



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 32  
Number 1

Article 8

---

10-15-2013

## Theological Reticence and Moral Radiance: Notes on Tolkien, Levinas, and Inuit Cosmology

Catherine Madsen  
*Independent Scholar*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Madsen, Catherine (2013) "Theological Reticence and Moral Radiance: Notes on Tolkien, Levinas, and Inuit Cosmology," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 32 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol32/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Online Winter Seminar

February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

<https://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/ows-2022.htm>

---

## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

The Inklings and Horror: Fantasy's Dark Corners

February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

Via Zoom and Discord

## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

### Abstract

Madsen pulls together three exceedingly disparate elements—the theology of loss and obligation of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas; the way the Inuit peoples of the Arctic regions relate to the hardships and challenges of their physical and spiritual worlds; and incidents of self-sacrifice in Tolkien—into a challenging and rewarding whole.

### Additional Keywords

Inuit peoples—Theology; Levinas, Emmanuel—Theology; Sacrifice; Sacrifice in J.R.R. Tolkien



THEOLOGICAL RETICENCE AND  
MORAL RADIANCE:  
NOTES ON TOLKIEN, LEVINAS,  
AND INUIT COSMOLOGY

CATHERINE MADSEN

I WANT TO CONSIDER, IN A ROUGH AND PRELIMINARY WAY, the resemblances of three moral landscapes. One is an imaginary landscape: Tolkien's Middle-earth in the Third Age, with its pockets of civilization in a vast depopulated wilderness. One is a depopulated European landscape, as mediated through one philosopher's mind: the postwar moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, developed as the remnant of European Jewry struggled to reconstitute its culture. One is a northern landscape: the high arctic of the Inuit and their kindred peoples, with its exacting and isolating climate.

Scholars who work intensively and methodically on Tolkien or Levinas or circumpolar anthropology may find such comparisons useless or superficial. But lived experience has a way of making connections across the boundaries of academic and religious taxonomy. It is associative; it knits together the personal discoveries that have commanded our attention, whether or not they have commanded anyone else's. What might be mere free-association for a casual reader—not that anyone can read Levinas casually—forms a coherent and purposeful pattern for a reader who listens at a certain frequency. My friend the late Anne Tracy once wrote, "One may count upon it, that two instruments, each tuned to one true tone, must then sing in tune with one another." These three instruments, singing together, form a compelling chord in my own mind that I hope to make audible to others.

Consider the following passages. The first is from *The Lord of the Rings*, as Frodo and Sam journey through Mordor hungry and afraid, and one night as Frodo sleeps Sam sees a sight that reorients and revives him:

Far above the Ephel Dúath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. (VI.2.922)

The second passage is from the memoir *Moonlight at Midday* by naturalist Sally Carrighar. The book records her life in a Bering Sea village in the 1950s, where she went to study marine mammals and became part of the human community as well. Dwight Milligrook, a man pulled in two directions by the competing claims of traditional subsistence hunting and the new money economy, said to her:

When you work for wages, your thoughts turn towards yourself. You look down when you walk. You no longer love simple things like little animals and the sky and beautiful country. You are self-centered and feel sober and thin. If you are locked up in jail, you do not feel like yourself, and having to work for somebody else is only like being locked up with a longer string. (188)

The third passage, from Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, probably reflects the philosopher's experience of five years in a German prison camp in the Second World War:

The whole acuity of suffering lies in the impossibility of fleeing it [...]. In suffering [the will] turns despairingly into total submission to the will of the Other. In suffering the will is defeated by sickness. [...]

But we still witness this turning of the I into a thing; we are at the same time a thing and at a distance from our reification [...]. In suffering the free being ceases to be free, but, while non-free, is yet free. It remains at a distance from this pain by its very consciousness, and consequently can become a heroic will. This situation where the consciousness deprived of all freedom of movement maintains a minimal distance from the present, this ultimate passivity which nonetheless desperately turns into action and into hope, is *patience*—the passivity of undergoing, and yet mastery itself. In patience a disengagement within engagement is effected—[...] extreme passivity becomes extreme mastery. (238-39)

These three passages are vastly different, yet they speak to each other. Sam Gamgee, struck to wonder by the star, looks beyond the oppressive landscape and draws strength from the sight. Dwight Milligrook's dejected analysis of the paid worker's emotional constraints is yet a conscious witness of what Levinas calls "the turning of the I into a thing": he perceives how his own spontaneous responses wither when he works for pay, and the very perception is an act of loyalty to his landscape, an effort to resist alienation. Despair that can be conscious of its own operations regains a measure of freedom.

