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Abstract

Applies the concept of Recovery from Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories" to an unusual subject—Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, a novel about a young boy with Asperger's Syndrome.

Additional Keywords

Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Recovery as characteristic of fairy-tale; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"

PUTTING AWAY CHILDISH THINGS: INCIDENTS OF *RECOVERY* IN TOLKIEN AND HADDON

ALANA CO. VINCENT

AT FIRST, LEARNING TO DRAW is primarily a process of deliberate forgetting. An untrained draughtsperson sees their subject as an entire thing—a chair, a ball, a hand—and commits a visual representation of the entire thing to paper. The results are recognizable, but not life-like; the hand, for example, tends to resemble nothing so much as five flattened sausages arranged around a frisbee. The viewer acknowledges a representation of an abstract category, but there is no link between the final drawing and any specific object.

The trained artist, by contrast, is able to look at their subject and see a collection of lines, highlights, and shadows. The functionality of the object, its categorical nature (hand, ball, chair) may be of importance before the drawing is begun, or after it is completed, but while it is being composed, there is only a straight line here that dips down a little before rising into a sharp curve and a little triangle of shadow there with a darker spot right along its edge . . .

Forgetting the abstract categorical nature of an object is necessary to the production of a faithful rendering of that object. Likewise, a momentary forgetting of the world one stumbles through, half-seeing, on a day to day basis, as the novice artist half-sees their subject, registering only the surface information necessary to categorize that which is seen, is necessary in order for one to see the fresh, unique, and marvelous qualities of the world as it really is, that odd, unrecognizable collection of highlights and shadows that, taken together, produce something somehow more real than the thing itself.

In his 1939 Andrew Lang lecture at St. Andrews University, which was later published as the essay “On Fairy-Stories” (OFS), J.R.R. Tolkien described this re-gaining of the ability to interact with the world as though it is something wholly new and not previously experienced using the term *recovery*, “‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’—as things apart from ourselves” (59).¹ The noted literary biographer Joseph Pearce has asserted that, in his

¹ The exact date of the lecture is somewhat disputable: according to Christopher Tolkien’s introduction to the aforementioned volume, it was delivered at St. Andrews in 1938, while according to Humphrey Carpenter’s *Biography*, it was not delivered until 8 March 1939, and the original 1947 edition of *Tree and Leaf* assigned a date of 1940 to the lecture (191). See

emphasis on separateness and uniqueness, Tolkien reflects two other mostly forgotten elements of Catholic philosophy: the *haecceitas* of John Duns Scotus, and the *inscape* of Gerard Manley Hopkins (Pearce 113-115).² However, *recovery* is more than merely Tolkien's mimicry of a previous age's metaphysics. Though it builds on the foundations constructed by Scotus and Hopkins, it transforms the older theories into an aesthetic principle which is widely applicable in modern literature.

Haecceitas (quite literally, "this-ness") is Scotus's contribution to the medieval debate on universals and individuation. Briefly stated, the philosophical problem concerns whether existence and essence are one and the same—whether, for example, two identical forks from your grandmother's silver service can be said to have a separate (ontological) existence, or whether their shared categorical fork-ness (essence) is the defining fact of their being. The importance of the debate may be somewhat difficult for the post-modern reader to grasp (one may set the two forks next to each other and observe that no matter how interchangeable they are, they are clearly *not* the same); it is helpful to remember that the medieval philosophers began from a far more concrete relationship to both the Platonic categorical ideals and the idea of the Trinity (three distinct and separate entities inseparable in essence) than is common in this era. Scotus, following, to a certain extent, the thought of the Islamic philosopher Avicenna, posited that each fork possesses two ontological natures: the categorical essence of fork-ness, and the individuating essence of *haecceitas*, or this-particular-fork-ness.³

For Scotus, individuation is a logical necessity long before it becomes a spiritual principle (Noone 105-112). Hopkins, however, read Scotus's *haecceitas* as a confirmation and validation of his theory of *inscape*, which has distinct spiritual overtones that *haecceitas* lacks (Coogan 67-68). *Inscapes* may be viewed as the means by which *haecceitas* is perceived, "the unified complex of those sensible qualities of the object of perception that strike us as inseparably belonging to

Christopher Tolkien's introduction to *Tree and Leaf* (vi). I have chosen to accept Carpenter's dates as authoritative.

