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Abstract

Symbolic meaning of the driving of automobiles in *Mr. Bliss* and *The Wind in the Willows*, especially as contrasted with the activity of picnicking. Implications for the question of Nature versus Rural, technology, food, and home.

Additional Keywords

Automobiles in fantasy; Driving in fantasy; Food in fantasy; Grahame, Kenneth—Attitude toward technology; Grahame, Kenneth—Characters—Mr. Toad; Grahame, Kenneth. *The Wind in the Willows*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward technology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Mr. Bliss; Tolkien, J.R.R. *Mr. Bliss*

MR. BLISS AND MR. TOAD

HAZARDOUS DRIVING IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *MR. BLISS* & KENNETH GRAHAME'S *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS*

DAVID SANDER

A distrust of cars unites the adventures of Mr. Bliss and those of Mr. Toad. One might be tempted to say, a mistrust of Technology unites them, and one might want to oppose this mistrust with a faith in Nature, But such a reading overreaches. In Tolkien's *Mr. Bliss* and Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* driving in particular is the problem; and the specific positive activity opposed to driving is picnicking, food and comfort and idle enjoyment.

Of Picnics

Food and comfort play an important role in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as well. A hobbit epitomizes the lover of good food and creature comforts, multi-course meals, cakes before and after each, presents and pocket handkerchiefs at all times. Gandalf, Aragorn, Boromir and the other immediately recognizable heroic figures in *LoTR* could not bear the One Ring to the Crack of Doom because they could not resist it. A hobbit must bear it. The final check to the Dark Lord's power is not, ultimately, the return of the True King, but a plump hobbit with crumbs on his chin and vest, smoking his pipe on the doorstep of his comfortable hobbit-hole. With one important caveat: hobbits don't like adventures, "We don't want any adventures here, thank you!" (18) as Bilbo tells Gandalf in *The Hobbit*, A hobbit must be roused to action, as Bilbo and Frodo were roused by Gandalf.

In Grahame's book, Mole is roused by "Spring...with its spirit of divine discontent and longing...Something up above... calling him imperiously" (I; ch. 1) in an inspiration to his "new life and its splendid spaces" (103; ch., 5). Specifically, Mole is called out to life on what his friend Rat called "The River" (9; ch. 1). The River is life *lived*, the opposite of Mole's previous pent up existence whitewashing his little home. It is like an always open holy book - "a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea" (4; ch. 1). On it lies a sacred island inhabited by the god of the river, Pan, whose mystic music whispers in the willows, inviting and instructing. Full of surprises and ecstatic energy, The River is described as enchanting, bewitching, fascinating, intoxicating, dreamy.

The chief activity of those living on Grahame's River is "messaging about in boats" (7; ch. 1), and the prominent feature of "messaging about in boats" is picnicking. In contrast to the car crashes and misadventures of driving, picnicking is slow, deliberate and relaxing. In these works,

to picnic is, to paraphrase Whitman, to "loafe and invite [your] soul, / lean and loafe at [your] ease" (1.4-5), an act of serenity of spirit. Food is lovingly described by Tolkien and Grahame, and reading about it can make one alternately full or ravenous. In one memorable scene, food is described to excess as Rat enumerates the contents of a picnic basket:

"There's cold chicken inside it," replied the Rat briefly; coldtonguecoldhamcoldbeefpickledgherkinssaladfrench rollsscressandwidgespottedmeatgingerbeerlemonsoda water - "

"O stop, stop," cried the Mole in ecstasies: "This is too much!" (8; ch. 1)

The true analogue to Grahame's River, and particularly the figure of Pan, in Tolkien's works is Tom Bombadil. Against the epic and seemingly absolute struggle of wizards and dark lords, Tom Bombadil took no sides, recognized no power, followed no laws. As he tells the hobbits under his care in *LoTR*:

"Eldest, that's what I am... Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn. He made paths before the Big People, and saw the Little People arriving... When the Elves passed Westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent, He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless - before the Dark Lord came from Outside," (142; bk. 1; ch. 7)

In *Mr. Bliss*, only the Girabbit comes close to representing the chaotic, unconscious energy expressed by The River and Tom Bombadil. The Girabbit is blind, lives in a "deep, deep hole in the ground" (6), sleeps during the day and is a secret from everyone, hidden by Mr. Bliss for years.

The Girabbit, Tom Bombadil, and The River cannot be simply identified as Nature. The Wild Wood in *WITW* and the Bears' wood in *Mr. Bliss* are nature as well. But they are dangerous places of wild excess compared with the gentler life on the riverbank or the domesticated Girabbit. Pan, Tom Bombadil and, to a lesser extent, the Girabbit are manifestations of sacred Nature, the Mystery made actual through the use of fantastic figures. They are beyond us, as Tom Bombadil is beyond the War of the Ring, the Girabbit is beyond the weather, or Pan's whisper in the willows is a longing beyond understanding. They reach out to us in need as Bombadil helped the hobbits against the treachery of Old Man Willow, a malevolent expression

of wilderness, or as Pan helped the Otter's son to come home. Older-than-time Tom Bombadil, the impossible Girabbit, and the divine Friend and Helper Pan are an embodiment of the world of the spirit immanent in Nature.

