Forest Ecology and Fantasy Fiction:

Forests and the Fantastic Imagination in a Time of Ecological Crises

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores how forests are represented in the fantasy fiction of William Morris (1834-1896), J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), and Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018). Rooted in real social, cultural, and environmental contexts, fantasy forests are also spaces to reimagine our present relationship with forests in a time of ecological crises. As complex ecosystems composed of real and imaginary beings, fantasy forests challenge us to perceive real forests in new ways and, in the process, complement and enrich our scientific understanding of forest ecology. Given its popularity, fantasy has real potential to engage wider society in forest environments in a context of global deforestation, mass extinction, and climate crisis.

A unique combination of literary analysis and qualitative social science methods were employed in a series of immersive "reading walks" and interactive workshops I designed and delivered in an area of ancient woodland, Ruskin Land, in the Wyre Forest. These workshops aimed to test how these fantasy texts may be used as an innovative form of environmental engagement. Participant responses, discussed in the final chapter, reveal a range of cognitive, emotional, and ethical effects were stimulated when reading fantasy forests within and in relation to a real forest ecosystem.

Acknowledgements

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Above all, I thank my parents, who instilled a lifelong curiosity and passion for the natural world, and finally my wife, for her endless love and support, and for all our walks in the woods together.

Contents

Abbreviations

INTRODUCTION **1**

1. **ESCAPE** **36**
   - **I. Old Forest**: *Uncomfortable Lore* 44
   - **II. Evilshaw**: *The Restorative Forest* 60
   - **III. Athshe**: *Radical Visions* 71
2. **ENCHANTMENT** **86**
   - **IV. The Wood Beyond the World**: *Shimmers of Suggestion* 92
   - **V. Lothlórien**: *Recovering Wonder* 108
   - **VI. The Immanent Grove**: *Itself an Enchantment* 124
3. **EXPERIMENT** **141**
   - **VII. Nowhere**: *The Forest of Future Pasts* 146
   - **VIII. World 4470**: *The Thinking Forest* 169
   - **IX. Fangorn**: *A Useful Fantasy* 184
4. **ENGAGEMENT** **198**
   - **X. Ruskin Land**
     - **i.** *Sensory Enrichment* 212
     - **ii.** *Wonder and Nature Connectedness* 225
     - **iii.** *Wellbeing* 235
     - **iv.** *Memory and Experience* 240
     - **v.** *Creativity* 246

CONCLUSION **263**

Bibliography 270

Appendices 293

Abbreviations

William Morris

The Wood Beyond the World	*Wood*
The Well at the World's End	*Well*
The Water of the Wonderous Isles	*Water*
News from Nowhere	*Nowhere*

J. R. R. Tolkien

The Hobbit	*Hobbit*
The Lord of the Rings	*LotR*
The Silmarillion	*Silm.*
Unfinished Tales	*UT*
'On Fairy-Stories'	'OFS'
The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien	*Letters*

Ursula K. Le Guin

A Wizard of Earthsea	*Wizard*
The Farthest Shore	*Farthest*
Tehanu	*Tehanu*
Tales from Earthsea	*Tales*
The Other Wind	*Other*
The Word for World is Forest	*Word*
'Vaster than Empires and More Slow'	'Empires'

INTRODUCTION

Preamble

> The king was silent. 'Ents!' he said at length. 'Out of the shadows of legend I begin a little to understand the marvel of trees, I think. I have lived to see strange days. Long have we tended our beasts and our fields, built our houses, wrought our tools, or ridden away to help in the wars of Minas Tirith. And that we called the life of Men, the way of the world. We cared little for what lay beyond the borders of our land. Songs we have that tell of these things, but we are forgetting them, teaching them only to children, as a careless custom. And now the songs have come down among us out of strange places, and walk visible under the Sun.[1]

Théoden's epiphany is a critical moment in J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy epic, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55). Upon seeing the Ents, the King of Rohan recognises that the reality he has for so long inhabited has been restricted to the narrow concerns of his kingdom and of the life of humankind – the 'way of the world'. Rohan's stories, songs, and legends of Fangorn Forest, carelessly regarded as fantasies for children, hold a truth that now materialises from under shadowy eaves to 'walk visible under the Sun'. The line is reminiscent of Éomer's earlier question, posed to the wandering Aragorn, 'Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?' (434), to which he replies, 'A man may do both,' musing that the 'green earth' is itself 'a mighty matter of legend' (434). The King sees the mundane merge with the marvellous and the material 'green earth' become the living matter of imagination. It is through Théoden's encounter with the legendary Ents that he begins to 'understand the marvel of trees'. Fangorn, a surviving fragment

[1] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 549-550. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.

of what was once a vast forest, deforested and forgotten through the ages, emerges from the periphery of Rohan's history to become its vital ally in the fight for Middle-earth's future – much as the forests of our own world are in tackling the ecological crises that affect all life on Earth. As the wizard, Gandalf, warns, 'For not only the little life of Men is now endangered' (550).

