edward Tylor describes a "barbarian" animism that gives "consistent individual life to phenomena that our

utmost stretch of fancy only avails to personify in conscious metaphor" (Tylor, 260). Later anthropologists have taken what we might call animism more seriously, and tried to examine it, for their part, endemically. From early anthropologists' attempts to understand spirits and fetishes, to more nuanced recent work in ethnobotany, anthropology has come full circle, now encountering animism within native Western traditions, and meeting philosophers and cognitive scientists around the ideas of panpsychism and other rejections of materialism.

The term "relative" is useful in that we can point to a being that is not humanoid or even biologically alive but may still be encountered as having a spirit or being a person. Danny Naveh and Nurit Bird-David (Harvey, 2014) suggest a necessary twofold maneuver, whereby anthropologist first leave behind a Cartesian dualism to embrace "indigenous cosmoes 'full of subjects'", and secondly to abandon the idea of a monolithic true or real universe into which indigenous cosmoes fit (27). To fully 'do' animism, anthropologists must accept, if not embrace, an innumerable set of coexisting universes whose subjects come to be "relational beings" (*relatives*) which may engage with beings from other cultural universes. A relative, then, is another being with whom we are somehow, and to an unclear degree, co-conscious; relatives are also capable of having, if not always expressing, their own wills.

A mountain is not alive in the same way that a pig is, yet we find relatives that do interact with the world in ways that are like being alive. Relatives have agency, by defini-

tion, meaning that they may exercise their own will and have their own agendas. They purposefully influence, and are influenced by, the world.

The suggestion of natural agency at play in Tolkien is a recurring theme, and has been explored by many, even if not often under the label of animism. “Interwoven with the melody [of the *Ainulindalë*] were all creations, including Man and Elf,” writes Timothy O’Neill (122). “All creations” includes everything -- from pebbles to sticks and from mountains to creatures -- as Eä was created (spoken and sang) into being by Ilúvatar and his creations. Tolkien himself writes that the Valar “were the first creation: rational spirits or minds without incarnation, created before the physical world” (Carpenter, 284). Spirit and mind precede matter here, and matter only exists because of its intimacy with soul and song. Patrick Curry argues often against any materialist view of Tolkien’s world, as he does with analogy to, and critique of, historical materialism: “The mythical ‘vs.’ the actual, the ideal ‘vs.’ the real -- this is a set of choices which postmodern sensibilities have exposed as cruelly misleading. The ‘material’ is meaningless except as structured by ideas; conversely, ideas have highly material effects. Revolutions -- before, during and after -- are saturated with myth” (34). Even though Curry is arguing for an interwoven material/mythic worldview for understanding our own reality as a way to appreciate Tolkien’s work, his argument supports animism as a lens through which to accurately perceive Arda. Making the animism, the view that “everything in the universe has a soul or spirit” (Skrbina, 19), explicit in Tolkien allows us to discuss events as interactions between actors in a network; it is a useful term, also, as a handy rebuttal to materialist, Marxist, or simple allegorical readings of Tolkien.

Pantheism, perhaps instead of the simpler *pantheism*, may also be a useful approach to understanding the philosophical foundations of Arda, such as they are. “Pantheism seeks to avoid either isolating God from the world as traditional theism often does or identifying God with the world as pantheism does” (Culp). Where pantheism identifies the creator and the creation as one in the same, pantheism’s insistence on something of the creator within (but not identical to) the created aligns with O’Neill’s description of Ilúvatar’s melody interweaving with all created things. In a panetheistic cosmos, relatives are related by way of their individual connection to a universal creator, as well as in their direct relationships to one another.

Pantheism supports animism as a way to view Tolkien’s fundamental assumptions about Arda. For Tolkien the world is first and primarily *alive* -- created by the art/magic of living spirits. The ontology of Arda is one of agency and relationships rather than material and mechanism; the very nature of its being is of alive-ness in community: relationships and relatives.

So equipped, there are many relatives that might be closely examined in Arda for their personal qualities and interrelationships to Tolkien’s characters. Numberless animals and trees, but also waterways, stones, and other kinds of beings, interact with Elves, Men, Hobbits, Dwarves, Orcs, Ents, and others. Examining some of these interactions reveals similarities (and differences) among and between the relatives of Arda.

The mountain Caradhras (Redhorn, Barazinbar) has a narrow pass that makes it possible to cross the Misty Mountains, but it is a very dangerous and treacherous one. “It is even hinted that the mountain might have been, in some mysterious way, intentionally cruel to those using the pass” (Fisher, “Cruel”). In the Fellowship’s attempt to cross it, Gimli says “Caradhras has not forgiven us... The sooner we go back and down the better” (Tolkien, 1994, 284). The narrator, too, suggests the agency and personality of the mountain: “[With] that last stroke the malice of the mountain seemed to be expended, as if Caradhras *was satisfied* that the invaders had been beaten off and would not dare to return” (286, italics added).