² See also Garbowski: "A concept which indicates the specificity of the spiritual dimension in Tolkien's work is that of *recovery*, a way in which art looks at the potentiality of the world and people" (4).

³ This is a greatly simplified gloss of the philosophical problem; for greater depth, see Noone 100-128; Ingham and Dreyer 108-116; Scotus 101-102. While I use here the example of a fork—an easily replicable, manufactured item—because it almost eliminates the issue of accidental differences, and therefore renders the problem more comprehensible to the contemporary reader, it should be noted that the debate is more typically couched in terms of animate beings; the example used by Noone is to what extent his dog may be considered an instance of the universal category "animal."

and most typical of it, so that through the knowledge of this unified complex of sense-data we may gain an insight into the individual essence of the object" (Peters 1). Beyond this, however, Hopkins understood *inscape* as a constant reminder of the immanent presence of God throughout creation; to him, the sensory evidence of the essential uniqueness of an object is a window into the mind of its creator (Peters 5-7). An excerpt from Hopkins's journal is evidence of this:

The bluebells in your hand baffle you with their *inscape*, made to every sense: if you draw your fingers through them they are lodged and struggle / [sic] with a shock of wet heads; the long stalks rub and click and flatten to a fan on one another like your fingers themselves would when you passed the palms hard across one another, making a brittle rub and jostle like the noise of a hurdle strained by leaning against; then there is the faint honey smell and in the mouth the sweet gum when you bite them. (qtd. in Peters 4)

Note both the close attention given to the effect of the bluebells on each of the five senses (especially touch and hearing) and also the participle "made" in the first sentence, which draws attention to the author's implicit assumption that the bluebells are the intentional product of a maker.

The shift between *inscape* and *recovery* is small, but important. *Inscape* is first and foremost a property of an object; *recovery* becomes primarily a property of a story—that is to say, an aesthetic principle governing literary sub-creation. Where *inscape* is a window into an object's *haecceitas*, *recovery* is a narrative expression of *inscape*. Tolkien believed that *recovery* is one of the essential components of a successful "fairy-story," which is to say, a story that contains elements of the fantastic, although he also found analogues of it in Dickens and Chesterton ("On Fairy-Stories" 10, 58-59). The reason that *recovery*, for Tolkien, is located primarily in the fantastic is that the aura of mystery which pervades the fantasy world is well situated to illuminate the real world by proxy. However, as I have already implied, and shall attempt to demonstrate somewhat later, instances of *recovery* are not limited to one particular genre.⁴

⁴ The Tolkienian term "fairy-story" is deceptively childish and simple. Tolkien goes to great lengths to combat this misreading at the beginning of his essay "On Fairy-Stories," through allusions to the Spenserian tradition and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For Tolkien, a "fairy-story" is "one which touches on or uses Faërie" which Tolkien elsewhere names "the Perilous Realm" (10). See also Lewis 47. I am deliberately broader in my definition than Tolkien, as I am concerned primarily with *recovery*, which is applicable to many literary works which contain elements in common with "fairy-stories" without being able to be properly labeled "fairy-stories" according to Tolkien's definition.

Recovery functions on two levels. First, *recovery* is a freshness of vision, “seeing things as we are meant to see them.” As Tolkien himself explains it,

[T]here may be a danger of boredom or of anxiety to be original, and that may lead to a distaste for fine drawing, delicate pattern, and ‘pretty’ colours, or else to mere manipulation and over-elaboration of old material, clever and heartless. But the true road of escape from such weariness is not to be found in the wilfully awkward, clumsy, or misshapen, not in making all things dark or unremittingly violent; nor in the mixing of colours on through subtlety to drabness, and the fantastical complication of shapes to the point of silliness and on towards delirium. Before we reach such states we need *recovery*. We should look at green again and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves. (OFS 56-57, emphasis added)

As a narrative element, *recovery* is characterized by a strong visual emphasis and an almost overabundance of descriptive detail and sensory language similar to that found in Hopkins’s journal entry, quoted above. In *The Lord of the Rings*, we see *recovery* most strongly in Tolkien’s treatment of Nature.⁵ The first hint of it comes in at the very opening of the story, during Bilbo Baggins’s eleventy-first birthday celebration:

