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On the ambivalence of fire in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*

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Abstract: Especially since the 1990s, the ecological significance of J.R.R. Tolkien's work has been increasingly analysed. Despite the growing body of secondary literature on the topic, however, the problematic role of fire in Tolkien's cosmos still remains to be clarified. In this article, I trace the ambivalent status of fire back to *The Silmarillion*, where Tolkien's mythical universe is exposed in detail, and go on to assess the role of fire in both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. To this end, I claim that the ambivalence of fire is present at an archetypal and at a civilisational level. At the archetypal level, fire can be primordial or elemental: while primordial archetypal fire functions as the fundamental principle of creation and life, elemental archetypal fire is part of the created natural world and can be wielded by supernatural beings. The civilisational aspect concerns how fire is put to use by the human and humanoid peoples of Middle Earth in order to build communities or civilisations, the problem being that, in Tolkien's work, ecological devastation and desire for power are inevitably linked to the (mis)use of fire. By drawing on Erich Fromm's distinction between biophilia and necrophilia (love of growing things vs. love of decay), I suggest that the excessive use of fire in Tolkien's work fosters the emergence of necrophilous civilisations and that the best thing one can do is to try to contain the damaging potential of fire as much as possible.
Keywords: *Tolkien;* The Silmarillion*;* Lord of the Rings*; Erich Fromm; fire ecology.*

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Introduction

When Paul H. Kocher labelled J.R.R. Tolkien as "ecologist" in 1972 (Kocher 26), the term 'ecocriticism' had not even been coined by academics. Therefore, it came as no surprise that, when ecocriticism finally established itself as a noteworthy research area in the field of literary studies in the 1990s (see Glotfelty xvii-xviii), critics and philologists started to pay increased attention to Tolkien's work. Since Patrick Curry's seminal study *Defending Middle-Earth. Tolkien: Myth and Modernity* (1997), an ever-growing body of secondary literature dealing with the ecological relevance of Tolkien's work – especially *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* – has emerged: be it book-length works that explore Tolkien's environmental vision in depth (see esp. Dickerson & Evans; Campbell; Jeffers), or shorter articles concerning narrower subjects such as the conflictual relation to trees (see Flieger) or ecological memory (see Sena).

Even under these circumstances, however, there remains much to be said on certain ecological topics in Tolkien's work that have been poorly explored so far. One such topic, namely the status of fire in Tolkien's mythical universe, will be explored in the present article. To this end, I shall focus on *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. While the former work best highlights Tolkien's concerns with respect to how the human and human-like, i.e. 'humanoid' peoples of Arda (Elves, Men, Dwarves, Orcs, Hobbits)[1] deal with nature and the environment, the latter provides the broader mythico-historical context – i.e. the entire history of Middle-Earth from the Elder Days until the end of the Third Age – which can enable the reader to better grasp the role of fire as a creative and destructive force, depending on its uses and misuses.

To better tackle the topic of fire in Tolkien's imaginary world, one should avoid oversimplification. While fire in Tolkien's work is usually linked with hellish landscapes (e.g. the volcanic landscapes of Mordor) and evil creatures (e.g. Balrogs or dragons), it would be misleading to assert that Tolkien wholly demonises fire. As Jyrki Korpua remarks, fire in Tolkien's work can also be "noble and benevolent", not just "frightening" (55); and yet even Korpua tends to view fire as a natural element just like air, earth or water – which may only partly be the case. Consequently, I will try to do justice to the representation of fire in Tolkien's work by distinguishing two aspects of it, both of them ambivalent: the *archetypal* and the *civilisational* aspect. The archetypal aspect of fire – which will be analysed in the first part of the following paper – refers to fire as an instrument of creation manoeuvered by supernatural beings (such as Illúvatar, Valar or Maiar) who model the environment that will eventually be inhabited by the human and humanoid peoples of Arda (Elves, Men, Dwarves, Orcs, Hobbits). On the other hand, civilisational fire – which will be dealt with more closely starting with the second chapter – stresses how the aforementioned peoples, who are not supernatural beings *stricto sensu*, adapt to the environment by using fire to build communities or civilisations, i.e. social organisms which provide the individual with a sense of orientation inside the created world. While discussing civilisational fire, I will also discuss its uses and misuses on a

[1] The word 'humanoid' is here intended as a synonym for 'human-like'. Morphologically speaking, Elves, Men, Dwarves, Orcs, Hobbits have a similar bodily structure.

collective scale, especially with regards to the spoiling of landscape and the practice of smithery. By drawing on psychoanalyst Erich Fromm's terminology, it will be suggested that excessive fire use tends to encourage the emergence of necrophilous (i.e. destructive or death-oriented) communities and that no people on Middle-Earth – not even Elves or Hobbits – is fully exempt from necrophilous tendencies as long as it is fire-dependent, as the conflicts involving the Silmarils and the Rings of Power show.