Trees, not just their shepherds, also express their own wills. “...None were more dangerous than the Great Willow: his heart was rotten, but his strength was green; and he was cunning, and a master of winds, and his song and thought ran through the woods on both sides of the river. His grey thirsty spirit drew power out of the earth and spread like fine root-threads in the ground, and invisible twig-fingers in the air, till it had under its dominion nearly all the trees of the Forest from the Hedge to the Downs” (Tolkien, 1994, p. 128).

At the Ford of Bruinen, where the Fellowship is about to be attacked again by the Nazgul, the river Bruinen rises up to wash the Nazgul away. How did this happen? On one level, it was by the “command” of Elrond, as Gandalf tells Frodo. But there is a hint of something more, too: “The river of this valley is under [Elrond’s] power, and it will rise in anger when he has great need to bar the Ford.” The river Bruinen may itself *have* anger, or share in Elrond’s when he has a need to defend Rivendell. The “river itself fend[s] off” the Nazgul attack (Ambush).

Many (and perhaps all) animals are also relatives. Eagles, the great horse Shadowfax and his kin, spiders, and bears all at times express their wills to some degree in the affairs of the world. There is a range of agency among animals, and beings like Thorondor and Gwaihir seem to have much more of an ability to express their will and interact with others than do Beorn’s bees or than does the pony Bill. Gwaihir plays an important role at key moments, such as rescuing Gandalf from Celebdil (Zarakzigil) after the battle with the Balrog, which has consequential influence on later events. And Shadowfax? “...Shadowfax will have no harness. You do not ride Shadowfax: he is willing to carry you -- or not. If he is willing, that is enough. It is then his business to see that you remain on his back, unless you jump off into the air” (Tolkien, 1994, 582).

The above are but a few examples of relatives interacting with intelligent, willful, personal, and deliberate influence in Arda. In all cases, the agency is combined with a sense of emotion. The personality that we see in the river Bruinen is “anger”. In Shadowfax it is a hint of capriciousness -- Gandalf sounds like he has experienced or witnessed the great horse change his mind before. Caradhras is malicious, and crabby. The old willow is “rotten”, mean and sour.

Now, let us see if there is evidence that the stars show any similar agency, and if such agency could also be connected to emotion or to personality.

THE KNOWN STARS AND THEIR DISPOSITIONS

There is an indefinite number of stars² in Tolkien's world, but a finite number of named stars. Our scope is necessarily limited to the very little we know about those stars that are explicitly mentioned in the texts. "Star" is here limited in definition to such stars that may be seen in the evening sky; other 'stars', such as the floral "earth-stars" sung about by Tom Bombadil (Swank, 190), or metaphorical stars (Star of Elendil), are not the present concern³. Neither is the type of literary criticism that would have us make much of symbols -- although there is much here to explore in that vein⁴. For now, let us simply note a few stellar attributes.

Eärendil, his ship *Vingilot*, and the Silmaril they carry in the heavens are together seen as a star⁵. *Vingilot* is made of mithril and "elven-glass", and the Silmaril on its prow is a symbol of hope in Middle-Earth (Tyler, 125). Also called Gil-Estel, the Star of High Hope, it has a more complicated story than what we know of other stars, as Eärendil began as an Elf but has somehow become a star in a seeming matrix with his ship *Vingilot* and the Silmaril they carry. This is a diligent star, still going across the sky after ages. We might say that Eärendil had long been on the job when Tolkien found a version of him in Norse myth (Noel, 116-118), and so stamina would perhaps be another personality trait to ascribe him.

Frodo sees Borgil, a red star, rising along with the constellations Remmirath (The Netted Stars) and Menelvagor (Swordsman of the Sky). Borgil rises "slowly above the mists", and there is a suggestion that this is linked to "some shift of airs" that caused the mist to be drawn away. When the constellations are then made clear, the Elves celebrate (Tolkien, 1994, 80). If we can see anything here that suggests agency, it may be in this drawing away of mists by Borgil, but there is not enough evidence to lay that cause for certain on Borgil's rise or will. If Borgil and his neighbors in the sky are relatives, and if we do venture to say something about their personalities, then we could describe them as festive spirits -- the Elves did "burst into song" after the rise of the stars and the dispersal of the mists.

The sun (perhaps a star) and moon (not a star) are also vitally important celestial relatives. These heavenly bodies with whom all beings of Arda have more-or-less daily contact were once part of the Trees of Valinor. The sun is a vessel made from the last fruit of Laurelin, and the moon a vessel from the last leaf of Telperion. "The maiden whom the Valar chose from among the Maiar to guide the vessel of the Sun was named Arien, and he that steered the island of the Moon was Tilion" (Tolkien, 1977, 99). Arien was "mighty", and "had not feared the heats of Laurelin"; she was a "spirit of fire", and became a "naked flame" when she took stewardship of the sun.

Tilion's is a dreamier disposition: he was "a hunter of the company of Oromë, and he had a silver bow. He was a lover of silver, and when he would rest he forsook the woods of Oromë, and going into Lórien he lay in dream by the pools of Estë, in Telperion's flickering beams; and he begged to be given the task of tending for ever the last Flower of Silver" (99-100). Here we see evidence of Tilion becoming enchanted with beautiful things, and perhaps losing time

to wandering and wondering -- moonlike, maybe, he disappears for a while in his wonder and in love.