Such moments of realignment, and the resistance and courage that attend them, do not happen inevitably; the suffering person may lose control rather than gaining it, and turn to rage or drugs or sink further into despair. But

experiences of personal and cultural jeopardy do regularly catalyze and reinforce resistance and resilience and courage. Tolkien and Levinas as writers, and the Inuit and other Eskimo<sup>1</sup> peoples as the builders of a remarkable civilization, are themselves examples of the phenomenon. What opens people to such responses and turns them from despair? I think two strong emotional currents come into play.

The first is a consciousness of irremediable loss. Readers of this journal are likely to know something about the outline of Tolkien's life: his loss of his father at a very young age, of his mother in his mid-teens, and of his closest friends only a few years later in the First World War. The languages and literatures he studied were themselves reservoirs of loss. The northern European pagan sensibility was soberly conscious of brevity and death. That sensibility was gradually eclipsed by Christianity—though like the sun in an eclipse, its corona remains visible in Scandinavian and early English literature—but a Christianity with its own consciousness of fallenness and human failure, of the loss of paradise. Catholic Christianity in its turn eventually lost much of its authority in England and northern Europe; Tolkien was one of those Catholic intellectuals who still felt the Reformation as a wound. And Christianity as a whole suffered a loss of reputation among educated people from the eighteenth century on. All these losses echo through Tolkien's work as a whole and through the structure of *The Lord of the Rings*. "And now all those lands lie under the wave" (III.4.469); "Deep they delved us, fair they wrought us, high they builded us; but they are gone" (II.3.284); "It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger; some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them" (VI.9.1029).

Levinas was born in 1905 in Kovno, now Kaunas, a city in Lithuania lying a bit below the latitude of Copenhagen and Ketchikan. Kovno gave birth in the nineteenth century to the Jewish pietist Musar movement, a sober and introspective antidote to the ecstasies of Hasidism; Musar ideals, still much in the air at that time for the city's educated Jews, form the substrate of his thought. As a young man Levinas moved to Paris, studied phenomenology with Husserl and Heidegger, and became a French citizen; when the Nazis came he served as an officer in the French army, which gave him the—in the circumstances, enviable—position of military prisoner for the duration of the war. His wife and daughter

---

<sup>1</sup> Though the term "Eskimo" is strongly disfavored in Canada and Greenland, scholars continue to use it as the only name that includes the Inuit of those countries, the Yup'ik and Iñupiaq of Alaska, the Yuit of Siberia, and a number of other related groups. See Fossett 223-27 for an explanation of the possible origin of the name and a detailed discussion of collective naming practice. In Alaska (where I once lived, and where I first read Tolkien), "Eskimo" is still used without pejorative implication when a term encompassing more than one group is needed.

survived in hiding in a monastery in France; his parents and brothers were arrested in Kovno and shot. The Musar yeshivas of Kovno were destroyed. After the war Levinas served for many years as principal of a Jewish teacher's college in Paris, where most of the students were from North Africa. Not being a Marxist, he did not hold an academic appointment until his fifties, when his books and reputation could no longer be ignored.

Loss is implicitly at the center of Levinas's thought, but what he speaks of is obligation. This is the second crucial emotional current, which we will encounter many times in our three landscapes. In his secular writings, Levinas is a phenomenologist addressing an audience of philosophers in their own impenetrable argot; yet his fundamental points are simple, direct, and extraordinarily forceful. The face of the other person in its need—its "destitution"—is to Levinas a revelation, a commandment that cannot be refused; the working principle of his philosophy is not autonomy but heteronomy. He is not interested in political theorizing about the good of humanity, which he sees as reducing particular persons to "elements of an ideal calculus" (*Totality* 216), "deform[ing]" them by judging them "according to universal rules, and thus as in absentia" (300). His concern is the specific need of the specific Other who faces you, the need no one else can fulfill. We are obligated even before we can consent; we are born into families and histories whose difficulties we cannot evade, and encounter new situations that disrupt our identities and our trajectories. In this sense, says Levinas, "Obedience precedes any hearing of the command" (*Otherwise than Being* 148)—an echo of *naaseh v'nishmah*, "We will do and we will hear" in Exodus 24:7.