Reading these passages, we are invited to consider the role of the fantastic imagination in the shaping of our own perceptions and cultural conceptions of trees and forests. Forests have long been a source of fascination and inspiration for artists, mythmakers, and storytellers. Home to the vast majority of terrestrial life, forests vividly embody the fantastic diversity and complexity of this more-than-human world.[2] In a time of climate chaos, ecosystem collapse, and mass extinction, forests are critical in the fight for a more sustainable world. Yet global deforestation and forest degradation continues at an alarming rate.[3] Nothing short of a 'root-and-branch transformation' of our society and culture is now required in order to secure a liveable future for all, and to do this we will need to collectively and radically re-imagine our relationship with forests.[4] We will need stories to guide us, told by those with a profound clarity and depth of vision, whose voices speak to a wide audience with extraordinary power and meaning. We will need writers whose imaginations are rooted in the ecological realities of the green earth, but also

[2] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *State of the World's Forests 2022: Forest Pathways for Green Recovery and Building Inclusive, Resilient and Sustainable Economies* (Rome: FAO, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb9360en>, p. xiii.
[3] 'Since 1990, it is estimated that some 420 million hectares of forest have been lost', *State of the World's Forests 2022*, p. xvi.
[4] Inger Anderson, 'Inadequate progress on climate action makes rapid transformation of societies only option', *United Nations Environment Programme*, 27 October 2022 <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/inadequate-progress-climate-action-makes-rapid-transformation> [accessed 29 October 2022].

offer compelling alternatives to the socio-political “realities” of our age. What we need, as the science fiction and fantasy writer Ursula K. Le Guin declared, are ‘realists of a larger reality’.[5]

This thesis reads forests in fantasy fiction, exploring how William Morris, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Ursula K. Le Guin – three of the most influential writers of the modern fantasy tradition spanning over a century of its development – imagine forests in relation to their respective literary, social, and ecological contexts. But it also reads fantasy in a forest, revealing how these imaginary forests may be read within and in relation to a real forest ecosystem today. Through a series of immersive “reading walks” and interactive workshops, I brought the texts out into the shimmering, mottled light of an actual forest. An area of semi-natural woodland, wood pasture, wildflower meadows, and orchards, the site chosen is known as Ruskin Land, situated in the Wyre Forest National Nature Reserve – one of the largest remaining ancient woodlands in Britain. Ruskin Land is so named because it is where the writer, educator, social critic, and proto-environmentalist John Ruskin himself envisioned and sought to enact an alternative way of life within a forest, one hundred and fifty years ago. From the autumn of 2021 to the spring of 2022, I recorded how a group of students responded cognitively, affectively, and creatively to fantasy forests *in situ* along a series of walks through the forest. Over the course of such reading walks, I wanted to see what happened when these fictional forests become reciprocally embedded in a real forest to discover the potential of the fantastic imagination as a creative form of environmental engagement. I suggest that fantasy, having become one of the most popular forms of fiction in

[5] Ursula K. Le Guin, ‘National Book Award Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Acceptance Speech’, *Dreams Must Explain Themselves and Other Essays, 1972-2004: The Selected Non-fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (London: Gollancz, 2018), pp. 383-84 (p. 383).

our time, may have a powerful role to play in germinating a collective and effective engagement with these magical and most vital ecosystems.