Other stars make appearances at key moments, such as the red star Frodo sees in Mordor. Sam sees a star in Mordor, and it brings him hope. The Valacirca (The Seven Stars; The Sickle of the Valar; The Sickle; The Plough; Butterfly; Etc.) serves as a warning to Melkor. Carnil is a red star (probably an analog to the planet Mars), which was one of the first and brightest created.

Many stars were made by Varda. She took the "silver dew from the vats of Telperion, and therewith she made new stars and brighter against the coming of the Firstborn; wherefore she whose name out of the deeps of time and the labours of Eä was Tintallë, the Kindler, was called after by the Elves Elentári, Queen of the Stars. Carnil and Luinil, Nénar and Lumbar, Alcarinquë and Elemmirë she wrought in that time, and many other of the ancient stars she gathered together and set as signs in the heavens of Arda: Wilwarin, Telumendil, Soronúmë, and Anarrima" and Menelmacar and Valacirca (Tolkien, 1977, 48). That she made "new" stars implies the pre-existence of other older stars⁶, and even if those she did not herself make, she certainly had power over them, as expressed in her rearranging them to "set as signs".

Cruel mountains, rotten trees, fickle horses, friendly birds, angry rivers: natural things are persons in Arda. Hope-giving, party-bringing, warning, fiery, and even errant: sometimes stars and celestial bodies are persons, too.

CONCLUSION AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

At least some of the stars are persons -- relatives. Even those, like Borgil, which did not start as Maia or as Elven heroes, seem to display agency. Tolkien's stars are "crystalline vessels within which shines the Flame Imperishable" (O'Neill, 78), shining with a light which all beings share (which is perhaps a bit of the Creator himself); in this, all relatives and "free folk" are kin to the stars through their *fëar*, which is given freely by Eru⁷.

This paper has presented evidence that Arda is full of animistic "relatives", has noted some of their attributes, and has also placed the stars within this category of relatives-as-persons. Animism, therefore, is a sound ontological mode for further exploration of Tolkien's subcreation. Beyond the further work collating the names and attributes of the stars, there remains more theoretical work to be done on how other approaches to animism, particularly developments in "new animism"⁸, may inform the ontology of Eä. Mapping the historical relationships of this animistic natural agency to Elves, Men, Dwarves, and back to the Valar, will illuminate finer details of Tolkien's sub-created ontology and cosmology.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Here the term Arda, Eä, 'cosmos', and 'world' will be used more or less interchangeably. Though Arda refers to the realm of our earth (Tolkien, C. 1994, p. 283), it only hints at the breadth of the term Eä, which we may think of as the 'beingness' of all that is, and within which

Arda is only one (very special) “place”. Middle-Earth is too specific in region and time to be a stand-in for the cosmos as a whole, even though it is sometimes roughly used as a proper noun to refer to the time and place of the happenings of Tolkien’s legendarium.

- 2 For very good work on identifying our world’s analogs for Tolkien’s named celestial bodies, see Kristine Larsen’s excellent essays. Of interest to some may be her analysis of Borgil as Aldebaran, for example (2005).
- 3 Should we make an exception for the sword Anglachel, Begel’s sword which was “made from iron which fell from heaven as a blazing star”? The sword was full of “malice”, but this did not apparently come from its previous life as a star so much as from the Dark Elf who forged it. His dark heart “still dwells in it,” according to Melian (Tolkien, 1977, p. 201-202).
- 4 As Anne Petty points out, stars and starlight do a lot of work in Tolkien. Indeed, as much as Galadriel is a vector for Eärendil’s hope given to Frodo in the phial, Shelob may be seen as a anti-star. Shelob is darkness even in dim daylight; Galadriel is clear and bright and gives vision even in the dark of night (53).
- 5 As Gilliver says, “it is not wholly clear whether [the star] refers to Eärendil the mariner himself, or to the bright ship in which he sails the heavens” (132), though toting a Silmaril would be a factor in the shininess of, as Bilbo puts it, “the Flammifer of Westernessee.”
- 6 I have shared all of the named heavenly objects, or stars, in Tolkien that I have found, but the scope of the current work does not require absolute certainty on this point. There is enough here to make a claim about stars as relatives. Further work on Tolkien’s stars, including a definitive list of all star names, with their appearances and associations, would be of great benefit to Tolkien scholarship.
- 7 Thomas Fornet-Ponse unpacks the complicated relationship between free will and the mechanics of Eru’s design for the world. Spirit and body, like individual agency and cosmic plans, are entangled by Tolkien in such a way that the determinism produces “a tension with the claim of freedom” (68).
- 8 Mattar (2012) further develops a place for new animism in fantasy literature by examining the relationship of W.B. Yeats’ ideas on faery to Edward Tylor’s conception of “savage” animism.

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