In some respects Levinas more obviously resembles Charles Williams than Tolkien. In his late work he begins to speak of substitution, and his focus on the face of the Other recalls moments in Williams's work when a lover is transfixed by the reality of the beloved. But for Williams this is a Beatrician—or a Celian—moment, a revelation that points beyond itself toward the divine. For Levinas, the face of the Other is specifically the revelation on Sinai, which points implacably back to the human community. The only valid response to its command is the response of Abraham and Moses and Isaiah to God's call: *Hineini*, here I am. Where Levinas resembles Tolkien is in the extreme weight of the obligation assumed. Consider the moment when Frodo, having brought the Ring at great personal cost to Rivendell, realizes that he must take it on to Mordor. For Levinas, as for Tolkien, "responsibility increas[es] in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished." (*Totality* 244)

Loss was a constant feature of traditional life in the high north, where every hunt and every storm and every migration involved mortal risk. The peoples of the narrow ice were closely acquainted with death: cold, famine,

scarcity, sudden accident. Their diet was almost entirely meat and fish, so they were constantly and intimately involved in the death of animals. They also had the serious responsibility of limiting their own numbers to stay within the limits of their food supply. This meant the grim necessity of infanticide—children were dearly loved—and especially of female infanticide, in order to concentrate the family's scant resources on raising new hunters. There was also an accepted tradition of suicide, assisted by one's family on request, among elders who saw that their infirmities endangered the family's survival and that "life was [now] heavier than death" (Freuchen 149).<sup>2</sup> Arctic travelers Knud Rasmussen and Peter Freuchen both report the terrible choices made during famines, which only began by having to eat your dogs and then your clothing; Rasmussen, on one of his journeys in the 1920s, was told of the rescue of a starving woman who in her extremity had eaten the bodies of her husband and children (*Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition* 7.1.29-32). Father Raymond de Coccola, who spent over a decade with the Krangmalit or Copper Inuit of the Canadian barrens, sketches a picture of what seems to urban dwellers inconceivable privation and squalor; he titled his book with a Krangmalit word, *ayorama*, meaning "it is what it is" or "there is nothing that can be done."

Yet resignation is not at all the dominant note of the polar cultures. "The Inuit mind," says Gretel Ehrlich, "is sharpened by vulnerability" (xiv). Skill, alertness, ingenuity: the development of these qualities imparted a virtuosity and unassuming good humor of the sort one finds among very good musicians. The economy of means imposed by severely limited resources led to astonishing ingenuities: blocks of snow as building materials, seal oil as food and fuel, urine as cleaning agent, sled runners made of driftwood or even of fish rolled in animal skins and frozen (and edible, at least by the dogs, at the end of the journey). Marriages were working partnerships: men daily risked their lives to find food, and women made and maintained weatherproof clothing from the products of the hunt, so the hunt could more safely continue. Childrearing was aimed at producing self-disciplined, skilled, and cheerful people, and was accomplished by teaching and admonition rather than anger or punishment; good-natured ridicule was the main tool of social control, and was generally highly effective.<sup>3</sup> Family and social relations were always to be conducted so as not to "injure the other's mind." The total picture is of obligation so infinite that it can hardly be comprehended—and vigorously, joyfully assumed, because reluctance is death. A story of the Yup'ik of southwestern Alaska, a

---

<sup>2</sup> See Rasmussen, *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition* 7.1.95-99, and Fossett 227-231 for more detailed discussions of suicide in traditional Inuit societies in Canada.

<sup>3</sup> Supplemented, in intractable cases, by banishment, a strategic accident on the ice, or undisguised murder.

comparatively temperate subpolar region, tells of a boy apprenticed to a seal: he learns that the energy and attentiveness of great hunters, who work hard at home and think continually of the seals, “clear a path” for them into the human world (Fienup-Riordan, *Yuungnaqpiallerput* 17-19).

The obligation to share the catch was a fundamental moral principle; there were (and are) layers of kinship that determine whom you share with first, and it was prudent to save food for lean times, but it was inhumane to hoard food in a crisis (though in a famine anything might happen). Levinas too is severe on this point: he quotes a talmudic dictum that “To leave men without food is a fault that no circumstance attenuates; the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary does not apply here” [B. Sanhedrin 104b]. He adds, “Before the hunger of men responsibility is measured only ‘objectively’; it is irrecusable. The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no ‘interiority’ permits avoiding” (*Totality* 201). So exigent is the Other’s need that Levinas speaks of it as the trauma of the ethical. Think of Tolkien’s Niggle the painter, forever drawn away from his central preoccupation by the demands of his neighbor Parish. The interruption is violent: “The one is exposed to the other as a skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter” (*Otherwise* 49).

In terms of *The Lord of the Rings*, we may note that Gollum is always on the edge of starvation—and besides eating worms, raw fish, and other things that revolt Frodo and Sam, has attempted in desperate hunger to reach the bodies in the Dead Marshes, the casualties of the Battle of Dagorlad, preserved like the bog people of Denmark for thousands of years (unless they are mere illusions). He cannot eat Frodo and Sam’s *lembas*, though they would share it—and they reject his worms and raw fish, though he would share those.