Archetypal fire in Tolkien's mythology – primordial and elemental

When reading Tolkien's major works (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Silmarillion* or even *The Hobbit*) one is often struck by the connection between fire and evil. After all, the Rings of Power and the Silmarils are made of fire, and antagonists such as Melkor/Morgoth, Sauron or Smaug are fire-loving villains. Consequently, it would seem that no major conflict on Arda – i.e. the universe created by the Supreme Deity Illúvatar (or Eru) – were possible without fire. Still, the overall picture is somewhat more complicated. As can be inferred from the first section of *The Silmarillion* entitled "The Music of the Ainur" (or "Ainulindalë"), fire is not just a destructive force, but also the primordial source of divine creativity: Illúvatar uses the Flame Imperishable (also called 'Secret Fire') to fill the Void and create Arda (or Eä), thus turning into reality the vision of the Ainur (the immortal, angel-like spirits devised by Illúvatar's thoughts): "Therefore I say: *Eä*! Let these things Be! And I will send forth into the Void the Flame Imperishable, and it shall be at the heart of the World, and the World shall Be; and those of you that will may go down into it" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 9). In *The Lord of the Rings* too, the reader is reminded of the existence of the Secret Fire during Gandalf's clash with the Balrog in the mines of Moria: "'I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udûn . . .'" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 430).

On a smaller scale, this clash between Gandalf and the Balrog merely parallels the conflict between the Valar and Melkor in *The Silmarillion*: as a fallen Ainur who used to be second only to the Creator himself, the luciferic figure of Melkor comes to epitomise Evil in its most destructive forms – in contrast to the other Ainur/Valar, Melkor does his utmost to pervert the inherent goodness of creation. It is true that Melkor is not exclusively a fire spirit; his dual nature tends to include the extremes of both hot and cold: "he wielded cold and fire, from the tops of the mountains to the deep furnaces that are beneath them" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 32). Nevertheless, he remains the only Ainur explicitly drawn to fire alongside Aulë, who in turn is presented as a "smith and a master of all crafts" of whom Melkor is jealous because he is "most like himself [Melkor] in thought and in powers" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 17-8).

The conflict between Illúvatar and Melkor is thus at least partly framed as a conflict between two different forms of fire, both archetypal. On the one hand, the *primordial* Secret Fire is directly related to the act of creation itself – at this level, fire is the principle of creativity and life and is, as such, detached from all the elements. On the other hand, at the *elemental* level of the created world, fire coexists with the other elements, i.e with air, earth and water; its status at this stage, however, is much more

problematic, since elemental fire does not seem to be conceived as a self-standing element. For instance, whereas the three other elements are ascribed the rule of a Valar at the dawn of the First Age – Manwë and Varda lay claim upon the air and skies, Ulmo upon the waters, Aulë and Yavanna upon the Earth – no Vala (i.e. no Ainur that settles in the west part of Arda) gets to master fire, even though Melkor and Aulë undoubtedly remain most closely linked to it. It therefore remains unclear whether fire can actually be deemed an element: for instance, when the three jewels called Silmarils are finally hidden from the world after Melkor's final defeat, one is taken "in the airs of heaven, . . . another one in the fires of the world, and another one in the deep waters" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 305). However, the Silmaril buried 'in the fires of the world' is actually associated with the Earth as element, since it is "taken into the bosom of the Earth" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 305). Last but not least, the questionable status of fire as an element alongside air, earth and water is reinforced by the fact that tree-like creatures such as the Ent Treebeard do not seem to register environmental change in terms of fire: ". . . the world is changing: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 1285). Given the fundamental ambivalence of fire as a principle of creation and destruction, Treebeard's omission may not be coincidental: it may suggest that Tolkien's cosmology involves three main natural elements (air, earth and water), with elemental fire as an additional natural force whose overall role remains unclear.[2]

In this respect, Tolkien's approach may as well be both modern and archaic – modern insofar as it suggests that fire is not an element like the others while still being 'elemental', as Stephen Pyne would put it (Pyne 2); archaic insofar as Tolkien still views fire as an archetype indispensable to literary imagination in a manner akin to Northrop Frye: "earth, air, water, and fire are still the four elements of imaginative experience, and always will be" (Frye 141). Consequently, fire is the only 'elemental force' or 'archetypal force' left without a ruler, i.e. without someone to contain it; Melkor and Aulë remain the Ainur most closely linked to it.

