

Review of:

Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien, by Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006. 316 pp. \$35. ISBN: 0-8131-2418-2 .

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This book is a major new contribution to the subject of Tolkien's work in relation to the natural world and environmentalism. Whether it is a good one, however, is much less clear.

Let me start by sketching out some of the context necessary to understand and evaluate it. Much of that context comprises what is now called "green studies" or, more narrowly but increasingly, "ecocriticism". Inspired by the environmental and ecological movements, this new field in the humanities is concerned with the relationships between human culture and non-human nature in all possible respects, including the political, social, religious, aesthetic and ethical. It can thus be seen as a major new addition to the slightly earlier critical perspectives of socialism (class), feminism (gender) and post-colonialism (race).

Ecocriticism as a discipline began in the late 1980s in the USA and slightly later in the UK. Its leading American scholars include Cheryll Glotfelty, William Howarth, Karl Kroeber and Laurence Buell; in Britain the work of Jonathan Bate has been especially influential. The principal academic organization is ASLE: the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment.

Traditions of ecologically-oriented literature, of course, are much older. Major figures include William Wordsworth, John Ruskin, William Morris, Edward Thomas and D.H. Lawrence. In America, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are central. And, to bring matters somewhat closer to home, in a collection edited by Laurence Coupe entitled *The Green Studies Reader* (2000), I argued that J.R.R. Tolkien deserves a place in such a context and company.

Turning to the volume under review, then, what is indisputably good? The authors have devised an ingenious and useful distinction between agriculture for food (the domain of Hobbits), horticulture for aesthetic beauty (that of Elves), and feraculture – from Latin *ferus/fera*, wild – for wilderness preservation (Ents). Also original is the application of certain concepts from the interface of ecology and literary studies: liminality, ecotones and thick margins. More generally, the thorough discussion of Christian stewardship as an environmental ethic, and especially its central role in Tolkien's thought and writings, including his lesser work, is lovingly detailed and well-supported by a good grasp of Catholic theology.

However, the central hope of the authors is to provide "a good introduction... to the whole environment of Middle-earth." Here there are serious problems about which readers must be warned, lest they are tempted to accept the book in such terms. To begin with, the novice (who will probably form the majority of readers) is given almost no idea of just such a context as I have outlined. Further serious problems follow from the authors' three subsidiary and closely-linked positions: (1) that a Christian environmental ethic is the best one; (2) that Tolkien's attitude to nature as found in his books is fundamentally Christian; and (3) that no non-Christian work on the subject is worth discussing. I shall take these in order.

“In our view,” the authors write, “the best foundation for an environmental consciousness is a Christian one identical with, or at least comparable to, Tolkien’s” (26). In practice, however, “best” translates in this case as something quite different, namely “only”. (Late on they aver that “Christianity is by no means the only religion that recognizes the spiritual significance of nature” [253] but this is a purely token gesture.) In a book with ambitions to join the ranks of contemporary ecocriticism (as mentioned in John Elder’s Foreword), such exclusivity is unacceptable.

No one judging by this book would realize that Christian stewardship is but one of several kinds of environmental ethics, the others being very different and at least equally important and influential. The reader of this review is referred to my recent introduction to the subject; suffice it to say that these authors omit any mention whatsoever of Deep Ecology or its variants (e.g., Transpersonal Ecology, Deep Green Theory, Left Biocentrism), ecofeminism, Gaia Theory or the Land Ethic. By the same token, Arne Naess, George Sessions, Richard Sylvan, Edward Abbey, James Lovelock and Val Plumwood make no appearance. (The Land Ethic is mentioned once (47) but associated solely with Gandalf; Aldo Leopold’s name also shows up elsewhere in a list of contemporary environmental writers (259) which borders on the eccentrically selective.)

‘Pagan animism’ is also mentioned only once (53), and that in context of a quotation from Lynn White. There is no suggestion that pagan animism might offer a powerful, still surviving (despite violent suppression by monotheists) and much older alternative – not necessarily as a fringe religion but also as an articulation and refinement of common feelings about, and experiences of, nature.