More broadly, though, the trauma of the ethical is a useful lens for seeing the Frodo/Sam/Gollum association. The three hobbits become, in the anthropologists’ term, “fictive kin” with mutual obligations through their possession of—or possession by—the Ring. Certainly the association is traumatic for both Sam and Gollum, who both protest vigorously against it. For Frodo it is one element of the traumatic obligation of bearing the Ring. The stakes of the kinship become clear in Frodo and Sam’s first open encounter with Gollum on their descent from the Emyn Muil, in the extraordinary moment when Gollum, “opening his eyes wide and staring at Frodo with a strange light,” says, “Sméagol will swear on the Precious” (IV.1.618). This is indeed the face of the Other in its destitution making its claim. Frodo masters the situation—in fact he rises to a new level of authority—but is aware of an innate sympathy with Gollum that he cannot abrogate. Progressively more violated by his exposure to the Ring at each step of the quest, Frodo knows the trauma of the ethical chiefly from his efforts to resist its lure. Though he becomes indebted to Gollum as a



guide, he is obligated to him from the start as a soul already destroyed by the Ring. That Frodo himself is not physically destroyed at Mount Doom is owing to his acceptance of this obligation: "For now that I see him, I do pity him" (IV.1.615).

That Gollum *is* physically destroyed—that he saves Frodo not deliberately, as an act of loyalty, but as an accident of taking the Ring from him by force—is in large part because Sam misinterprets Gollum's tenderness to the sleeping Frodo on the stairs of Cirith Ungol. Sam, in saying *hineini* to Frodo's need, has nothing left over for Gollum's: his contempt and suspicion injures Gollum's mind at the very moment of repentance, and Gollum never recovers (IV.8.714). Sam does get as far as pity when Gollum attacks them on the slopes of Mount Doom; he spares his life because, having now briefly carried the Ring himself, he has a glimmering of what Gollum has suffered. Sam's pang of compassion vouchsafes Gollum the ecstatic moment of regaining the Ring, the fulfillment of his heart's desire simultaneously for good and for evil—a fine subtlety on the part of Middle-earth's unnamed providence, or at least on Tolkien's part. Perhaps even Gollum's thwarted instant of repentance has earned him that much reward.

Roger Sale, in his 1968 essay "Tolkien and Frodo Baggins," perceives that Frodo, "[i]n his scarred and beautiful relationship with Sméagol [...] is saved from the worst ravages of the Ring because he binds himself to others rather than to love of power[.]" This, says Sale, is the distinctly modern form of heroism that moves Tolkien more than any event on the battlefields of the War of the Ring: "We see, without in the least needing to make the seeing into a formulation, what the heroism of our time is and can be: lonely, lost, scared, loving, willing, and compassionate—to bind oneself to the otherness of others by recognizing our common livingness" (287-88). Nothing could be more Levinasian.

The spare theological framework of *The Lord of the Rings* has been exhaustively analyzed; there is no need to recapitulate the full discussion. One of the more interesting recent observations is Nicholas Boyle's, in *Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature*, noting the parallels between the pre-Christian Middle-earth and the post-Christian modern West:

This setting in a world that does not yet know the Christian, or even the Jewish, revelation has the singular advantage that it also, as it were, prefigures a world so secularized that it has largely forgotten them: the archaic, or archaizing, features of the book are the metaphors for its ultra-modernity. [...] It is a landscape heavy with a past meaning, now largely forgotten but not entirely so: it still lingers on here and there in the mind. (259)

The element of loss is evident here—in the physical landscape itself, so often uninhabited in the places where meaning lingers. The element of obligation also appears, when Boyle adds that *The Lord of the Rings*

captures the experience of coming after meaning [...] the experience of inhabiting a world in which a great story was once present but is now accessible only in shards of illumination and memory, moments of communion with saints; yet it is a world in which life has to be lived and a task has to be performed, it is a post-Christian world in which Christ still has to be imitated. (261-2)