Before moving to the next section on the civilisational aspect of fire, it is best to make a few additional remarks while summing up what has been said thus far:

1. Though not exactly an element in its own right, fire can be regarded as an archetypal force in two respects. At a *primordial* level, *primordial archetypal fire* qua Secret Fire (or Flame Imperishable) stands for the mysterious principle of creation and is as such detached from the natural elements: it functions as a kind of 'soul of the world' without which the universe could neither exist nor subsist. On the other hand, at an *elemental* level, *elemental archetypal fire* is part of the created world alongside water, air and earth – here, it forms part of the *natura naturata*. It is at this elemental level that fire

[2] It is also worth noting that the toxic environment of Mordor seems to be presented as affecting earth, air or water, but not fire: "Earth, air and water all seem accursed" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 931). Since the toxic landscape of Mordor – as shall be discussed later in this study – is overwhelmingly shaped by elemental fire, a legitimate question arises regarding the impact of fire on the development of life on Arda. The least one can say with respect to this passage is that the other three natural elements – earth, air and water – seem to be less problematic than fire in that they are more readily perceived as non-destructive and life-sustaining.

becomes a truly ambivalent force for two reasons: firstly, because no Vala gets to rule over it; and secondly, because, in comparison to the unquestionable positive status of the Flame Imperishable, fire as an elemental force becomes a corruptible tool, prone to various misuses. Moreover, the postulation of a Secret Fire at the primordial level also increases the ambivalence of fire by suggesting that fire cannot be easily integrated into creation: it is either beyond the other elements (qua Secret Fire) or below them (elemental force, but not element).

2. While primordial archetypal fire (Secret Fire/Flame Imperishable) constitutes the primary source of creation, it is true that elemental archetypal fire in Tolkien's work tends to be heavily associated with evil creatures and hellish landscapes more generally. As regards landscapes, one cannot fail to mention the Iron Mountains with the group of three volcanoes called Thangorodrim (where Melkor's underground forges lie) or the volcanic mountains of Mordor (Mount Doom, the Ash Mountains). As regards living things intimately related to archetypal fire, one may recall dragons such as Ancalagon the Black or even Smaug from *The Hobbit*; fire demons called Balrogs, who, like Sauron, are Maiar corrupted by Melkor to become his servants (see Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 43); and, last but not least, primordial spirits drawn to smithery such as the fallen Valar Melkor or even the late Sauron, whose overall connection to elemental fire becomes more evident from the Second Age onwards, where it is said that the hand on which Sauron wore the One Ring "was black and yet burned like fire" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 329).

3. Insofar as archetypal fire, both primordial and elemental, pre-dates the peoples who will eventually inhabit Arda, it makes sense to distinguish between the archetypal fire manoeuvered by supernatural beings (Illúvatar, Valar, Maiar) and the civilisational fire that can be controlled at a collective level by the various races of Middle-Earth. While the boundary between archetypal fire (in its elemental variant) and fire as a culturally integrated 'tool' is admittedly fluid, there remains a qualitative difference between the use of fire by supernatural agents who, through their immense power, are able to model Arda on a cosmic scale, and the more limited use of fire for technological, cultural or civilisational purposes, which is typical of the peoples of Middle-Earth devoid of supernatural powers. The first type of use would thus count as archetypal, since it involves the creation of living beings and of the existential conditions – good or bad – to which the peoples of Middle-Earth will have to adapt collectively, whereas the second one involves an intensified use of natural resources with the aim of creating entire civilisations based on specific sets of rules and ways of life.

Civilisational fire in Tolkien's work

Once the first peoples of Middle-Earth, the Elves, arrive on Arda during the First Age, the question concerning the entanglement of the artificial and the natural becomes unavoidable. It is only with the arrival of the peoples of Middle-Earth (Elves, Dwarves, Men, Orcs, and Hobbits later on), i.e. of those human and humanoid creatures who cannot be identified with elemental forces of nature, of beings for whom nature is something larger and much more uncertain and – last but not least – a source of purpose, that the problem of the interaction with the environment via technology becomes relevant. In

short, it is at the civilisational level that works such as *Lord of the Rings* become relevant for us as human beings, since it is only with the advent of human and humanoid peoples that responsibility towards the environment becomes a collective issue that involves more or less 'ordinary people'.