There were rockets like a flight of scintillating birds singing with sweet voices. There were green trees with trunks of dark smoke: their leaves opened like a whole spring unfolding in a moment, and their shining branches dropped glowing flowers down upon the astonished hobbits, disappearing with a sweet scent just before they touched their upturned faces. (I.1.27)

This is not quite the normal shape that *recovery* takes in the narrative; the passage describes Gandalf’s fireworks rather than any naturally occurring phenomenon—but it sets the tone for the rest of the narrative, pre-figuring both the dark and mysterious forests of Mirkwood and Fangorn as well as the glow that suffuses descriptions of Lothlórien, Rivendell, and Tom Bombadil’s realm. The passage is also strongly reminiscent of Tolkien’s description of the effects of *recovery* in the vehicle of creative fantasy: “The gems all turn into flowers or

⁵ I use Nature here and in the following pages, *per* Kate Soper, “to refer to that part of the environment which [humans] have had no hand in creating”; the capitalization is meant to differentiate it from usages of nature more closely akin to the concept of essence, “those features which are exclusive to [a class or concept],” *e.g.* “human nature” (16, 26).

flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you" (OFS 59).

In addition to this strong sensory language, *recovery* is characterized by the use of literary techniques that highlight the sudden strangeness that comes from encountering the overly familiar with fresh eyes, as when Dickens looked at the word "Coffee room" from the other side of the glass and discovered *Mooreefoc* (Tolkien, OFS 58). The sort of glancing that leads to bad drawing is possible in large part because of familiarity: we know what a thing ought to look like, and can therefore be spared the trouble of studying it closely at each encounter. Glancing is necessary in day to day life, lest we become overwhelmed by the need to consider every element of our environment, but it also robs us of the sense of wonder we gain by seeing things as we were meant to see them, rich with individual detail.

This idea is echoed by Christopher John Francis Boone, the autistic narrator of Mark Haddon's recent novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*:

But most people are lazy. They never look at everything. They do what is called *glancing*, which is the same word for bumping off something and carrying on in almost the same direction, e.g., when a snooker ball glances off another snooker ball. And the information in their head is really simple. For example, if they are in the countryside, it might be

1. I am standing in a field that is full of grass
2. There are some cows in the fields.
3. It is sunny with a few clouds.
4. There are some flowers in the grass.
5. There is a village in the distance.
6. There is a fence at the edge of the field and it has a gate in it.

And then they would stop noticing anything because they would be thinking something else like, "Oh, it is very beautiful here," or "I'm worried that I might have left the gas cooker on," or "I wonder if Julie has given birth yet."

But if I am standing in a field in the countryside I notice everything. For example, I remember standing in a field on Wednesday, 15 June 1994, because Father and Mother and I were driving to Dover to get a ferry to France and we did what Father called *Taking the Scenic Route*, which means going by little roads and stopping for lunch in a pub garden, and I had to stop to go for a wee, and I went into a field with cows in it and after I'd had a wee I stopped and looked at the field and I noticed these things

1. There are 19 cows in the field, 15 of which are black and white and 4 of which are brown and white.
2. There is a village in the distance which has 31 visible houses and a church with a square tower and not a spire.
3. There are ridges in the field, which means that in medieval times it was what is called a *ridge and furrow* field and people who lived in the village would have a ridge each to do farming on (140-142)

. . . and he continues in this manner for several more pages. The experience Christopher describes is not *recovery*; he himself is not experiencing anything in a new way, but rather describing the manner in which he always sees the world around him. However, when the reader enters into Christopher's world, and attempts to engage his or her imaginative faculties in the act of seeing through Christopher's eyes, *recovery* is at work in the narrative. Christopher cannot decode emotional nuances or idiomatic language, but notices and comments on environmental minutiae that most people have trained themselves to ignore. Following Christopher's recounting of the information he considers important, we as readers catch only glimpses of what, in another book, would be the main story. Our everyday preconceptions have very little place in the narrative, and we cannot comfortably project ourselves into the position of protagonist/narrator, as is common when reading fiction. The lengthy list of details that attract Christopher's attention, peppered heavily with bald numerical data, may seem rather bland and sterile in comparison to Tolkien's lush, painterly prose, but both modes of description encourage the reader to move away from their everyday habits of glancing and towards a deeper perception of the world both inside and outside of the act of reading. Christopher, for all his daunting mathematical intelligence, is a child; in order to discover the full story, the reader must deliberately put aside certain portions of his childish narration.