It is illuminating to keep Boyle's suggestions in mind in our other two landscapes. Levinas was "coming after meaning" in an appallingly immediate sense, after the nearly total destruction of Jewish families, communities and institutions in Europe—years full of choices as hideous as those made in a far-northern winter, but all engineered by humans with the stated intent of annihilating a people. The imitation of Christ was not his paradigm, though he often spoke with gratitude of a Catholic priest, Father Chesnet, who "over the grave of a Jewish comrade whom the Nazis had wanted to bury like a dog [...] recited prayers which were, in the absolute sense of the term, Semitic" ("A Religion for Adults" 12). Rather, Levinas lived in an almost post-Jewish Europe in which life still had to be lived and the commandments observed. He did not, like Emil Fackenheim or Arthur A. Cohen or Richard L. Rubenstein, respond to the catastrophe by recasting Jewish theology or declaring the death of God; in essence he thought good and ill had not changed since yesteryear and that it was a man's part to discern them, as much in postwar Paris as in prewar. He admired Zvi Kolitz's short story "Yosl Rakover Talks to God" for its fierce confrontation with a God "against whom one may revolt—for whom one can die" ("To Love the Torah More than God" 220). Yet in his major philosophical works he tends to speak only of "the trace of God" or "the trace of the Infinite." By temperament he resists the too-easy invocation of God:

The Infinite is [...] a thought behind thoughts which is too lofty to push itself up front. "Here I am, in the name of God," without referring myself directly to his presence. "Here I am," just that! The word God is still absent from the phrase in which God is for the first time involved in words. It does not at all state, "I believe in God." To bear witness [to] God is precisely not to state this extraordinary word, as though glory would be lodged in a theme and be posited as a thesis[...]. [T]he "here I am" signifies me in the name of God, at the service of men that look at me, without having anything to identify myself with, but the sound of my voice or the figure of my gesture—the saying itself. (*Otherwise* 149)

The Name is not, as it were, to be taken in vain. Statements of faith cannot hold it; only in trustworthy acts does it appear. For Levinas, as his translator Alphonso Lingis suggests, God is not “a postulate required to render the ethical imperative intelligible” or even “revealed in ethical phenomena”: God is the ethical relation, the ethical imperative decreed by the Other’s voice (*Otherwise* xxxix).

If Tolkien’s reticence allows the non-Christian reader full access to the moral power of his narrative, the same austerity in Levinas extends the locus of command from the theological category “God” to the basic nature of the human moral universe. The philosopher Philippe Nemo observes that Levinas

never stopped being loyal to Judaism and nourished by the sources of the Bible and the Talmud. *But his philosophical efforts consisted of articulating the revelation in such a way that no one can avoid them.* He developed the concepts and even the vocabulary of his ethical philosophy in such a way that no one could say: that is good for Jews, that is good for Christians, but that is meaningless to someone who does not believe in these superstitions or who does not belong to this ethnicity, for someone who is only human. (Malka xii, emphasis added)

To universalize, in this case, is not to dilute but to extend and intensify the fact of obligation.

The traditional Inuit/Eskimo cosmology, sketchy in theological terms but absolutely binding in its demand, founds its moral literacy in the physical needs of a subsistence community. Extrabiblical in its origins, it is strikingly congruent with the biblical sense of commandedness. It has a few mythical figures, notably the woman under the sea who provides or withholds the food animals; also it has ideas of where people go after death—one common story is that victims of violent death (hunting accidents, childbirth, suicide and murder) go to live in the aurora. There is an overpowering sense of indebtedness to the animals; the hunter Ivaluardjuk told Rasmussen in the 1920s, “The greatest peril of life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls” (*Report* 7.1.56). To this day there remains a strong sense of moral duty toward animals; the Yup’ik, observing the procession of Alaska sports fishermen, have nothing but scorn for catch-and-release fishing, as gratuitously injuring the fish and playing with their freely offered lives (Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays* 184-86). They believe the injured fish will warn other fish away from the site of the insult.

But the most complex presence in this cosmology is “a genderless, sentient force” (Fienup-Riordan, *Ellavut* 60) variously called Sila, Hila, or Ella depending on language group. The name has a constellation of meanings: the world, the weather, the universe, the outdoors, awareness, consciousness, thought—something like the more familiar words *prana*, *pneuma*, *spiritus* and *ruach* (which each convey spirit/wind/breath), but with a somewhat wider range

of reference. Silam (or Silap) Inua or Ellam Yua, “the person of the universe,” is more like “the trace” than like a personal God, having no theology or story; it is imagined as a generalized awareness of the people’s conduct. Rasmussen recorded in his notes that Silam Inua is “only distant, and is then good”; that it is “Never seen, the voice alone heard; all we know is that it has a gentle voice like a woman, a voice ‘so fine and gentle that even children cannot become afraid’. What it says is: ‘*sila ersinarsiniodlugo*’ (‘be not afraid of the universe!’)” (*Report* 10.3.128).