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Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894) is considered by some to be, as the fantasy author Lin Carter boldly claimed in the introduction to the 1969 Ballantine edition, 'the first great fantasy novel ever written'.[6] As its title suggests, forests and woodlands are often associated with the otherworldly, set apart from a reality we usually inhabit.[7] It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that writers of fantasy have long been drawn to such places. The eponymous Wood in Morris's novel is a transformative space where the protagonist departs from the known world and ventures into a realm of magic, mystery, and adventure. Yet fantasy's arboreal otherworlds are intimately entwined with the past, present, and future of the woods within our world. Much like the roots of the Immanent Grove, 'the source and centre of magic' in Le Guin's Earthsea books (1968-2001), the roots of fantasy forests are 'connected at root to all forests that ever were, are, or will be'.[8]

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[6] Lin Carter, 'About the Wood Beyond the World and William Morris', *The Wood Beyond the World* (London: Ballantine, 1969), p. ix.

[7] Throughout I use the terms 'woodland' and 'forest' interchangeably. There is no formal, universally accepted distinction between them among the scientists who study them today, though both terms have their own distinct set of cultural associations which have changed over the centuries. This is important to keep in mind when we read Morris, Tolkien, and Le Guin in their respective social and historical contexts. For example, "forest" in medieval England referred to any land preserved by the monarchy for the hunting of game, which included heath, grassland, farmland – even entire villages – as well as woodland, at a time when geographical boundaries between these spaces were less well-defined as they are today. It was through the decline of Crown interest in the eighteenth century, and the establishment of professional forestry in the nineteenth century, that forests gradually became associated specifically with wooded areas. Since the Forestry Commission was set up in 1919, the term "forest" is applied ambiguously in Britain to many very different kinds of wooded spaces, including land given over to conifer plantations to produce timber and designated 'National Forest Parks' used for recreation, as well as ancient deciduous woodlands, often the remnants of medieval Royal Forests. See Charles Watkins, *Trees, Woods, and Forests: A Social and Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), pp. 8-9.

[8] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea* (London: Gollancz, 2018), p. 720. All subsequent references are given parenthetically using the title of the novel or short story included in this omnibus edition.

The earth beneath is fecund with the mulch of ancient folklore, legend, and myth. As Brian Attebery has argued in *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (2014), modern fantasy sustains new growth from the recycling of these earlier forms.[9] Fantasy draws inspiration up through 'taproot texts', or from what Tolkien described as the 'countless foliage of the Tree of Tales, with which the Forest of Days is carpeted'.[10] At the same time, fantasy unfurls fresh leaves to face the present, adapting to a social, political, cultural, and environmental climate perpetually in flux. Fantasy forests have a dynamic ecology in which the real and the unreal are intimately and sometimes subtly interconnected, inviting us to read more closely the real forests around us. In fantasy, we encounter not only an array of richly detailed forest ecosystems, but the enriching diversity of a 'story system' through which we may envision and indeed enact alternative ways of valuing and living with forests.[11]

Forests are sometimes conceived in cultural imaginaries as being situated over yonder, outside or even antithetical to the realm of predominantly human-built realities. In his historical overview of the way forests are imagined in Western culture, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1994), Robert Pogue Harrison argues that the 'forest remains a margin of exteriority with respect to civilization'.[12] Corrinne J. Saunders's examination of the forest in medieval romance, a

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[9] Brian Attebery, *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[10] John Clute, 'Taproot Texts', *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, edited by John Clute and John Grant (New York: St Martins, 1997), p. 921; J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 56. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.

[11] The term 'story system' is used by Marek Oziewicz in his introduction to *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*, edited by Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery, and Tereza Dědinová (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 1. I understand the term as meaning not just a particular kind of story, but more generally as the discursive network of ideas, values, and narratives through which a culture creates and re-creates itself.

[12] Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 201.

wellspring of inspiration for modern fantasy, demonstrates a more nuanced understanding of 'the literary history of the forest, and the intellectual and historical traditions associated with it,' which she argues 'illustrate its complexities and ambiguities, revealing it as a landscape at once attached to and separate from medieval reality'.[13] As renowned woodland historian Oliver Rackham states, communities living during this period relied upon forests for almost every aspect of social life.[14] Harrison claims that 'To be human means to be always and already outside of the forest's inclusion, so to speak, insofar as the forest remains an index of our exclusion'.[15] Problematically, this notion generalises a sense of estrangement from forest environments within the Western imagination, then extrapolates it to be a universal and inevitable part of the human condition, overlooking the many cultures around the world that have long coexisted with and within forests. The power of Morris, Tolkien, and Le Guin's fiction is that it reminds us not only of the histories and continuations of destructive relationships with forests, but that there are other ways of being and living in the world, showing us cultures with a more sustainable relationship with forests than our own. Indeed, we can learn a great deal from the Athsheans, an alternate species of forest-dwelling humans in Le Guin's novella for, in their language, as its title tells us, *The Word for World is Forest* (1972).