When Rat and Mole follow Pan's piping, they see, to quote Wordsworth, "into the life of things" (49). Nature becomes at every moment more vivid as the veil between this world and the world of the spirit drops away: "the horizon became clearer, field and tree came more into sight, and somehow with a different look; the mystery began to drop away" (132; ch. 7). Nature reveals its sacred heart: "Mole felt a great Awe....no panic terror -- indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy -- but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that same august Presence was very, very near" (135). Mole and Rat see Pan and worship him with a joy that is also fear.

"Afraid?" murmured Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love, "Afraid! Of Him? O, never, never: And yet - and yet - O, Mole, I am afraid!"

Then the two animals crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship. (136)

In *WITW* and *Mr. Bliss*, the sacred is not found in the deeper wilds (this is not true of *LotR*), but rather on small river islands, or poking its head out of holes in the front yard, or (as with Bombadil and *The River*) in picnicking on lazy-day boating trips. To picnic, which in these works may be read, to Pray or to meditate, is best done not in innocent and untrammelled wilderness, but rather in a place of compromise between nature and comfort, in *WITW*, one picnics along the riverbank; the big picnic in *Mr. Bliss* is in the Dorkinses' spacious but enclosed garden. These works are ultimately champions not of Nature, but of the Rural, the cultivated countryside of distant but friendly neighbors and dusty roads.

Not simply anti-Technological, they require a certain level of technology, enough to build manor houses and roads from the primeval forest, and boats and bicycles and carts in which to get around. Driving, in *Mr. Bliss* and *WITW*, can be characterized as shallow, disconcerting, disconnected, part of the Wide World with which Rat wants nothing to do. Yet Technology is not simply demonized, but is rather deplored as an end in itself. For Bliss and Mr. Toad, motor-cars are an end in themselves, choice in their unseemly pursuit of the ecstatic.

Of Motor-cars

"*Caveat emptor*" could be the moral of the fables of Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad. Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad acquire their cars on impulse. According to the dust jacket copy on a recent edition, Mr. Bliss makes "the whimsical decision to buy a car," a moment of high camp to anyone who has bought their own. The chapter by chapter alternation between the adventures of Mole and the adventures of Mr. Toad in *WITW* establish Toad as an exaggerated, comic

counterpoint to Mole, Both are Romantic seekers of the ecstatic, but where Mole errs on the side of the Wild Wood, wandering in too deep, Toad errs on the other side, toward the fleeting and insubstantial, toward driving. "Poop, poop!" Toad says in a comic exclamation of glassy-eyed joy when he first sees a motorcar. In an excess of driving-lust, Toad even steals a car although he has plenty of money. Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad do not think about what they are getting into, nor do they make an adequate assessment of their driving skills. One hope of redemption for the rest of us drivers is that we can easily be more proficient than Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad, who are exceptionally bad drivers.

Mr. Bliss has three car crashes: first, he crashes into Mr. Day and upsets his cabbages; then he upsets Mrs. Knight and her bananas; finally he smacks into a wall and everyone in his car is thrown over the wall and into the Dorkins' family picnic (reinforcing once again that picnicking is the opposite of driving.) Mr. Bliss's car must then be towed homeward by three ponies and a donkey, And this is after only his first drive!

Mr. Toad crashed at least eight cars, the final two someone else's. Mr. Toad's coach-house is, according to Rat, "literally piled up to the roof... with fragments of motor-cars none of them bigger than your hat" (68; ch. 4). For stealing a car, he winds up in a dungeon, a dejected toad.

Mr. Bliss's and Mr. Toad's lack of foresight and poor driving skills are clear enough even before they own cars. Mr. Bliss's bicycle has no pedals and he rides it only downhill. In our first encounter with Mr. Toad, he rows his boat too fast and overturns it. Driving motor-cars magnifies the tragic, or rather, comic flaws of Mr. Toad and Mr. Bliss. Toad never drives a car but he drives it fast, as fast as he can go until he crashes. His arrogance is inflated, and sometimes even sinister:

He increased his pace, and as the car devoured the street and leapt forth on the high road through the open country, he was only conscious that he was Toad once more, Toad at his best and highest, Toad the terror, the traffic-queller, the Lord of the lone trail, before whom all must give way or be smitten into nothingness and everlasting night. (121; ch. 6)

When driving, Mr. Bliss seems ever more lost in his repressed obliviousness. A crash around one corner does not make him more careful going around the next. An undercurrent of the sinister can even be glimpsed in the greedy and opportunistic actions of the Bears. They attempt to intimidate Mr. Bliss into giving them his car after he drives into their forest. (They also demand his passenger's goods.) When Mr. Bliss refuses to give up his car (and Mr. Day his cabbages, and Mrs. Knight her bananas), the Bears cry out:

"Then we shall eat you all up -- one each! said the [three] bears,... they rolled their yellow eyes, and growled, and looked so fierce that Mr. Bliss was frightened (and so was Mr. Day and Mrs. Knight). (14)

The narrator assures us they were only teasing, but Mr. and Mrs. Knight do give the bears their cabbages and bananas. In *WITW* and *Mr. Bliss*, motor-cars breed a sometimes violent and unseemly lust.