Unlike other imagistic techniques, such as Hopkins's attempts at describing *inscape*, however, *recovery* aims beyond merely re-focusing the reader's attention on details of the surrounding world. It draws our attention to the details of the created world, "as we are (or were) meant to see them," unique in the eyes of the creator, but also reminds us that we were meant to see things exterior to us "as things apart from ourselves" (Tolkien, OFS 58). This is the opposite of Whitman-esque exuberance, which attempts to claim the exterior world as an extension of the self.⁶ Rather than emphasizing the oneness of creation, *recovery* guides readers towards a putting away of proprietary attitudes.

We see this early on in *The Lord of the Rings*, as the hobbits make their initial journey out of the Shire. It is present in the sudden, otherwise

⁶ If the reader is at all confused by what is meant by "Whitman-esque exuberance," a quick consultation of the first stanza of "Song of Myself" ought to clarify the phrase.

unexplained, interjection of a fox who comes across Sam, Frodo, and Pippin as they set out from Bag End: "'Hobbits!' he thought. '[...] There's something mighty queer behind this.' He was quite right, but he never found out any more about it" (I.3.71). This sudden turning of the tables, the realization that the scenery the hobbits (and the reader) pass through is *also* sentient and capable of looking back at them, is an example of the sort of relation to the world that *recovery* encourages.

This manner of relating to the world is particularly difficult for Christopher Boone. He explains that

when I was little I didn't understand about other people having minds. And Julie said to Mother and Father that I would always find this very difficult. But I don't find this difficult now. Because I decided that it was a kind of puzzle, and if something is a puzzle there is always a way of solving it. (116)

Christopher's frequent explanations of his inability to lie condition the reader to accept all of his statements at face value, and so we are prone to believe that he no longer has any difficulty distinguishing between self and other. However, other portions of the narrative clearly show that he still has difficulty truly understanding that the world around him is separate from his self:

I used to think that Mother and Father might get divorced. That was because they had lots of arguments and sometimes they hated each other. This was because of the stress of looking after someone who has Behavioral Problems like I have. [...] Sometimes these things would make Mother and Father really angry and they would shout at me or they would shout at each other. Sometimes Father would say, "Christopher, if you do not behave I swear I shall knock the living daylight out of you," or Mother would say, "Jesus, Christopher, I am seriously considering putting you in a home," or Mother would say, "You are going to drive me into an early grave." (45-48)

It is certainly probable that raising an autistic child would place stress on a relationship, and at first glance, Christopher appears to be offering a rather logical, objective interpretation of the situation. However, a closer inspection reveals an extraordinary degree of self-absorption; at no point does Christopher ever consider that his parents may have other motivations for their actions, unconnected to him. Christopher's inability to comprehend emotional nuance conspires with his position as a child straining to make sense of the adult world to ensure that his explanations of other people's actions may be logical and believable, and are certainly true in the sense that Christopher believes them, but

are never entirely accurate. Because Christopher is telling the story, however, the reader is left to draw this conclusion out from beneath the fogged surface of his carefully constructed narrative.

This aspect of *recovery*, the emphasis on uniqueness, distance, or separation, viewing the Other not as an extension of one's self, but as an entity both outside of and equal to one's self, is also poignantly present in *The Lord of the Rings*. We see this to a certain extent in the instance of the fox, when the gaze the hobbits customarily apply to Nature is suddenly turned back on them, but also quite clearly much later on in the narrative, when Frodo and Samwise take on Gollum as their guide:

Gollum looked at them. A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face. The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and tired. A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head, as if engaged in some interior debate. Then he came back, and slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo's knee—but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing. (IV.8.699)

