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Abstract

Presents attitudes toward nature held by the inhabitants of the province of Galicia in Spain, and notes similarities to Tolkien’s view of nature. Reproduces bookplate and title page of a Galician dictionary owned by Tolkien.

Additional Keywords

Galicia—Folklore and mythology; Nature in literature; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward nature

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J.R.R. Tolkien’s Use Of Nature: Correlations with Galicians’ Sense of Nature

Marta García de la Puerta

It is a pleasure for me to be here amongst so many experts and admirers on J.R.R. Tolkien among other fantasy writers, even though when I found out that so many important researchers were also going to be present, my first thought was:

“I am not going to take part as a speaker.” Besides, as you know, when talking about feelings, it’s very difficult to get them across in another language. But soon after, I realized that I felt the need of sharing the results on an incipient research and thoughts with you all about the apparent correlation between J.R.R. Tolkien’s attitude towards Nature and Galicians’ sense of Nature, from a real and imaginary point of view.

Having overcome the first moments of panic, I understood that it would be a very good opportunity to learn a great deal from all of you.

And here I find myself, willing to share what Tolkien evoked in me as a Galician, not only through his fiction but also through the various comments he made on Nature, like the one you can read on this slide and which I took from his famous essay “On Fairy Stories”:

A close examination of the concept of Nature shows us that there are some affinities between J.R.R. Tolkien and the attitude of the Galicians towards Nature from a real and imaginary point of view. Nature both as a physical and supernatural space with vibrations, feelings and common roots.

Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.

Since Galicia is not very well known, in spite of the large number of Galicians who live worldwide, for those who are approaching Galicia and Galician culture for the first time I will provide you with a very brief introduction to this beautiful and mysterious land. No wonder, Santiago Lorenzo Sacco says that “the magic, the unique and the unknown is everywhere” (Lorenzo Sacco 24).

It is located in the Northwestern corner of Spain by the Atlantic Ocean. As a friend of mine once said: “it looks like a boat entering the Atlantic at the very moment when it is launched.”

Immense seas, stormy capes whose loud fury frightens and impresses us; lakes, waterfalls, transparent streams and rivers which bubble and gush forth into pleasant fields.

The Atlantic climate, tempered by the Gulf Stream, and the huge amount of rain that falls mainly during the winter permits us to enjoy the vegetation covering our land: valleys and fields covered by grass and flowers in all seasons, bright green meadows dotted with fertile orchards, mountains full of pines, oaks, chestnuts and weeping willows. The traveller should not be surprised if in his wanderings along the roads and paths of Galicia it suddenly seems as if he were in the green and peaceful lands of The Shire. No pen can enumerate so much charm. As Rosalía de Castro states: “…Galicia is always a garden where sweet aromas, freshness and poetry are in the air…” (De Castro, p.12).

Nature is of such importance in Galicia that it plays an intrinsic part among Galicians and in Galician culture. The Man in this Land feels he is deeply related to Nature. This long intimacy with Nature has often been attributed to the “Celtic substratum,” since the Galician mind and response to Nature present many affinities to those of other “Celtic” regions, such as Ireland and Brittany. Ernst de Renan, (who was quoted by Kathleen Kulp in her book Manner and Mood in Rosalía de Castro), speaking of the Celtic races of Wales, Brittany, Scotland and Ireland, indirectly describes the Galician’s feeling for nature:

Their mythology is nothing more than a transparent naturalism, not that anthropomorphic naturalism of Greece and India, in which the forces of the universe, viewed as living beings and endowed with consciousness, tend more and more to detach themselves from physical phenomena, and to become moral beings; but in some measure a realistic naturalism, when he mentions the love of nature for herself, the vivid impression of her magic, accompanied by the sorrowful feeling that man knows, when, face to face with her, he believes that he hears her commune with him concerning his origins and his destiny (Kulp 232).

The “Celtic theory” was the explanation of the Galician past prevalent in the XIX century. Among the galaxy of authors who emerge from Galician literature we can mention Eduardo Pondal, Rosalía de Castro, Manuel Murguía, Vicente Risco, … who were avid proponents of this belief, and Galicia their inspiring land. Menéndez Pelayo (quoted by García Martí in the prologue to his edition of Rosalía’s Obras Completas) is perhaps the most sensible from a literary point of view:
...it is about a sentimental exclusive attitude of the Galician people, sons and daughters of Celtic origin, which might not have an anthropological foundation, but which seduces so many generations of writers (García Marti XIII-XIV).