Of these 'ordinary peoples' that, strictly speaking, do not possess supernatural powers, the Elves qua Firstborn are privileged enough to feel a disinterested, primarily aesthetic appreciation for all things created (see Dickerson & Evans 98). From all peoples of Middle-Earth meant to highlight certain facets of human beings' interaction with the environment, Elves and, to a lesser extent, Hobbits seem to stand closest to nature in that their relation to the environment is for the most part organic and non-exploitative. Still, not even Elves and Hobbits can sustain this non-exploitative, organic relationship with the environment – or of 'power with' in Susan Jeffers's terms (Jeffers 19-49) – without friction. They too are prone to destructive tendencies at times; for instance, during a fight allegedly provoked by trees of the Old Forest, the Hobbits "came and cut down hundreds of trees, and made a great bonfire . . ., and burned all the ground in a long strip east of the Hedge" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 145). As for the Elves, the story of the Silmarils shows how pride and lust for power can pervert the will of the Firstborn. When Fëanor – an Elf from the kindred of Noldor – forges the three precious stones, his intention is to preserve the divine light of the Two Trees of Valinor; however, he soon finds himself possessed by "a greedy love" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 70) for the Silmarils. And once Melkor – who also covets the precious objects – starts spreading lies by telling the Noldor that the race of Men will threaten the supremacy of the Elves, the Noldor, led by Fëanor and his sons, swear a terrible oath to hunt down any member of any race – "Vala, Demon, Elf or Man as yet unborn, or any creature, great or small, good or evil" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 89) who would happen to own a Silmaril. The result is the catastrophic War of the Jewels, which will only end with the defeat of Melkor at the end of the First Age.

These two examples regarding Hobbits and Elves share one thing in common: both involve ecological imbalance following the misuse of fire, albeit on two qualitatively different levels. One level concerns the *direct infliction of ecological harm*; the other concerns the perils entailed by *the practice of smithery*, whose downsides can be seen in the forging not only of destructive weapons in general, but also of power-laden objects. Although some races are more deeply connected to nature than others, none of the human or humanoid peoples of Middle-Earth, roughly speaking, can completely avoid such misuses of fire that may lead to ecological imbalance or harm, be it local or general. In other words, none of the human(oid) peoples of Middle-Earth displays such an unconditional respect for nature and life so as to completely avoid pathologies of power and damage to nature, i.e. behaviour patterns which can be termed 'necrophilous'.[3] The adjective 'necrophilous' is derived here from the term 'necrophilia' as employed by Erich Fromm. In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), Fromm defines necrophilia as "the passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; . .the passion to

[3] In the following, I will use the words 'biophilous' and 'necrophilous' when describing individual and collective attitudes and mentalities; 'biophilic' and 'necrophilic' will be used instead when describing acts or things.

transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical" (332). Thus, while necrophilia in its purest form is only encountered in Tolkien's arch-villains (Melkor, Sauron, Saruman and, for the most part, the Orcs), necrophilous tendencies, as shall be shown in the next two sections, are also noticeable in the desire for power and the disregard towards nature displayed on the 'good side' as well. Shortly put, there is no perfectly biophilous folk in Tolkien's universe, if by biophilia one understands "the passionate love of life and of all that is alive" (Fromm 365). Under these circumstances, the best option available to the peoples of Middle-Earth is to contain to some extent the ecological harm caused by the dependence on fire.

For the remainder of this article, I will discuss the two aforementioned types of misuse in more detail – i.e. the direct infliction of ecological harm and the ambivalence of smithery as a fire-related practice –, since these two types of misuse are crucial to understanding the extent to which, in Tolkien's work, ecological harm and ecological harmony depend on how fire is dealt with.

Civilisational fire and necrophilia (I): Reshaping landscapes through the cutting and burning of trees. Three examples of necrophilous civilisations

Roughly speaking, fire-provoked environmental damage is at its most blatant in the reshaping of landscapes and communities, often through tree removal. That Tolkien was a tree-lover is already well-known; in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* written on June 30, 1972, he even went so far so as to state that "[i]n all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies" (Tolkien, *Letters* 419). Treebeard himself laments the isolation of trees whenever wars are fought between the peoples of Middle-Earth: "I am not altogether on anybody's *side*, because nobody is altogether on my *side*, if you understand me: nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves nowadays" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 615).

Of all ecologically damaging acts in *The Lord of the Rings*, the felling and burning of trees probably has the highest symbolic relevance, as it reflects a latent tension between trees and some peoples of Middle-Earth (Hobbits, Dwarves, Men, Orcs). Albeit of a short duration, the local clash between Hobbits and the trees of the Old Forest is not without consequence – forests come to be perceived as dark and dangerous places. What goes for Hobbits goes all the more for Dwarves as axe wielders, as suggested by their maker Aulë, who tells his wife Yavanna that the Dwarves "will have need of wood" despite the simultaneous need to protect trees (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 42; see also Flieger 156).