As Gandalf makes clear much earlier in the narrative, Gollum is in fact "an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time," and twisted beyond recognition by the evil of the Ring, though in the normal flow of the story this is all too easily forgotten, as Gollum is presented as a foil to the hobbits—nocturnal where they are diurnal, apparently allergic to the Elves that they idolize, fond of the water that they themselves fear, and cringing and cowering in corners while they exert bravado well beyond their physical size. This passage provides the reader with the sudden strangeness that Tolkien believed to be the natural result of re-encountering the world, and then uses that strangeness to guide the reader to a moral conclusion: Gollum *is* like the hobbits, he *could be* like them, save that he freely chooses not to be. It is well worth noting that this passage occurs immediately before Gollum betrays Sam and Frodo in the lair of the giant spider, Shelob; the moment of interior debate as he peers back up towards the pass is, presumably, a moment of last-minute doubt over his chosen course of action. It would perhaps be easier to read *The Lord of the Rings* as a tale of Absolute Good versus Absolute Evil, as many commentators have done, and assume that Gollum is predestined to Evil just as Sam and Frodo are predestined to Good, but this reading sacrifices accuracy for the sake of childish

simplicity.⁷ Gollum has his moment of near-redemption, just as Frodo has his moment of moral failure at the crack of Mount Doom. Indeed, the main use of *recovery* in *The Lord of the Rings* appears to be to re-order the reader's moral preconceptions.

Nature, in Tolkien's writing, appears at first glance to be entirely aligned with the forces of "good." This is a reasonable first assumption, especially if the reader has a vague knowledge of Tolkien's place in the tradition of Catholic ecological writers, such as Hopkins. However, a close examination of figures such as Old Man Willow, Tom Bombadil, and Shelob reveals that this surface reading is not entirely accurate. Tolkien confounds the reader's moral expectations; when we put aside our presuppositions, we discover that not only are all trees not Good, some aren't even "good," and what at first appears to be Evil winds up being nothing more than a slightly darker shade of convenient.

Frightening as the Nazgûl creeping about the Shire in the first few chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring* may have been, the first direct threat to the protagonists comes not from any agent of Sauron, but from the self-interested caprice of the natural world—in this case, Old Man Willow, the tree who (it is decidedly a *who*, rather than a *that*) attempts to engulf the hobbits. The first glimpse of Old Man Willow gives some hint of what is to come:

[Frodo] lifted his heavy eyes and saw leaning over him a huge willow-tree, old and hoary. Enormous it looked, its sprawling branches going up like reaching arms with many long-fingered hands, its knotted and twisted trunk gaping in wide fissures that creaked faintly as the boughs moved. (I.6.114)

The tree's arms are, of course, reaching for the hobbits; soon enough, the gaping wide fissures have swallowed Merry and Pippin. Frodo and Sam's attempt to free their friends involves lighting a fire in order to frighten the tree; they succeed in frightening it, but the plan as a whole backfires: "A tremor ran through the whole willow. The leaves seemed to hiss above their heads with a sound of pain and

⁷ While the sides in the conflict over the Ring are very commonly viewed as Good and Evil (see, for example, Michael Stanton's, *Hobbits, Elves, and Wizards*), such a reading is, in fact, inconsistent with both the text of the novel and the Augustinian view of evil which a number of recent critics have convincingly argued to have been the basis of Tolkien's thought, as it implicitly grants the existence of absolute Evil, which Tolkien repeatedly denies, both in the book and in private letters (*Lord of the Rings* II.2.261; *Letters* 90). Lacking a more convenient manner in which to differentiate between the two sides, I have chosen to label them "good" and "evil" (rather than Good and Evil) so as to make clear that we are dealing in tendencies rather than absolutes. For a discussion of Augustinianism in Tolkien, see especially Fisher 221-225.

anger" (116). Old Man Willow threatens to squeeze Merry in half, and the entire forest reacts to the threat:

There was a sound as of a wind rising and spreading outwards to the branches of all the other trees round about, as though they had dropped a stone into the quiet slumber of the river-valley and set up ripples of anger that ran out over the whole Forest. (I.6.116)

This is dire peril indeed, and not adequately explained by the plot of the book. The villain Sauron has no hand in it (that we know of), and Old Man Willow, like the fox encountered several chapters earlier, disappears and is never heard from again. The entire incident seems to be constructed as a device for introducing the enigmatic Tom Bombadil (and, perhaps, for foreshadowing Merry and Pippin's later encounter with the Ents), though one can't help but feel that he could have just as easily happened upon the hobbits on his stroll through the woods without them needing to be in mortal peril. Still, his appearance is decidedly fortuitous; he pacifies Old Man Willow, rescues Merry and Pippin, and sweeps all four hobbits off to his house, dancing and singing all the way (I.6.118-119).