Yet a Yup’ik informant told Ann Fienup-Riordan that “the weather is hunting those who don’t listen”; when a sudden storm comes up it is trying to kill someone, and having found its victim it “suddenly calms down and gets good because it is thankful for taking a human life” (*Ellavut* 35). More or less as, in Deuteronomy 11:13-17, God will cause the rains not to fall if the Jews do not love and serve him with full energy, Sila will cause personal or collective misfortune if the people do not keep their minds fixed on their work. The shaman Aua told Rasmussen how much his people had to fear from the universe. Annoyed by Rasmussen’s incessant questioning about why they observed their traditional precepts and taboos, Aua took him outside and showed him the hunters returning empty-handed against high winds, the shivering children in a snow house without enough fuel, his sister mortally ill with pneumonia, and asked in return, “Why? Why? [...] You see, you are equally unable to give any reason [...]. All our customs come from life and turn towards life; we explain nothing, we believe nothing, but in what I have just shown you lies our answer to all you ask” (*Report* 7.1.54-56).

Renée Fossett, a historian of the Central Inuit of Canada, adds to this picture the central moral principle that in Inuit thought there is no distinction between “love” and “responsibility to care for”:

The reverse is also true: to be unable to take care of someone is expressed as being unable to love them. [...] Inability to share or care for, which is expressed as being unable to love, does not mean that affective emotion is missing. Being unable to love or care for is a source of intense grief and emotional pain to parents, children, spouses, and companions in times of extreme deprivation when there are simply not enough resources to go around. (206)

Fossett recounts a 1966 conversation with a young mother that initially puzzled her because of its double use of the word “love”:

She told me she loved her newborn daughter, but regretted her “love” because it had created a conflict with her own mother. Her mother had impressed on her that she (the young woman) could not “love” the baby and must therefore find an adoptive home for it. At the same time, my young friend insisted that her mother was right and she did not love her child. What she was telling me, *in English*, was that she did indeed love the baby (as an English-speaker would use the word “love”), while at the same time telling me, *out of an Inuktitut mental framework*, that because she did not have the resources to feed, clothe, shelter, and otherwise nurture the infant, she could not “love” the baby (as an Inuktitut speaker would use the word “love”). (277, n. 25)

There is a special destitution in being unable to answer the need of the Other. Levinas does not address what happens when we are obligated but not equipped to fulfill the obligation; insistent that we each be prepared to exceed our limits for the sake of the Other, he devotes no time to reciprocity. But sometimes we must each hope that someone will see us as the Other and offer help.

Like many tribal names around the world and several other Eskimo names, the names Inuit and Yup'ik mean “the real people, the genuine people.” This is, of course, both a powerful, obligating bond within the group and an implied dismissal of people outside it. Both Jewish and Eskimo survival strategies have favored the kin-group by curtailing the sense of obligation to outside groups (which have, indeed, often felt no obligation to them); when resources are limited you must certainly first feed your own kin and only then the stranger. And yet—“because you were strangers in the land of Egypt”—the obligation to the individual Other from outside one's own group is encoded in Jewish law and liturgy, and the far north had traditions of hospitality toward strangers who were not hostile. It may well be impossible to train human beings out of their tendency to exclusivity; even Levinas says that as soon as a second Other makes a claim on you, questions of justice cannot be avoided. Still the primary moral question is not “Why is our group unlike all other groups?” but “How does one become a real person?”

The question is especially urgent in contemporary Eskimo communities, now under the administrative control of Denmark, Canada, or the United States and subject to their influences and interests. The erosion of the old ways has been rapid and damaging. From the start, silence was lost to modern machines; in the late 19th century one Yup'ik shaman, perhaps having encountered the New Testament epithet “sons of thunder” through Moravian missionaries, applied it to white people in general, because “everything they do and everything they have” makes noise (Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays* 71). The introduction of

alcohol had a devastating effect, which continues. Access to air travel, television, and consumer goods has eased many hardships while introducing others. Sally Carrighar recounts a conversation in the 1950s with an Inūpiat man in Barrow named Segevan:

Impelled perhaps by a sense of racial or national guilt, I heard myself say to him one day, rather fatuously, I'm afraid,

"What do you think are the most valuable things the white men have brought to the North? Rifles and planes?"

He looked at me long, without smiling, and answered:

"The best things are coffee and cigarettes. There are sorrows too great for consolation, but the small pleasures help us to bear them." (198)

Worse drugs than coffee and cigarettes have now been on the scene for some time. Food and government assistance imported from farther south have allowed populations to grow and to concentrate in areas where they could not be self-sustaining. Simultaneously, the climate for which the old ways were developed has been rapidly changing; there is no argument about this in the far north, where villages have to be moved and patterns of sea ice formation (and therefore of subsistence hunting) are radically altered. There is a strong and complex sense of loss, but the old avenues of obligation have been blocked. The suicide rate among young Inuit and Eskimos from Greenland to Alaska is extremely high, especially among adolescent boys, who suffer the despair of coming into their powers and having nowhere to use them: the strong young people who in traditional times were essential to the community are making the deliberate exit of old people whose strength was failing. This is "coming after meaning" with a vengeance.