Much more serious is the felling and burning of trees performed by Men and, of course, Orcs. In *The Silmarillion*, Ar-Pharazôn (king of the Island of Númenor, located outside Middle-Earth) is tricked by Sauron into burning the sacred tree Nimloth as a first offering to Melkor (see Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 327). Predictably enough, the burning of Nimloth – a veritable *axis mundi* of the Númenorean community – signals the downfall of the Kingdom of Númenor: Númenor will be drowned by Illúvatar himself after Ar-Pharazôn, unsatisfied with his mortal condition, threatens to come after the immortal

Valar (see Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 329-34); the line of kings is then continued by Elendil, who sails to Middle-Earth and goes on to become the first King of Gondor at the end of the Second Age (see Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 348). In the courtyard of Minas Ithil, the capital of Gondor, a new White Tree is planted that contains a sapling of Nimloth; this tree will again be burned when Sauron conquers Minas Ithil and turns it into Minas Morgul (see Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 1423). The next White Tree is planted in Minas Anor and later replanted in Minas Tirith, but in both cases the tree withers and dies. After the Ring of Power is destroyed at the end of the Third Age, Aragorn will eventually replace the withered White Tree and plant a newly-discovered sapling of Nimloth in its place that will eventually grow and blossom. In this context, it is worth noting that the third White Tree is not burned but placed at Rath Dínen, where the tombs of Gondor's kings lie: "Then the withered tree was uprooted, but with reverence; and they did not burn it, but laid it to rest in the silence of Rath Dínen" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 1273).

Last but not least, the felling and burning of trees by Orcs (including the Uruk-hai) is by far the most devastating ecologically; whereas some Men (like Aragorn) do their best to correct the mistakes of their ancestors, Orcs have no such intentions – they basically follow Sauron's and Saruman's orders. Treebeard explicitly laments the mischief done by Saruman's Orcs, who cut down trees and burn them in the furnaces of Saruman's stronghold Orthanc: "Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot – orc-mischief that; but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc. There is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 617).

At this point, it should be noted that, as already suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the cutting and burning of trees is mainly indicative of the destructive ways in which fire can be put to use more broadly. On a symbolic plane, the burning of a tree (such as the White Tree) can stand for a community's moral and spiritual decay; on a more concrete plane, the systematic felling of trees (such as the felling of the trees of Fangorn Forest), correlated with the oppression and maltreatment of other living beings, constitutes part of a broader 'civilisational' project, namely the erection of a machine-centered, often war-oriented civilisation that stifles the free manifestation of life through intensive fire use. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Mordor under the rule of Sauron, as well as Isengard and the Shire (when both under Saruman's rule) are three representative cases of such communities or civilisations which, building on Erich Fromm's terminology outlined in the previous section, might be called 'death-oriented' or 'necrophilous'. Naturally, these three communities do not display the same degree of necrophilia, Mordor serving as prototype for Isengard and the Shire under Saruman's rule. Still, Tolkien makes it clear that all these three places are evil in the sense that, with time, their landscapes come to stifle the healthy growth of living things (plants, animals, peoples).

In the shaping of the landscape in all three cases, fire plays a key part by fuelling the development of destructive machinery. Mordor is, of course, by far the most fire-consuming of all, due also to the geographic conditions prior created by Melkor: as a predominantly volcanic territory with Mount Doom at its heart, it provides the recipe for environmental disaster. In nearly every description of Mordor, fire, smoke and ash are mentioned, of which the following descriptions are only a sample:

> Thither, eastward, unwilling his [i.e. Frodo's] eye was drawn. It passed the ruined bridges of Osgiliath, the grinning gates of Minas Morgul, and the haunted Mountains, and it looked upon Gorgoroth, the valley of terror in the Land of Mordor. Darkness lay there under the Sun. *Fire* glowed amid the *smoke*. Mount Doom was *burning*, and a great reek rising. Then at last his gaze was held: wall upon wall, battlement upon battlement, black, immeasurably strong, mountain of iron, gate of steel, tower of adamant, he saw it: Barad-dûr, Fortress of Sauron. (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 523; my italics)