Tolkien himself identified Bombadil as "the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside" (*Letters* 26). Other readers have identified him as a Maia (one of the Ainur who entered into Middle-earth to assist the Valar, which would make him the same class of being as Gandalf and Saruman), a nature spirit, a projection of the reader into the narrative, and even a failure on the part of Tolkien's editor.⁸ Stepping outside of the immediate constraints of the narrative, however, leaves us free to take Tolkien at his word: Bombadil is a projection of our world into Middle-earth, (a portion of) Nature personified and lifted away from the realm of the familiar. Bombadil therefore stands in contrast to Old Man Willow, as the friendly and hostile elements of our own everyday landscape.

Bombadil, no matter how essential his presence is for the survival of the hobbits and the success of their quest, and no matter how much nostalgia Tolkien has invested in the character, *does not* represent unambiguous moral good, and nor do any of Tolkien's other representations of Nature—though at the same

⁸ For information on the Maia, see Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 30-31. Most of the theories of Tom Bombadil's identity are covered by Jensen, but the theory of Bombadil as a projection of the reader is from Beier, and the unfriendly remarks about Bombadil's extraneousness come from Gasque (6). In his letter to Peter Hastings, Tolkien says of Bombadil, "In historical fact I put him in because I had already 'invented' him [...] and wanted an 'adventure' on the way. But I kept him in, and as he was, because he represents certain things otherwise left out" (*Letters* 192).

time, none of them represents unambiguous evil. Old Man Willow was a threat to the hobbits, yes, but not a deadly threat, until they attacked him with fire. The entire episode reads as an invitation for the reader to put aside their anthropocentric world view and consider the matter from the tree's unique point of view, in keeping with the aims of *recovery*, and from that point of view one might argue that he merely acted in self-defense, much as the Ents do when they later march to war against Saruman (though his reasons for attempting to trap Merry and Pippin in the first place remain an admittedly problematic mystery). Moreover, he was a threat quickly dispatched by Bombadil, who appears to have been at no personal risk during the episode, nor later, when he rescues the hobbits from the clutches of the Barrow-wight, an unpleasant but decidedly human remnant of a time long past (I.8.153-159). The assistance that Bombadil grants to the hobbits, coming without any apparent sacrifice on his part, cannot be used as evidence that he stands on one side or the other of the great conflict that consumes the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Bombadil's moral neutrality is demonstrated several times in the narrative, each more pointedly than the last. He is immune to the power of the Ring, which speaks not only to his lack of evil impulse, but also to his lack of *good* impulse.⁹ One of the reoccurring motifs in the narrative is the manner in which the Ring corrupts its owners, twisting even good impulses into destructive ones. Elrond warns Boromir of this at the council; later, Galadriel puts aside the Ring for identical reasons (II.2. 285; II.7.386). As Michael Stanton has argued, this shows that "Tom [Bombadil] represents a position, both disinterested and uninterested, in the political struggle between Good and Evil" (30). Indeed, Bombadil seems to have no interests at all outside of the boundaries of the land over which he is "Master." His protection of the hobbits ends at that border, where he leaves them to their own "luck," and when later, at the Council of Elrond, Elrond expresses regret at having failed to invite Bombadil, Gandalf responds rather tersely that "He would not have come," going on to explain that Bombadil's isolation is deliberate and self-imposed; in addition to being unwilling to leave the boundaries of his own lands, Gandalf believes, he would be unlikely even to help the Council hide the Ring within those boundaries (II.2.258).

⁹ Tim McKenzie's 2005 paper on the nature of evil in *The Lord of the Rings* has drawn on Rowan Williams's reading of Augustine in a manner which lends further support to the idea that Bombadil's immunity to the ring stems from a sort of moral neutrality: "Augustine's reasoning applies only to creatures endowed with will, and it explains why creatures' capacity to do evil depends on the strength of their wills. If a will has such excellencies as 'liberty, energy, [and] persistence,' then directed towards selfish ends, it also has terrible potential for evil" (4).