This genuine and innermost feeling for Nature is a constant feeling among Galicians because the life of any Galician is, by far, deeper rooted in his natural surroundings than in society; he is more dependant on the cosmic than in the social environment. As a consequence of this closeness the landscape becomes spiritualized and transforms itself from an objective scenery to a sentimentally valued vital reality which is lived instead of contemplated. In Galicia, Man feels Nature as one together with his own feeling. In Vicente Risco’s words:

We, Galicians, deeply feel the beauty of our land, and this feeling creates in us a sense of landscape, a sense of Nature... Our Land is also our Nature... making itself divine, paradisiacal, transforming itself in God’s inspiration, Who, as an artist benefitted us the most (Risco 7).

(I would like just to mention that some of the quotations in this paper have been translated from Galician, our mother tongue).

After having read Tolkien I have become more aware that, without doubt for this great author, the same as for Galicians, Nature and the landscape become a source of emotions, an intimate and deep reality which is prior to any aesthetic appraisal. Therefore, Tolkien’s writings display a pronounced affinity with that essential part of Galician identity. But, how does this happen? How does the landscape become part of you? How was Tolkien’s deep love and respect for Nature born?

One possible way of determining how the landscape became part of him would be by delving into his childhood memories. I agree with Rof Carballo, when he states that “we more often take our first steps accompanied by a landscape than by friends... and we are not aware up to what point a visual perception of the landscape...learnt in childhood influences us” (Rof Carballo 17,18).

Tolkien would never forget seeing his father in Bloemfontein tending the vines in his garden or digging among the cypress, pines and cedars which he himself had planted. He always considered trees his friends: “I am - Tolkien states - ... much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been...” (Tolkien 1995 220). Besides, throughout his life, he would always cherish the thoughts of the countryside of the Midlands, where he spent the golden days of his childhood and which together with his close contact with Nature lay the foundations for his writings of fantasy.

Tolkien would always stress the importance of the natural environment. However, the law of Nature is not only the acceptance of happiness but also cruel death, it is not only brotherly fraternity but also blind rivalry; it is equality but also hierarchy. Loving Nature, he suffered when seeing how Man, in the name of progress, was without any sense destroying it. In his wonderful descriptions of burnt and desolated lands - the ruin of Beleriand, the devastation of Ardglen, the desolation of Smaug, to name just a few — there are also autobiographical elements and recollections of the time he spent in the trenches during the war, what Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull in J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator call “the painfully real blasted landscape Tolkien saw during the First World War” (Hammond & Scull 54). Consonance of Nature and Man is often disrupted and becomes a hostile and desolated presence in many of Tolkien’s writings, paintings and drawings, the so called “dark side of Nature” according again to Hammond and Scull (54).

Nevertheless, and contrary to what some people think, Tolkien’s fantasy is an hymn to Nature, to the communication between man and his surroundings as when Tom Bombadil manifests his intimist experience about his beloved Nature and through whom we learn that: “The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves” (Tolkien 1993 172).

Nature in Middle-earth, in Galicia in spite of the repeated summer fires which are despossessing this unbelievably beautiful land, has a regenerative capacity which surprises everybody: “as a good mother, is generous, and in spite of all the ill treatment she continues to feed her children” (De Castro 146); it has the same sweet expression (gesture), and the same mysterious tranquility. In Galicia, the fountains continue springing up for Man’s lips, in its woods the fallen dead leaves form the humus from which the new trees live on. In Middle-earth “Mirkwood had fallen under the domination of a Power that hated all living things but was restored
to beauty and became Greenwood the Great before the end of the story” (Tolkien 1995 420).

But if physical reality is vividly felt by Tolkien and most of Galicians, there is also a recognition of the mysterious, vague, supernatural side of life and nature and which exists behind and beyond the brilliant surface of appearances. There is, then, in the idea of Nature a component which is “supernatural,” magic.

This “supernatural” component can be seen in Tolkien’s descriptions of Nature and in Galician environment in general. And this is so, because their cosmo vision, the same as that of the primitive man, is essentially religious, the perspective from which the world is considered as having been created by the Gods in such a way that everything, to an extent, is subject to a sacred process. A specific object acquires worth and, in this way becomes real, because it takes part, in one way or another in a reality which transcends it. And it is here where fantasy intervenes, what Tolkien called “a natural human activity” (Tolkien 1983 144). According to this author, it originally combines things and shows itself like an instrument which is able to highlight the mysterious and sacred things about Nature which are familiar to us “but that are seen suddenly from a new angle” (Tolkien 146) “with the regaining of a clear view”, and through which “the sense of wonder is exercised” (Noel, 8).

If in Galicia we open the doors to a world of fantasy, we find ourselves in the midst of a land of magic which is full of myths and beliefs which are transmitted orally from generation to generation and later collected, amongst others, by Vicente Risco, Florentino Cuevillas, Taboada Chivite, Bouza Brey,... whose research helped to clarify the meaning of some beliefs which survived the passing of time.