> Hard and cruel and bitter was the land that met his [Sam's] gaze. Before his feet the highest ridge of the Ephel Dúath fell steeply in great cliffs down into a dark trough, on the further side of which there rose another ridge, much lower, its edge notched and jagged with crags like fangs that stood out black against the red light behind them: it was the grim Morgai, the inner ring of the fences of the land. Far beyond it, but almost straight ahead, across a wide lake of darkness dotted with tiny *fires*, there was a great *burning glow*; and from it rose in huge columns a swirling *smoke*, dusty red at the roots, black above where it merged into the billowing canopy that roofed in all the accursed land.
> Sam was looking at Orodruin, the *Mountain of Fire*. Ever and anon the *furnaces* far below its *ashen cone* would grow *hot* and with a great surging and throbbing pour forth *rivers of molten rock* from chasms in its sides. Some would flow *blazing* towards Barad-dûr down great channels; some would wind their way into the stony plain, until they cooled and lay like twisted dragon-shapes vomited from the tormented earth. (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 1176; my italics)

The passages quoted above underscore the excessive presence of fire in Sauron's dominion. In the land of Mordor, forges, furnaces and mines – together with the region around Lake Núrnen where Men toil slavishly (see Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 1208) – lay the basis for a militarised society with the purpose of oppressing nature and the peoples of Middle-Earth, Orcs included.

At a smaller scale, Saruman aims to emulate the necrophilous civilisation of Mordor twice. He tries to do so first as a ruler of Isengard and its surroundings, and the changes are considerable enough after damming the river Isen and sacrificing part of Fangorn Forest. The once "fair and green" valley of Nan Curunir becomes "a wilderness of weeds and thorns" with no trees left (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 722). The perimeter of Isengard itself becomes a barren place where "groves of fruitful trees" are replaced with "long lines of pillars" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 723). Saruman's cult for the inanimate and lifeless – hard materials such as iron, marble or copper – is of course heavily fire-dependent as well. Instead of nurturing the growth of living things, the evil wizard turns Isengard into a barren place where vents and shafts lead to a series of underground "treasuries, store-houses, armouries, smithies, and great furnaces" meant to sustain Saruman's own thirst for power (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 723-4). And as the unceasing thudding of hammers and endless revolving of iron wheels (see Tolkien, *Lord of the*

Rings 724) suggest, Saruman's cult for machinery and weapons would be unthinkable without excessive (mis)use of fire.

Even after Saruman is defeated, his influence still affects the Shire, as Frodo and his companions find out when they return. Unsurprisingly, the environmental changes to which the habitat of the Shire is subjected are explicitly linked to heavy fire use – the hobbits do not fail to notice the "rather sad and forlorn" state of the land and "the unusual amount of burning going on" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 1309). As they advance, they notice missing houses and trees, weed-choked gardens, ugly houses and smoking chimneys:

> Many of the houses that they had known were missing. Some seemed to have been burned down. The pleasant row of old hobbit-holes in the bank on the north side of the Pool were deserted, and their little gardens that used to run down bright to the water's edge were rank with weeds. Worse, there was a whole line of the ugly new houses all along Pool Side, where the Hobbiton Road ran close to the bank. An avenue of trees had stood there. They were all gone. And looking with dismay up the road towards Bag End they saw a tall chimney of brick in the distance. It was pouring out black smoke into the evening air. (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 1314)

While the causal link is not necessarily obvious, the building of new, ugly houses and the removal of trees are again correlated with increased fire use. The above quote might even be construed as a subtle wink to the reader to fill in the causal blanks by drawing the connection between the missing trees on the avenue and the smoke rising up the chimney. Although the impact of Sharkey's (i.e. Saruman's) influence is arguably less malign than in Isengard, the similarity between the barren, fire-blasted landscape of Mordor and the maltreated habitat of the Shire does not escape Sam's eye: "'This is worse than Mordor!' . . . 'Much worse in a way. It comes home to you, as they say; because it is home, and you remember it before it was all ruined.'" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 1332). Eventually though, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin manage to raise the Hobbits against the gangs of ruffians – made up of Hobbits and Men – under Sharkey's (i.e. Saruman's) command and thus reclaim their way of life. In the end, Sam manages to revive the trees of the Shire by using the magical dust given to him by Lady Galadriel of Lothlórien.