No matter how uninterested Bombadil may be in the epic struggle, he is not untouchable; at that same Council, the elf Glorfindel suggests that if Sauron gains power, even Bombadil will fall, “Last as he was First; and then Night will come” (II.2.259). Of course, Glorfindel is here implicitly aligning Bombadil with the side of good—and I do not attempt to dispute that if a strict division had to be made, Bombadil would fall on the same side of the line as the hobbits, elves, and Gandalf.¹⁰ I would, however, suggest that the division between “good” and “evil” within *The Lord of the Rings* is not nearly so simple as it appears; that there is in fact a large gray area either outside or in between these simplistic moral polarities; and that this area is occupied in large part by representations of Nature, who act according to convenience rather than conviction. These representations are necessarily caught up in *recovery*, in that the narrative forces us to regard the everyday scenery in a new and demonstrably sentient light, “freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness” (Tolkien, OFS 57). That Tolkien, as we have seen, regarded *recovery* as one of the essential qualities of a Fairy-Story, and therefore presumably essential to the success of this particular narrative, indicates that what we learn from such representations is particularly important to understanding the author’s intent, such as it may be. For further illustration of this, we should turn to the nightmarish Shelob.

On the surface, Shelob appears to be even more Bombadil’s perfect opposite than Old Man Willow—both are unspeakably ancient; Shelob is “grossly physical” where Bombadil’s realm is ethereal and dreamlike;¹¹ Shelob female where Bombadil is male (a contrast that is not quite so superficial as it might initially appear). The text places them in opposition to each other in much the same way as Bombadil and Old Man Willow were contrasted earlier in the narrative: just before Shelob appears, Sam Gamgee thinks “I wish old Tom was near us now!” (IV.9.703). Surely it is no accident that Bombadil, having gone unremarked upon for near to five hundred pages, should suddenly re-enter the narrative at the same time as Shelob?

Like Bombadil, Shelob is unaffected by the Ring, mainly because she is also uninterested in it:

Little she knew of or cared for towers, or rings, or anything devised by mind or hand, who only desired death for all others, mind and body, and for herself a glut of life, alone, swollen till the mountains could no longer hold her up and the darkness could not contain her. (IV.9.707)

¹⁰ Anne C. Petty has a rather convincing analysis of the symbiotic relationship between Bombadil and the “good” side (241).

¹¹ Verlyn Flieger provides a lengthy explication of the dream theme in the Bombadil sequence (189).

She and Sauron share a relationship of mutually disinterested convenience; she understands the importance of the hobbits to Sauron even less than Bombadil understands their importance to Gandalf. For his part, Sauron “knew where she lurked. It pleased him that she should dwell there hungry but unabated in malice, a more sure watch upon that ancient path into his land than any other that his skill could have devised” (IV.9.708). Shelob does Sauron’s work, but not his bidding; like Bombadil, she exists too far outside of the field of battle to be a true ally to either side. In both cases, the symbiotic relationship relies on convenience and the desire for survival rather than moral conviction or deliberate choice. Bombadil rescues the hobbits because it suits him to do so, apparently without thought to the fact that in helping them, he also helps the side in the conflict that must win if he is to survive; Shelob attempts to eat them for much the same reason, and with an equal lack of awareness given to the larger conflict.

By thus removing Nature from commitment to either side on the recognized battleground between “good” and “evil,” Tolkien guides his reader towards an acknowledgement of Nature as Other, outside of the recognizably human cares, concerns, and dichotomies that occupy the rest of his narrative. The direct result of the narrative’s embrace of the aesthetic principle of *recovery* is a revision of ethical stance towards Nature that appears to be indicated by a surface reading, and a movement towards a relationship between humanity and the natural world somewhat closer to that which Hopkins aimed at in his poetry.¹² But though *recovery* in Tolkien, like Hopkins’s *inscape*, is usually connected to the natural world, passages such as that involving Gollum show that the formula of precise description meant to lift the reader away from their everyday preconceptions to a vantage point from which they are able to perceive the world around them as composed of separate, spiritually unique, morally autonomous entities can apply somewhat more widely.