The fantasy novel emerged when forests had become distant from the spaces and disconnected from the rhythms of everyday life in Britain, following a trajectory of rural depopulation as a result of the continuation of parliamentary Enclosure Acts and the rapid growth

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[13] Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), p. xiii.

[14] Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape: The Complete History of Britain's Trees, Woods, and Hedgerows* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), pp. 59-70.

[15] Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization,* p. 201.

of industrial cities throughout the long nineteenth century. However, as Anna Burton points out in *Trees in Nineteenth-Century English Fiction: The Silvicultural Novel* (2021), 'With a growing urban populace, paradoxically, came a need for the preservation and creation of woodland,' a period in which knowledge about and appreciation of trees and forests proliferated, as did deepening concerns about 'deforestation and environmental pollution'.[16] It is within this context that we can place writers like Morris, turning to the fantasy forest not to escape from but to respond meaningfully to contemporary societal and environmental trends. And Morris is a vital starting point for thinking about the fantasy forest today because many of these trends – urbanisation, deforestation, over-consumption, pollution, the rise of the fossil fuel economy – precipitated the global ecological crises of the twenty-first century.[17]

In recent decades, the deforestation and devastation we have inflicted on our forests has escalated to an almost unimaginable pace and scale, intensifying the catastrophic loss of biodiversity and the climate emergency. We know that forests are critical in combatting these inextricably connected ecological crises. They contain more than half of the world's carbon stock in their soil and vegetation by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, whilst producing

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[16] Anna Burton, *Trees in Nineteenth-Century English Fiction: The Silvicultural Novel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), p. 13.

[17] For studies of responses to environmental changes in the Victorian period, see Michael Wheeler (ed.), *Ruskin and Environment: The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Barri Gold, *ThermoPoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Heidi C. M. Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014); Allen MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016); Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (eds.), *Victorian Writers and the Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2017); Wendy Parkins (ed.), *Victorian Sustainability in Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018); Dewey W. Hall, *Victorian Ecocriticism: The Politics of Place and Early Environmental Justice* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017); Wendy Parkins and Peter Adkins, 'Introduction: Victorian Ecology and the Anthropocene', *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 26 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.818>.

and maintaining the oxygen necessary for life on earth.[18] All of us rely upon the wider plethora of resources and benefits forests provide, including offering shade in increasingly hotter summers, preventing soil erosion in ever-more frequent floods, filtering our polluted air and waterways, and improving community health and wellbeing at a time of a widespread and worsening mental health crisis.[19] Meanwhile, billions of the world's poorest – those most at risk from and least responsible for ecological crises, often living in areas where deforestation is most concentrated – are highly dependent on forests for fuel, food, and livelihoods.[20] The broad use of the term 'forest ecology' in my title and throughout this thesis reflects this deep imbrication of social, political, and cultural dimensions within forest ecosystems and vice versa. Forests play a vital role in our societies and economies, fulfilling the material needs and ecological functions necessary for human survival. They are also, not coincidentally, places of profound spiritual and cultural significance to people around the world. In ways that are far too complex to be understood merely through the arid conceptual frameworks used by policymakers as 'cultural ecosystem services', forests are sources of meaning-making and storytelling – of creativity, wonder, and joy which ultimately make life liveable.[21]

In his essay critiquing the political economy of industrial capitalism and its effects on the natural environment, *Unto this Last* (1860), Ruskin wrote that 'there is no wealth but life', contrasting a living and life-affirming wealth with the defining 'illth' of nineteenth-century

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[18] FAO, *State of the World's Forests 2022*, p. xiii.
[19] FAO, *State of the World's Forests 2022*, p. xiii, p. 31, p. 15, p. 8, p. 10; Kjell Nilsson, et al. (eds.), *Forests, Trees and Human Health* (New York: Springer, 2011).
[20] FAO, *State of the World's Forests 2022*, pp. 22-23.
[21] Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Ecosystem Services & Biodiversity (ESB): Cultural Services*, <https://www.fao.org/ecosystem-services-biodiversity/background/cultural-services/en/> [accessed 11 April 2023].