Mordor with its volcanoes and fire-blasted landscapes, Isengard with its stony, treeless roads and underground furnaces, the Shire with its ugly houses and chimneys – all three places are shaped by the misuse of fire in a toxic way that oppresses the environment and stifles the healthy development of living things. The principle at work implied here might be summed up as follows: *The heavier the use of fire in a community or civilisation, the higher the degree of necrophilia of the respective community or civilisation*. While fire per se is not evil and is not always perceived as such even by trees, as can be inferred from the scene where a tree at the edge of Fangorn Forest draws closer to the fire kindled by Gimli the dwarf in order to warm itself (see Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 574), the use of fire for civilisational purposes often has devastating ecological effects. By using the seemingly innocent example of the Shire, Tolkien makes it clear that

fire is an ambivalent resource and its use a very delicate matter: at the same time with providing the basis for the development of communities and civilisations, fire also provides the basis for environmental damage as a necessary means to sustain the existence of communities and civilisations. In this sense, environmental damage through fire can only be contained, not wholly avoided. As a result, the opposition between biophilia (love of life and living things) and necrophilia (love of death and decay) is by no means absolute, since no people of Middle-Earth (human or humanoid) is exempt from necrophilous inclinations. One might at best frame this opposition in terms of a spectrum, with Elves (and maybe Hobbits) at the biophilous end and Orcs at the necrophilous one. Still, as shall be briefly explored in the following subsection, the paradox of fire as a tool for civilisation is most aptly captured by Tolkien in the practice of smithery.

Civilisational fire and necrophilia (II): smithery as an ambivalent practice

Just like fire itself, smithery is not per se evil, and yet the main villains in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* (i.e. Melkor and Sauron) are in a sense smiths. In fact, one may go as far so as to say that the ambivalence of fire is expressed at its fullest in the ambivalence inherent to the practice of smithery. Therefore, a short discussion of smithery is inevitable when analysing the role of fire in Tolkien's work, for the thesis that no people on Middle-Earth is perfectly biophilous can best be demonstrated by its relation to this practice, since few of the human or humanoid peoples of Middle-Earth disapprove of it.

For instance, while the Elves are unquestionably the most biophilous folk of Middle-Earth, even they cannot escape a certain thirst for knowledge which may degenerate into a subtler form of will to power. In *The Silmarillion*, it is the Noldor Elf Fëanor who forges the Silmarils, the three precious stones which will be coveted by Melkor and will eventually become an object of strife between the Elves and other peoples of Middle-Earth. And as if one war caused by Elvish pride and possessiveness were not already enough, the Elven-smiths of Eregion are later tricked by Sauron into forging the Rings of Power during the Second Age:

> . . . many eyes were turned to Elrond in fear and wonder as he told of the Elven-smiths of Eregion and their friendship with Moria, and their eagerness for knowledge, by which Sauron ensnared them. For in that time he was not yet evil to behold, and they received his aid and grew mighty in craft, whereas he learned all their secrets, and betrayed them, and forged secretly in the Mountain of Fire the One Ring to be their master. But Celebrimbor was aware of him, and hid the Three which he had made; and there was war, and the land was laid waste, and the gate of Moria was shut. (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 315)[4]

[4] It is true that the Elves of Eregion are not motivated by "strength or domination" when forging the Rings, as Elrond is quick to emphasise, but by the need "to preserve all things unstained" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 350). Still, the need to suppress change may also turn out to be a form

The Elves may thus live in greater harmony with nature than the rest of the peoples of Middle-Earth; still, their relation to fire remains problematic on a more abstract plane. Their pride and resistance to change – which may result in possessiveness – makes them quite sensitive to Sauron's machinations: the latter exploits the Elves' interest in smithery – which he also shares – to his own advantage. Once Sauron creates the One Ring supposed to master all the others, the Elves' fate is sealed – most of them decide to leave Middle-Earth even if the One Ring is destroyed, for, as Galadriel tells Frodo, the destruction of the Ring would diminish the power of the Elves, who would then "dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 475). Notwithstanding Galadriel's hospitality towards the Fellowship of the Ring in the woods of Lothlórien, humility does not seem to be the Elves's forte. The effect of the forging of the Rings of Power is in this sense irreversible – one way or another, it puts an end to the Elves's privileged status on Middle-Earth.

Predictably enough, temptation of power and possessiveness also corrupts Dwarves and Men: seven Rings of Power are given to the former, nine to the latter. From these two peoples, it is hard to say which one is the more biophilic/necrophilic. On the one hand, Men seem to be easier to deceive and corrupt – after all, only members of their race are turned into Ringwraiths, and only members of the race of Men like the Haradrim join Sauron's armies in the War of the Ring. On the other hand, no other folk is as prone to smithery as the Dwarves who live underground: no other folk is as dedicated to the exploitation of anorganic matter as they are, which may result in an excessive attraction to precious stones and jewels and a general disregard for trees and plants.