The instances of *recovery* in Haddon’s novel take a very different shape, but ultimately lead the reader to the same end. Christopher begins the story with his ideas of good and bad firmly in place: his father is good, like the color red, Siobhan knows everything (which is good), his mother is dead, but was good when she lived, math and logic are comforting (and good), and metaphors are lies (and bad, like the color yellow), “because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards” (15). Each of these assumptions is broken down over the course of the novel. Even early in the narrative, Bill Greenwell points out that we as readers can discern that “It has already turned out to be a pig of a day (Christopher has found a dead poodle, impaled with a

¹² See especially the reading of “Binsey Poplars” given by Peter Milward (62-68).

garden fork, and has hit a policeman who has been crowding him); and his father does indeed have a skeleton in his cupboard," though we don't learn about that until later (279-280). The discovery of his father's "skeleton," a box of letters from Christopher's mother who, it turns out, didn't die, but ran off with the husband of the neighbor whose dog, Wellington, is found dead at the beginning of the story (stabbed with a garden fork by, we later find out, Christopher's father, in a fit of anger after the neighbor terminated their own affair), turns the rest of Christopher's assumptions on their head, leading him into territory where even Siobhan cannot guide him, and to the point that even math cannot comfort Christopher. His A level exam is subsumed in the chaos surrounding the break in his relationship with his father, and the return of his mother; instead of being a still point at the center of the maelstrom, it becomes another source of anxiety:

But I still felt sick because I didn't know if I'd done well in the exam and because I didn't know if the examination board would allow my exam paper to be considered after Mrs. Gascoyne had told them I wasn't going to take it. [...] I think it is worst if you don't know whether it is a good thing or a bad thing which is going to happen. (214-215)

Christopher's worries over his math exam are merely a sign of how greatly the foundations of his world have been shaken. By far, the greatest source of anxiety for Christopher is his father's admission to the canicide that Christopher set out to investigate: "I had to get out of the house. Father had murdered Wellington. That meant he could murder me, because I couldn't trust him, even though he had said 'trust me,' because he had told a lie about a big thing" (122).

For all this upheaval, Christopher's journey is ultimately one of discovery, not one of transformation. He learns facts about the people around him, but none of his experiences alter him or his fundamental outlook on life. He learns to distrust his father, but does so because his father's actions ("he had told a lie about a big thing") outweigh the trust he has vested in the idea of "father." He never questions his mother's willingness to resume the maternal role she abandoned, in spite of her own repeated statements that she left because she couldn't withstand the pressure of caring for him; her own actions are not sufficient to override Christopher's idea of "mother," and he himself is incapable of separating that idea (the categorical essence) from the actual person (the *haecceity*). As Ruth Gilbert asserts, "Haddon also allows the reader to see that Christopher's reading and writing of his own story is only partial and the author shows the limits and often painful consequences of Christopher's lack of intuitive connection, for him and those around him" (246). Christopher may see the details we miss, but we see the larger picture that Christopher misses, and without an understanding of that larger picture and his place in it, he can only react to the circumstances he discovers.

The place of *recovery* in this text is perhaps more difficult to identify than it is in *The Lord of the Rings*. Clearly, it is not in Christopher, whose literal-minded approach to the world would likely not admit anything remotely akin to *haecceitas*—essence, categorical or ontological, is a mostly unseen quality, and Christopher doesn't like things that he can't see and understand. But *recovery* doesn't exist for the benefit of the characters in a story. The scene of Gollum's near-redemption takes place when the main characters are all asleep, and there is nobody to witness his transformation but we, the readers. We see—the narrative demands that we see—through the cracks in Christopher's idea of the story and into the complex emotional landscape beneath it. We are led to understand what Christopher does not: no person is all good or all bad, and his father's behavior towards Wellington, or even towards his mother, is not an accurate barometer for his relationship with Christopher. We come to this knowledge through the struggle to find a balance between projecting ourselves into Christopher's situation and introjecting Christopher's perceptions into our own life, a struggle which culminates in the realization that neither of these things is actually possible. The text forces our recognition of Christopher as an entity separate from ourselves, and in so doing helps us to put away, if only for a little while, the childish possessiveness with which we are prone to view the rest of the world.

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