The authors’ unbalanced discussion of White’s famous essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” is of a piece with their approach as a whole. Despite the obvious implication of Christianity, as a matter of historical record, in environmental despoliation – if not as a direct cause, then as useful ideological justification – they are unwilling to concede him any significant degree of truth. So too with their discussion of the notorious injunctions of Genesis 1:26 and 1:28, giving humans “dominion” over the Earth and ordering them to “subdue” and “rule over” all other inhabitants. The authors’ interpretation is as idealistic (in both senses) as the common understanding of those passages, which they skate over, has been otherwise. Consequently, when they assert that exploitation of nature is “radically at odds with Christian faith”, it is comparable to maintaining that Islam *is* a religion of peace and Marxism *is* a philosophy of liberation. They may be, metaphysically; and perhaps they should be, in earthly reality; but *in effect, on the ground* – where, I would say, it matters most – the truth of all three assertions should be radically doubted.

The authors’ extol “the special place humans have in creation” (52), since apparently “humankind is not *merely* part of the natural order” (65): all part of the all-too-familiar story of humans deciding they are special (read, as it has been read: superior):

To an animal – a squirrel, for example – a tree is *nothing more* than a source of nuts, a place to escape from predators, and a nesting site. But if humans are more than *mere* animals, if their being transcends *mere* physical existence in some way, they can see a tree as something more (63) [my emphases].

Such dispiriting contempt for nature (not to mention presumption: how do they know this about squirrels, I wonder?) hardly seem part of a promising environmental ethic; and it is not improved by religious legitimation.

Great stress is laid on the “transcendent” character of Christian stewardship, beginning with the principle that “The universe is the work of a divine creator” (24). But this may be the heart of the problem; the natural world does not have any intrinsic value but is valued only as an *instance* of something else greater, that is, as the handiwork of God. To make matter still worse, it is profoundly anthropocentric: “Arda is brought into being for the Children of Ilúvatar – for Elves and Men” (51). Hence it has no value or purpose *in itself*.

Contrast that with Sean Kane’s point: “all the work that various peoples have done – all the work that peoples must do – to live with the Earth on the Earth’s terms is pre-empted by the dream of transcendence” (255). Or Ronald Hepburn’s: values and experiences

are essentially the result of a cooperation of man and non-human nature: the universe would not contain them, were it not for our perceptual-creative efforts, and were it not equally for the contribution of the non-human world that both sustains and sets limits to our lives. To realize that... [shows] our earth-rootedness even in our aspirations. There is no wholly-other paradise from which we are excluded; the only transcendence that can be real to us is an “immanent” one (181-82).

I don’t cite this alternative view to show that the authors are necessarily mistaken. The point is that there is no such discussion in *Ents, Elves, and Eriador*. Rather, Christian stewardship is misleadingly presented as constituting the whole of environmental ethics. (On other religions – which themselves do not exhaust that subject – see the excellent series published by Harvard University Press on “Religions of the World and Ecology”.)

Turning to Tolkien’s work, the same problem persists. It is taken as self-evident that since “Tolkien’s environmental ethic was firmly rooted in a deeply Christian, Catholic understanding of the world and its creator” (xxii), it follows that his “environmental vision is a profoundly meaningful outgrowth of his Catholicism and is therefore, at bottom, Christian” (24). The trouble is two-fold. (1) Tolkien certainly wrote as a Christian, but not *only* as a Christian. (They apparently recognize this – “*The Lord of the Rings* is a philological novel inspired by philological principles” (129) and “Tolkien wanted above all to tell a good story” (139) – but once again, these are gestures with no weight.) And in keeping with the authors’ narrowly Christian programme, the fact that Tolkien also had a passionate interest in pagan Northern European mythology is ignored, along with its significant environmental implications.