All in all, it should be noted that smithery in Tolkien's work is a thoroughly ambivalent practice, all the more so since most human and humanoid civilisations on Arda from Elves to Orcs depend on it more or less (presumably Hobbits too, though the extent remains unclear). In other words, all or most human and humanoid peoples on Arda channel archetypal fire for civilisational purposes through the practice of smithery. And while smithery is not directly evil, one cannot ignore its contribution both to the creation of weapons (i.e. to the war industry) and to the forging of magical or precious objects that awaken lust for power and possessiveness. At this point, it should be added that this ambivalence of smithery, i.e. its latent evil is prefigured on a cosmological level in the tension between Melkor and Aulë, both smiths. Aulë is supposed to be the better counterpart of Melkor in this respect, and yet he is also the maker of the Dwarves against Illúvatar's initial will, the "Friend of the Noldor" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 33) who instructs the Elves in the lore of craftsmanship and, last but not least, Sauron's first master (see Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 23). Even though Aulë's reputation remains untarnished due to his good intentions, his teaching of craftsmanship yields some terrible results in the long run, insofar as it prefigures the Noldor's forging of the Silmarils and Sauron's forging of the Rings of Power.

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of abuse, especially when power is externalised onto precious things such as the Rings of Power (cf. also Schick 23-5).

Conclusion

The above analysis of the role of fire in Tolkien's work (*The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*) has led to a few notable conclusions. Firstly, fire in Tolkien's work is best seen as an ambivalent principle that can stand for both creation and destruction. Accordingly, I have tried to distinguish between an archetypal and a civilisational dimension of fire. The archetypal dimension of fire encompasses *primordial archetypal fire* as *the* absolute principle of creation (Flame Imperishable) and *elemental archetypal fire* as part of the created world, i.e. as part of landscapes and creatures perceived as hostile (volcanic landscapes like those of the Iron Mountains and Mordor, evil creatures like balrogs, dragons and, to an extent, Melkor and Sauron themselves). Whereas primordial archetypal fire grounds and sustains the universe itself, elemental archetypal fire is an unstable elemental force that is not ascribed to supernatural agents (Valar or Maiar), although it can still be manoeuvred by them on a bigger, cosmic scale. Both cases combined prove that fire's status in Tolkien's mythical universe remains ambivalent and fuzzy: thus, fire is either placed beyond the natural elements (e.g. as Flame Imperishable) or, as part of the created world, it coexists with the natural elements, though not so much as a stable, life-sustaining element rather than as an elemental force with no clear master (with Melkor or Aulë being at best the most likely candidates to fill in this role).

The civilisational dimension of fire, on the other hand, involves the channelling of elemental fire for the purpose of building communities or civilisations. In comparison to archetypal fire (both primordial and elemental), civilisational fire is exploited not so much by supernatural beings like Illúvatar, the Valar or the Maiar, as by human and humanoid peoples forced to adapt to nature collectively. Therefore, it is at the stage of civilisational fire that the problem of ecological harm is posed: successful adaptation to the environment and responsibility towards it now become relevant issues. Hence the ambivalence of civilisational fire, which lies in the tense coexistence of nature and civilisation. In some cases – such as the burning of trees and environmental destruction – the infliction of ecological harm through fire misuse is clear; in other cases, it is more subtle, as the problematic practice of smithery shows.

Last but not least, I have tried to argue that excessive use of fire is often correlated with environmental harm and fosters the development of necrophilous civilisations (Mordor under Sauron's rule, Isengard and the scoured Shire under Saruman's influence). And while evil characters like Melkor, Sauron and Saruman are easily distinguishable, Tolkien also makes it clear that necrophilous inclinations cannot be fully suppressed: no human or humanoid people of Middle-Earth is able to seamlessly sustain a harmonious relationship with the environment. The trick is rather to know how to deal with fire in order to mitigate ecological harm as much as possible.

In the end, I would like to suggest, by referring one last time to Fromm's distinction between biophilia and necrophilia, that the key moral message of Tolkien's work is a biophilic one (though from a Christian perspective). As a biophilic writer, Tolkien emphasises time and time again the initial goodness of creation and the intrinsic value of living things. When Mordor is described as a land where "nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 825) or when

Treebeard complains that Saruman has "a mind of metal and wheels . . . and does not care for growing things" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 616), it is clear that the fight against Mordor and Isengard is a fight against necrophilia, against the tendency to stifle the free, healthy development and growth of life on Middle-Earth. And although misuse of fire cannot be fully avoided, whence the impossibility to entirely suppress necrophilic behaviour patterns, it is also clear that biophilic acts – such as Sam's and Aragorn's restoration of trees and gardens – can improve the state of Tolkien's fallen, less-than-perfect world.

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