"Privation and suffering," said the shaman Igjugarjuk to Rasmussen, "are the only things that can open the mind of man to those things which are hidden from others" (*Across Arctic America* 81). If in his time there was understood to be a link between physical distress and moral nobility, in modern times there is in effect a link between physical security and moral impotence. Urban and suburban dwellers, "locked up with a longer string" to the sources of their security, live their lives in this situation with varying degrees of awareness, but to those who have suffered privation it is strongly evident. Tzvetan Todorov speaks of the "general collapse" that afflicted many survivors of the Nazi camps once they had returned to normal economic and cultural lives:

While in the camps, the inmates had had to marshal all their energies, to live beyond their capacities. [...] After the intensity of this experience, everything seemed colorless, futile, false. [...] In daily life after the war, one did not often encounter the absolute. There was something

disproportionate in the contrast between the intensity of life in the camps, even if that life had been miserable, and the mediocrity of happiness outside (assuming one could attain it). (266-67)

Frodo's malaise after his return to the Shire is essentially the same phenomenon: "It is gone for ever, and now all is dark and empty" (VI.9.1024) is not only the ghost-voice of the Ring that tormented him but the useless spinning of his energies, which now have nothing to resist. Psychology tells us that survivors of trauma, who have known extremity in everyday life, both dread and physically expect its recurrence; when it does not come, its absence is felt as a kind of loss.

We may even know that privation and suffering are on the way—we may be aware, in Stephen Morillo's phrase, of "the coming passing of [our] world" (116). Yet the awareness is intermittent even with our best efforts. The weather is hunting for those who don't listen, but amid the noise of machinery we cannot hear. We feel Frodo's malaise without having done the work; we are "coming after meaning" unconvinced that we would be able to handle it.

Yet we are also, always, coming before meaning. Russell Hoban's earthy and humble northern fantasy *Soonchild* concerns an Inuit shaman who has been evading his calling by watching TV and drinking Coca-Cola, and must recover his powers and seek the endangered World Songs so his new daughter will consent to come out of the womb. One of his spirit guides—a whalebone spirit, Deepguy by name—tells him, "You're the only one there is" (13), an imperative he keeps repeating throughout the story. To the spirit of his great-grandmother, a hard-drinking cardsharp in the next world to whom he comes for help, he says, "I have no excuses. I am not a good man but I am trying to do a good thing" (80). We may recognize Frodo's "I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way" (*LotR* II.2.270).

To accept and carry out a hard task—not necessarily the task you want, but the task you are faced with, the task for which you are the only one there is; to develop good judgment, always slowly and inefficiently, in a matter where the stakes are high: this is the only means of becoming a real person. It is not glorious, and we may be on the right side without being on the side that wins. Aragorn may be Isildur's heir and the potential King Elessar, but he is first of all Strider, who earns his authority by protecting others, at the repeated risk of his life and his future. Traditional Eskimo communities had no hereditary leaders: the best hunter or the best strategist or the best negotiator, the capable and openhanded person who wore his (or occasionally her) authority easily, would be in charge until the need shifted and other skills were required (Fossett 208-10). And following established laws and precepts is only the beginning: you have to apply them with moral agility, stamina, and a trained set of reflexes. Levinas

suggests that the law is a sort of sketch or schematic, which the individual is required not simply to fulfill but to surpass:

[J]ustice summons me to go beyond the straight line of justice, and henceforth nothing can mark the end of this march; behind the straight line of the law the land of goodness extends infinite and unexplored, necessitating all the resources of a singular presence. I am therefore necessary for justice, as responsible beyond every limit fixed by an objective law. The I is a privilege and an election. The sole possibility in being of going beyond the straight line of the law, that is, of finding a place lying beyond the universal, is to be I. The morality called inward and subjective exercises a function which universal and objective law cannot exercise, but which it calls for. (*Totality* 245)

Or, as Sally Carrighar puts it in homely, concrete terms:

Here nobody's work is finished when he has done what he is paid to do. Only literally by undertaking to solve one another's problems can people live on this splendid and sometimes terrifying coast. [...] When a neighbor's baby comes prematurely, it may not be saved unless you, with a layman's ignorance, keep it warm and fed; and when you have an infection that is out of control, you are pulled back from the edge only because a ham radio-operator gets busy, and a bush pilot comes for you, maybe in hardly flyable weather. [...] To discover that close web of life, and over the months to learn to fit into it, is the most moving experience to be found in the North. (212-13)

Or, in the extraordinary words of Deuteronomy 30:11-14, which may apply in all three landscapes: "For this commandment that I command you today, it is not too hard for you, neither is it far off [...] *Ki-karov eilecha hadavar meod, b'fikha ul'vov'cha laasoto*, the thing is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you do it."