Britain – pollution, poverty, and ill-health that went along with the monetary "wealth" of industrialisation.[22] Today, the disastrous exploitation of forests for short-lived and vastly inequitable profit imperils not only the global economy in the longer-term, but the health of our biosphere and the prospect of a liveable future.[23] The pursuit of limitless economic growth at the expense of life on earth is the supreme fantasy of our age. What we require is a radical transformation from what Marek Oziewicz in *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene* (2022) calls the 'fantasy *of* the Anthropocene' to a 'fantasy *for* the Anthropocene' – that is, from stories of human mastery over the natural world or paralysing despair about our deep-time ecocide, to stories which give us the imaginative tools to 'transition to an ecological civilization'.[24] As expert worldbuilders and compelling storytellers, fantasy writers have long engaged readers with wider, ecological realities. Fantasy shows us visions of alternative worlds which encourage us to imagine beyond what philosopher Mark Fisher has described as 'capitalist realism' – the entrenched idea that there are no alternative social and political systems to the ones we live within.[25] I argue that the forests of Morris, Tolkien, and Le Guin offer us pathways through these dark and perilous times, enabling us to distinguish between the fantasies and realities of our cultural imagination, and stimulating us to create for ourselves an alternative, more sustainable world.

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[22] John Ruskin, *Unto This Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy*, 12th edition (London: George Allen, 1898), p. 126.
[23] FAO, *State of the World's Forests 2022*, p. vi.
[24] Marek Oziewicz, 'Fantasy for the Anthropocene: On the Ecocidal Unconscious, Plantarianism, and Imagination of Biocentric Futures', *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*, edited by Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery, and Tereza Dědinová (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 58-69 (p. 64).
[25] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley, Zero Books, 2009).

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Morris, like his intellectual mentor, John Ruskin, was a social critic as well as an artist and writer. In both his fiction and his political activism, Morris recognised that the environmental destruction and social inequalities wrought by industrial capitalism were complexly intertwined. In his later years, Morris became engaged in 'Saving the People's Forest' of Epping as well as commoners' rights to use the forest which were threatened first by aristocratic developers and then by the Corporation of London's mismanagement of the forest.[26] This was a forest he knew well from his childhood, when he would wander 'the depths of Epping Forest like a small-scale version of one of his own heroes', and revisited in later life, advocating for the protection of this 'strange, unexampled, and most romantic wood'.[27] His experiences were to shape the vision of his utopian romance, *News from Nowhere* (1890), in which London is transformed into a communitarian sustainable urban forest in the year 2090. In his later epic fantasy, *The Well at the World's End* (1896), similarly set in a pseudo-medieval landscape, vast trackless forests are sites of romance and adventure reminiscent of the Arthurian legends which fascinated him as a child. But they are also sites of rebellion in the geopolitical war between a tyrannical ruling-class and exploited commoners, narrativizing both historical and present class struggles. Scholars have argued that the ways in which Morris saw the exploitation of human society and the more-than-human world as interconnected anticipated trends in political thought such as ecosocialism in the late-twentieth

[26] Mark Gorman, *Saving the People's Forest: Open Spaces, Enclosure and Popular Protest in Mid-Victorian London* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2021).
[27] Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 14; William Morris, Letter to the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle* (8th May 1895), in John Bellamy Foster, 'William Morris's Letters on Epping Forest: An Introduction', *Organization & Environment* 11.1 (1998), 92-97 (p. 96).

century.[28] At a time in which ecological issues are still being approached as techno-scientific problems requiring mainly techno-scientific solutions, Morris offers a perceptive contribution to environmental discourse today around issues of historic and ongoing forms of environmental (in)justice.

Morris embedded his radical politics into the form of the fantasy novel with an expressly ecological ethics. Phillippa Bennett describes these ethically embedded imaginary worlds as 'wonderlands', in which characters channel a profound appreciation of and respect for the natural environment to emphasise its essential value to human life and wellbeing.[29] In many ways, as Amanda Hodgson argued, Morris's fantasy novels were aesthetic anomalies in the late-nineteenth century, when 'realism had become the established dominant mode of prose fiction'.[30] In *Against the Age* (1980)**,** Peter Faulkner argues Morris's turn to a non-realist mode anticipates the successful rise of fantasy in the twentieth century – especially following the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*.[31] At the same time, Morris was very much a part of the radical aesthetic movement of his day.[32] The sensuously rich and naturalistic topographies of Morris's fantasy worlds indicate the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, championed by Ruskin, who emerged from