For the sin of driving, Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad lose control of their homes, a representation of their own personal loss of control. Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad both own large houses. Toad owns stately Toad Hall, commonly called the "best house in these parts." Mr. Bliss has a great house on a hill with "tall rooms, and a very high front door, because Mr. Bliss wore such tall hats" (4). They are both country gentlemen, a man and a toad of property, not exceedingly rich, like the Dorkinses in *Mr. Bliss* but wealthy enough to buy a car on a whim, and their homes are their castles.

Home is, unsurprisingly in these works, deeply connected with food. When Toad is locked away in a dungeon, a piece of buttered toast calls him back home:

The smell of that buttered toast simply talked to Toad, and with no uncertain voice; talked of warm kitchens, of breakfasts and bright frosty mornings, of cozy parlour firesides on winter evenings, when one's rambles were over and slippers feet were propped on the fender; of the purring of contented cats, and the twitter of sleepy canaries. (146; ch. 8)

Home is the balance to Romantic seeking, either picnicking, as is proper, or driving, which is unseemly. It is respite and renewal. In the chapter, "Dulce Domum," Mole returned to his home after living awhile with Rat on the riverbank and learned the:

special value of some anchorage in one's existence. He did not at all want to abandon the new life and its splendid spaces, to turn his back on sun and air and all they offered him and creep home and stay there; the upper world was all too strong, it called to him still, even down there, and he knew he must return to the larger stage. But it was good to think he had this to come back to, this place which was all his own.... (103)

"I am Blessed!" remarks Mr. Bliss when, after running all night, he spots his home on the hillside in the distance.

The return home is a common motif in fantastic literature, perhaps a necessary balance to the estrangement of the fantastic, the presence of what Tolkien called *Faerie*, the other world *The Hobbit* is sub-titled "There and Back Again," and the last line of *LotR* is Sam's greeting to his wife: "Well, I'm back." Mole's homecoming is enacted easily enough, a tribute to his more dignified pursuit of the ecstatic. For Mr. Toad and Mr. Bliss there is a "Scouring of the Shire" to face. As a direct result of their misadventures in motor-cars, they are required to fight for their lost homes.

Mr. Bliss and Mr. Toad are comic Odysseuses, home from their Great Wanderings to find their homes over-run. Penelope's suitors are played by, respectively, the stoats and weasels in *WITW* and the Girabbit in *Mr. Bliss*. The stoats and weasels jump on the opportunity of Mr. Toad's

incarceration to steal into his home in great numbers, set up guards against Toad's friends and eat up his larder during big and unruly celebrations. The Girabbit begins to literally eat Mr. Bliss out of house and home, breaking into the dining room and eating "its way through the ceiling into the best bedroom and through the next ceiling into the attic, and up the attic chimney" (39) until its head, eating a piece of the rug, stuck out the top of the house like a flag.

Toad's friends, Badger, Rat and Mole, aid him in routing the stoats and weasels, while the Bears, of all creatures, scare the Girabbit out of Mr. Bliss's house for a small fee.

Mr. Bliss and *The Wind in the Willows* end happily with banquets, friends and lavish eating. Mr. Toad, one is assured, "was indeed an altered Toad!" (257; ch. 12), although one doubts it. And as for Mr. Bliss, "Old Bliss has got the best of it after all!" (47) the Bears remark. For the moment each is contented doing what Tolkien and Grahame endorsed as one of life's great deeds: eating, and eating well among friends. And each, at least for the moment (for who can tell with Toad), has given up the horrid and spiritually jejune habit of driving.

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Notes to

"The Gift of Death"

continued from page 18

16. Since the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen so nicely illustrated Tolkien's attitude towards Death and mortality, Tolkien called it the most important part of the Appendices, and regretted that it could not be part of the main narrative. See *Letters*, N°181, et al.
17. *Silm.*, p.42.
18. *Ibid.*, p.264.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 265.
20. *Ibid.*, p.266.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
22. *Letters*, N° 246.
23. *Ibid.*, N° 154.
24. *Silm.*, p. 42.
25. It may be interesting to compare here the attitude toward death given by the Stoics. They held too that one has an appointed purpose on the earth, but that when it was clear their time had run, they should accept death willingly, committing suicide if necessary, rather than to "refuse to yield, until life was reft from them" as did the later kings of Númenor.
26. N° 211. See also N° 186, and N° 208, where he expresses similar sentiments.