(2) It does not actually follow that because Tolkien was Christian, his work is. No more does it follow that “In a book whose subject is Tolkien’s environmental ethic... stewardship is the appropriate term [because] it is the term Tolkien used in his writing... with full awareness of its implications for Christian belief” (40). Here the authors manage to combine both genetic and intentional fallacies. Nor will it do to invoke transcendent principles “in the sense that they are based on something beyond the personal preference of the author or of any one character or group of characters inside or outside the story in any particular time or culture” (25) This is essentialism with a vengeance, placing any “transcendent” assertions beyond meaningful criticism.

I would add that the attempt to fit Bombadil and Beorn into the box of Christian stewardship is also, significantly, highly unconvincing. Even in Tolkien’s own assessment, Bombadil is a nature spirit (not something Christianity has been all

that keen about, on the whole) whose ethos, as described by Goldberry to Frodo – “The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves” – is an encapsulation not of theistic stewardship (which is, after all, a kind of ownership, even if in someone else’s stead) but of precisely animistic and, to that extent, pagan intrinsic value, as well as a pointer to the other presences in Tolkien’s complex work which these authors have chosen to ignore. As for Beorn, he is first and foremost a shamanistic shape-shifter (!) and if a steward, decidedly a ruthless Machiavellian not a forgiving Christian one.

Crucially, in addition to the fallacies and errors just noted, the authors show no awareness that the meaning of a book is a highly complex amalgam of what the author has put into it *plus* what readers are finding in it – a very different matter. (This lacuna corresponds exactly to their determination that since a religion “is” only what it was purportedly intended to be, there is no need to take into account what it has been *taken* to be.)

In short, the authors’ exegesis of Tolkien’s environmentalism is both uncritical and unself-critical. In relation to ecocriticism generally and Tolkien studies in particular, it is therefore decidedly regressive.

Finally (3), the authors of this book are equally selective, not to say sectarian, about which prior work they choose to acknowledge and discuss. Setting aside the lack of discussion of ecocriticism as a whole, perhaps the most egregious example concerns my own. I write this in no spirit of proprietorship nor pique; what is at stake is scholarly standards. Thus, several scholars, including myself, are politely dismissed as having “addressed in a more specific, even narrowly academic manner, [what] we address on a broader and more thorough popular level...” (xviii) This is highly misleading. *Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* was (so far as I know) not only the first full-length work to concentrate on Tolkien’s environmental vision but one written precisely for the general reader rather than the academic specialist. (It has received some sharp criticism, even dismissal, on both accounts!)

So, for example, there is a section here, entitled “Myth and Wonder”, in which the authors discuss how, by bringing “readers into contact with the mythical dimension of reality, and by showing the transcendent, even sacred, spiritual dimensions of nature in everyday life, Tolkien’s story engenders a similar appreciation of the real world among his readers...” (233) Yet unmentioned is the fact that a decade ago, in the same book about the meaning of *The Lord of the Rings* in this world – to which, I argued, it returns us – and which includes chapters specifically on myth and wonder, I defined Tolkien’s literary project as “the resacralization (or re-enchantment) of experienced and living nature, including human nature, in the local cultural idiom” (29).

Why this lack of common academic courtesy or, for that matter, charity? The answer is surely plain: because my book was not written from a Christian perspective. But is that sufficient reason not to even mention previous work (in a field where there is little enough of it), and in such an obviously related context (even if only to go on to disagree with it)? No, it is not; this is simply poor practice. (I would also like to reassure readers that despite this book’s bibliography, Joseph Pearce did not write my essay “Tolkien and the Critics: A Critique.”)

This has been a severe review, and some may be tempted to reach for an easy explanation. But I have been equally sharp about dogmatic secular Tolkien criticism (in the same essay). Dogmatic religious criticism, however – of any kind – is no better. Let me be quite clear: if the authors of *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* had described their subject as Christian stewardship, Tolkien’s commitment to that ideal and its

presence in his work, without pretending that there is no other significant kind of environmental ethics, that Tolkien had no other significant commitments which affected his work in this respect (never mind how that work has been taken up), and that no earlier work on this subject is worth considering, then it would be a very different matter, and this would be a very different review. Regrettably, they chose otherwise. The result is both disingenuous and tendentious.

Works Cited

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