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[28] Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England, 1880-1914* (London: Quartet, 1982); Peter C. Gould, *Early Green Politics: Back to Nature, Back to the Land, and Socialism in Britain, 1880-1900* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1989); Florence S. Boos, 'An Aesthetic Ecocommunist: Morris the Red and Morris the Green', in W*illiam Morris: Centenary Essays*, edited by Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 21-46; Bradley MacDonald, 'William Morris and the Vision of Ecosocialism', *Contemporary Justice Review* 7 (2004), 287-304; Patrick O 'Sullivan, '"Morris the red, Morris the green" – a partial review', *The Journal of William Morris* 19.3 (2011), 22-39.
[29] Phillippa Bennett, *Wonderlands: The Last Romances of William Morris* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015).
[30] Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 3.
[31] Peter Faulkner, *Against the Age: An Introduction to William Morris* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 175.
[32] Christine Bolus-Reichert, 'Aestheticism in the Late Romances of William Morris', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 50.1 (2007), 73-95.

a wider cultural cross-fertilisation between scientific discourse and the literary imagination during this period.[33] Morris's 'semi-scientific' aestheticism, functioning 'to sharpen our dulled senses' may enable readers, as John Holmes states in his reading of *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), to 'test how far it conforms to or departs from their own perceptions' – a theory corroborated by participant responses during the reading walks, which I discuss in Chapter Four.[34] The ways in which Morris integrated mythic narratives of magic and heroism into vividly depicted landscapes came to define the fantasy forests of Tolkien and Le Guin. Yet, there has been a history of critical neglect and even derision directed towards Morris's final works: *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Well at the World's End*, and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897).[35] Building on the literary scholarship celebrating the socio-ecological ethics in Morris's *News from Nowhere* and *The Earthly Paradise*, I argue that Morris's vision of a more sustainable relationship with the natural world can be found in his final works of fiction.[36] Returning to the forests Morris imagined in these pioneering fantasy novels enables us to understand how they came to influence the modern fantasy tradition.[37] Moreover, Morris's ideas about humanity's vital interdependency

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[33] Lynn Merrill, *The Romance of Victorian Natural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Fairy-Tales, Natural History and Victorian Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); John Holmes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

[34] Holmes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science*, p. 198.

[35] See, for example, J. R. Ebbatson's 'Visions of Wild England: William Morris and Richard Jefferies', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 3.3 (1977), 12-29 (p. 14).

[36] Clive Wilmer, 'Introduction to William Morris', *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, edited by Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. ix-xli; John Holmes, 'Sustaining the Earthly Paradise', *Victorian Sustainability in Literature and Culture*, edited by Wendy Parkins (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 32-50.

[37] The term 'fantasy novel' is not an oxymoron. Contrary to definitions of the novel as a specifically realist work of fiction, I use the term in its broadest possible sense to mean any long prose fiction. While some literary scholars may find it more helpful to be specific in how this term is applied, particularly when referring to the kind of fiction which first took shape in the eighteenth century in contrast to the romance form, defining the novel too narrowly in this context belies the entwinement of realist and non-realist modes in fantasy – or, indeed, in any work of fiction.

with the natural world become revitalised when we think about them reflexively in our own time of ecological crises.

In his youth, Tolkien ‘fell under the spell’ of Morris’s wooded otherworlds.[38] Evidence suggests he had read Morris’s romances, *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), *The House of Wolfings* (1889) and his earlier works, *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) and *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876), but whether Tolkien had read Morris’s fantasy novels is less clear.[39] Nevertheless, Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull point out that Tolkien’s drawing of ‘The Wood at the World’s End’, ‘an evident precursor to the book jacket of *The Hobbit*’, amalgamates of the titles of *The Wood Beyond the World* and *The Well at the World’s End*.[40] They also argue that Morris’s influence can be found in the Arts and Crafts style of Tolkien’s illustrations of the ‘Tree of Amalion’ – a visual depiction of the Tree of Tales.[41] Mirkwood, the forest that first appears in *The Hobbit* (1937), is described as ‘the great forest of the Northern world’.[42] Lin Carter noted as early as 1969 that the etymological root of Mirkwood can be found in the myths and legends of Northern Europe. Tolkien may have come