As we have previously been able to ascertain, Galicia abounds with the presence of natural phenomena which lend themselves to their sacralization. From time immemorial, Man worshipped mountains, water, trees and stones. This mythic belief continues to survive in the different levels of our culture; therefore, our mythology complied with the remains of pagan cults.

In the traditional mythical Galician world, water, in whatever form, whether it be in rivers, fountains or seas, plays a fundamental part. It is clearly associated with being a vital resource; it makes the crops grow, it is necessary for living, it cleanses our body and our soul. If Galicia is known as “the land of a thousand rivers”, fountains could also be included in the latter. It is in the rivers and fountains, where, according to tradition, the spirits of Nature live. These magic water beings, nymphs or “moures” in Galician, like to sit near brooks and fountains, where they comb their long golden hair whilst singing love songs.

Another of the popular traditional cults which has primitive origins is the worshipping of stones. Many are the stones which are scattered all over Galicia and worshipped as having magical powers, and which are attributed with having a beneficial or supernatural nature. These are always linked to legends and have curative and purifying properties. With the passing of time, popular tradition continued holding the beliefs that certain stones had magical powers: equilibrium stones, fertilization stones, lightning stones, the popular belief which is that they have a celestial origin, sacrificial stones, stones that resemble people or animals, stones which are used in initiation or regeneration rituals, ...as you can see in the slides. In the North of Galicia, at a crossroads, there is an enormous stone with a dragon or winged serpent engraved on it. Galicians believe that dragons, also serpents, concealed treasures. With the passing of time, numerous Christian monuments were built on stones on which the image of a serpent was engraved; according to tradition these were located in places with a high source of energy.

Trees and plants also fulfill an important role in Galicia. The tree is the symbol of the regeneration of life and among all the trees, the oak is the lord of the forests, the sacred tree, the symbol of a glorious past and represents everything Galicia stands for.

With regard to plants, there are healing and magic ones: for example the famous herbs of Saint John, which are picked on that special night and which are used for therapeutic purposes as well as to prevent witches from prowling about.

Another phenomenon of Nature which is also a mythic protagonist are mountains; Mountain ranges, summits,
peaks... were places of worship for primitive man. Height meant closeness to divinity; the summits meant strength and the union between the earthly and the celestial world. Some were places of worship in the past: such as the Sacred Mountain Peak (Monte Pico Sacro) which as legend has it, a dragon guards the summit.

Fire is another important element in Galician culture. It was considered something alive, sacred and purifying. The numerous bonfires which are lit throughout the year, specially those lit to coincide with the important dates of the solar cycle when people jump over the flames to purify both body and soul, are proof that fire as a myth exists.

And this is what happens time and again in Middle-Earth which not only contains elves and fays, witches and trolls, giants or dragons but trees and plants, water and stones, mountains and fire... all charged with transcendental values which exist beyond physical reality: the Simarils, precious stones which inside them guard some of the light of the gold tree and the silver one; mountains that conceal treasures; mountains as boundaries and obstacles release uneasiness; trees which have the power of movement to do good or harm (Ents, The Old Man Willow); plants which are able to heal (athelas); stones (for example, the Orthanc stone and those of Minas Ithil and Minas Tirith) that provide glimpses of the past....

Any Tolkien reader has been able to verify the rediscovery of those and many other elemental truths: flowers, wood, air, grass, the sun and moon, the rustle of the leaves, the colours and the noises of the Earth, in one word: NATURE, and above all, that unique sense of emotion that I, as a Galician, feel for IT.

I hope that I have been able to transmit and share what I, as a Galician, who loves her land deeply feels for our landscape, our culture, our essence, our feelings, our attitude towards Nature. This theme is very important because I believe that we do not possess the land, the land possesses us.

And, as a Galician, it was very interesting and important for me, to find out that Tolkien possessed a Galician-Spanish dictionary by Marcial Valladares Núñez edited in 1884 by the Central Conciliar Seminar in Santiago de Compostela. The stamp belongs to Jose Gali Camps, a famous bookshop in this town and where the dictionary was bought. This dictionary was donated by the executors of Professor J.R.R. Tolkien to the Taylor Institution Library in 1975. In this last slide we can see that this dictionary was signed by Professor Tolkien himself in 1923 with his beautiful handwriting.

The finding of this dictionary has made me think of asking the following questions:

Did J.R.R. Tolkien ever visit Galicia?

Had he ever read Galician traditions or myths?

If Tolkien did indeed visit Galicia or ever read about Galician culture, would it be too daring to state that there is a link, a correlation between Tolkien's concept of Nature and Galicians' sense of Nature?

Works Cited