Sometimes the trauma of the ethical begins as the trauma of the aesthetic. Sam receives the sight of the star like a wound: "the beauty of it smote his heart," the thought of its steadiness and remoteness "pierce[s]" him "like a shaft." Dwight Milligrook's response to "the little animals," or our own response to the face of the Other in its need, links a vulnerable beauty to our own obligation. There is a certain psychological truth to Psalm 19, which begins with the great impersonal heavens telling the glory of God in their unheard voices, proceeds to praise the perfection of the law, and ends with the prayer that the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart be worthy. To see how Tolkien, Levinas, and Inuit cosmology inform each other is to begin to see the pattern of that worthiness.



## WORKS CITED

- Boyle, Nicholas. *Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature*. South Bend, IN: U of Notre Dame, 2005.
- Carrighar, Sally. *Moonlight at MIDDAY*. New York: Pyramid, 1958.
- De Coccola, Raymond, and Paul King. *Ayorama: That's the Way It Is*. Montreal: Novalis, 2007.
- Ehrlich, Gretel. *This Cold Heaven*. New York: Pantheon, 2001.
- Fienup-Riordan, Ann, and Alice Rearden. *Ellavut: Our Yup'ik World and Weather: Continuity and Change on the Bering Sea Coast*. Seattle: U of Washington, 2012.
- Fienup-Riordan, Ann. *Eskimo Essays: Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1990.
- . *Yuungnaqpiallerput: The Way We Genuinely Live: Masterworks of Yup'ik Science and Survival*. Seattle: U of Washington, 2007.
- Fossett, Renée. *In Order to Live Untroubled: Inuit of the Central Arctic, 1550 to 1940*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba, 2001.
- Freuchen, Peter. *Book of the Eskimos*. Ed. Dagmar Freuchen. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961.
- Hoban, Russell. *Soonchild*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2012.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1998.
- . "A Religion for Adults." *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Trans. Seán Hand. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990. 11-23.
- . "To Love the Torah More than God." Trans. Helen A. Stephenson and Richard I. Sugarman. *Judaism* 28.2 (1979): 216-23.
- . *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969.
- Malka, Solomon. *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*. Trans. Michael Kigel and Sonia M. Embrée. Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 2006.
- Morillo, Stephen. "The Entwines." In *The Ring and the Cross*. Ed. Paul E. Kerry. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson U, 2011.
- Rasmussen, Knud. *Across Arctic America: Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition*. Fairbanks: U of Alaska, 1999.
- . *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-24*. Vol. 7, no. 1: *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*. Trans. W. Worster. Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1929.
- . *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-24*. Vol. 10, no. 3: *The Alaskan Eskimos as Described in the Posthumous Notes of Dr. Knud Rasmussen*. Ed. H. Ostermann and E. Holtved. Trans. W. E. Calvert. Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1952.
- Sale, Roger. "Tolkien and Frodo Baggins." *Tolkien and the Critics*. Ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame Press, 1968.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*. Trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak. New York: Henry Holt, 1996.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1955. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- . "Leaf by Niggle." *Tree and Leaf*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CATHERINE MADSEN is the author of many essays, including several on Tolkien, and of three books: *The Bones Reassemble: Reconstituting Liturgical Speech*; *In Medias Res: Liturgy for the Estranged*; and the novel *A Portable Egypt*. She is helping to establish the as-yet-unnamed journal of the Center for Circumpolar Studies.



# MYTHIC CIRCLE

*The Mythic Circle* is a small literary magazine published annually by the Mythopoeic Society which celebrates the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. These adventuresome writers saw themselves as contributors to a rich imaginative tradition encompassing authors as different as Homer and H.G. Wells. *The Mythic Circle* is on the lookout for original stories and poems. We are also looking for artists interested in illustrating poems and stories.

Mail submissions and letters to the Editor:  
Dr. Gwennyth Hood  
English Department, Corbly Hall  
Marshall University  
Huntington, WV 25701  
or Email: [hood@marshall.edu](mailto:hood@marshall.edu)

Order through the society website:  
[www.mythsoc.org](http://www.mythsoc.org)  
US first class \$8  
Canada first class \$10  
Mexico/Latin America air \$12  
Europe/Asia \$12