[38] Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), p. 29. For an excellent examination of Morris’s influence on Tolkien, see Kelvin Lee Massey, ‘The Roots of Middle-earth: William Morris’s Influence upon J. R. R. Tolkien’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Tennessee, 2007), <https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/238> [accessed 3 May 2023].
[39] Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R Tolkien: A Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 2016), pp. 99-100; J. R. R. Tolkien, Letter 1 (‘To Edith Bratt’, *c*. October 1914) and Letter 226 (‘From a letter to Professor L. W. Foster’, 31 December 1960), in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter (London: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 7, p. 303. All subsequent references to Tolkien’s *Letters* are given parenthetically using to the page number it appears in the collection, not the number ascribed to individual letters – e.g. (*Letters* 7) refers to Letter 1 on p. 7 in the collection.
[40] Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Artist & Illustrator* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), pp. 63-4.
[41] Hammond and Scull, *Artist and Illustrator*, pp. 9-10.
[42] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 134. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.

across the name itself in Morris's *Wolfings*, translated from the Old Norse *Myrkvidr.*[43] Tolkien connected the 'intricately knotty and ramified history of the branches of the Tree of Tales' to the 'tangled skein of Language'.[44] It is perhaps no coincidence that the entanglement of philology, translation, and storytelling in Morris's life also defined the creative processes through which Tolkien's expansive imaginary universe came into being.

In his genre-defining lecture of 1939, 'On Fairy-Stories', Tolkien asks:

> Who can design a new leaf [for the Tree of Tales]? The patterns from bud to unfolding, and the colours from spring to autumn were all discovered by men long ago. But that is not true. The seed of the tree can be replanted in almost any soil, even in one so smoke-ridden (as [Andrew] Lang said) as that of England. […] Each leaf, of oak and ash and thorn, is a unique embodiment of the pattern, and for some eye this very year may be the embodiment, the first ever seen and recognised, though oaks have put forth leaves for countless generations. ('OFS' 57)

Morris demonstrated that fresh leaves could indeed bud from the Tree of Tales even in the 'smoke-ridden' climate of the nineteenth century, reviving the stories of the past in new ways. In Tolkien's 'Leaf by Niggle' (1945), the creative process is fictionalised in the tale of an artist who, like Tolkien, becomes utterly absorbed in manifesting a vision of another world in all its sprawling intricacy:

> It had begun with a leaf caught in the wind, and it became a tree; and the tree grew, sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out the most fantastic roots. Strange birds came and settled on the twigs and had to be attended to. Then all round the Tree, and behind it, through the gaps in

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[43] Lin Carter, *A Look Behind* The Lord of the Rings (New York: Ballantine, 1969), pp. 169-70.

[44] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 19. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.

> the leaves and boughs, a country began to open out; and there were glimpses of a forest marching over the land, and mountains tipped with snow.[45]

Niggle's elderly neighbour, Parish, is forever in need of Niggle's help, and so the painting remains incomplete and the artist's vision unrealised. Over time, the painting is destroyed save one fragment of the canvas, depicting a single leaf. Towards the end of the story, however, Niggle finds himself walking through the landscape of his painting. The tale ends with Niggle and Parish working together to make the Tree and Forest more beautiful, before Niggle decides to venture deeper into the Forest and beyond. The enigmatic story is, at its heart, a myth of mythopoesis – the subject of the poem posthumously collected alongside 'Leaf by Niggle' and 'On Fairy-Stories' in *Tree and Leaf*. Through a process he called 'sub-creation' ('OFS' 48), Tolkien believed that, by creating fictional worlds, a more expansive vista of reality can be realised through unfurling the creative 'pattern' of the material universe.

The legendary Woods of Oromë in the Undying Lands to the West; the vast forest regions of Beleriand, sunk beneath the waves at the end of the First Age; the numinous realm of Lothlórien, protected sanctuary of Galadriel and the Galadhrim; Drúadan Forest, last refuge of the hounded Drúedain; the spider-infested gloom of Mirkwood, once known as Greenwood the Great before Sauron's corruption; the lush, fragrant woodlands of Ithilien under the shadow of Mordor; the ominous Old Forest on the edge of the Shire, twisted with the memory of past transgressions; the tangled, ancient forest of Fangorn, survivor from centuries of deforestation, whose denizens – the venerable and vengeful Ents – overthrow the wizard Saruman laying waste to their forest home. Emerging during a period in which Britain's forest cover plummeted to its

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[45] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Leaf by Niggle', *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 94.

lowest point in recorded history, Tolkien's legendarium is profusely, diversely, richly forested.[46] His fictional world is also one in which vast swathes of the land are deforested and degraded, whose surviving fragments of forests that we see in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* face existential threats.

Tolkien's self-proclaimed love and passion for plants, and trees especially, is palpable in the attentiveness and care with which he describes the physical ecology of his imaginary world.[47] Take, for example, a passage of extraordinary botanical detail in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Frodo and Sam journey through the fragrant forests of Ithilien:

> All about them were small woods of resinous trees, fir and cedar and cypress, and other kinds unknown in the Shire, with wide glades among them; and everywhere there was a wealth of sweet-smelling herbs and shrubs […] fronds pierced moss and mould, larches were green-fingered, small flowers were opening in the turf, birds were singing. Ithilien, the garden of Gondor now desolate kept still a dishevelled dryad loveliness. […] Many great trees grew there, planted long ago, falling into untended age amid a riot of careless descendants; and groves and thickets there were of tamarisk and pungent terebinth, of olive and of bay; and there were junipers and myrtles; and thymes that grew in bushes, or with their woody creeping stems mantled in deep tapestries the hidden stones; sages of many kinds putting forth blue flowers, or red, or pale green; and marjorams and new-sprouting parsleys, and many herbs of forms and scents beyond the garden-lore of Sam. The grots and rocky walls were already starred with saxifrages and stonecrops. Primeroles and anemones were awake in the filbert-brakes; and asphodel and many

[46] *Forest Research*, 'Area of woodland: changes over time', <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/statistics/forestry-statistics/forestry-statistics-2018/woodland-areas-and-planting/woodland-area-2/area-of-woodland-changes-over-time/> [accessed 1 April 2023].

[47] Tolkien stated that 'I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals' (*Letters* 220).

> lily-flowers nodded their half-opened heads in the grass: deep green grass beside the pools, where falling streams halted in cool hollows on their journey down to Anduin. (*LotR* 650)

We follow Sam's eyes (and nose) as he wanders through a profusion of plant life. Species are identified (to the best of Sam's 'garden-lore') but also situated in biological communities and within a wider ecological context. Our vision follows 'fronds' and 'creeping stems' into the minutiae of 'moss and mould' and 'hidden stones', or flows with the waterways of 'pools', 'falling streams' and 'hollows' out into the Anduin – the Great River ribboning across the length of Middle-earth. The ways in which these richly immersive details spill and meander out towards a wider world beyond the eye of the character in this passage is demonstrative of Tolkien's astonishing talent for worldbuilding. The reader is given the impression of depth, as Tom Shippey argues, through references or remnants to bygone ages, such as the resinous trees 'planted long ago' in this neglected 'garden of Gondor', or the defaced monument of an ancient king of Gondor Sam and Frodo later encounter at the crossroads of Ithilien, crowned with yellow stonecrops and a vine of starlike flowers (702).[48] Dimitra Fimi describes landscapes such as these as 'palimpsests of layers of history represented by ruins and material remains.'[49] As well as temporal depth we are given a sense of spatial breadth in glimpses or brief mentions of other lands not visited in the narrative, or maps which only ever show part of a world extending beyond the margins of the page. Botanists, geographers, and ecologists have approached his fictional

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[48] Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 259-261, pp. 351-352. Walter S. Judd and Graham A. Judd suggest that the yellow stonecrop and the unnamed white flower (which they speculate may be 'a morning-glory, *Ipomoea*, of the Convolvulaceae') give a 'subtle reminder of the two trees of Valinor, one silver (Telperion) and the other gold (Laurelin)'. *Flora of Middle-Earth: Plants of J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 282. The vine-like growth of *Ipomoea lacunose*, whose common name is 'whitestar', certainly resembles the description of a 'trailing plant with flowers like small white stars' (*LotR* 702).

[49] Dimitra Fimi, 'Tolkien's Arda', in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 377-85 (p. 381).

world as they would a real landscape, surveying its topography and natural history, cataloguing the plethora of real and imaginary flora and fauna which inhabit it.[50] Botanist Walter Judd and artist Graham Judd state that not only was Tolkien a writer who was clearly 'botanically knowledgeable', 'whose eyes were open to the diversity of the natural world', but one who, through what Tolkien described as fantasy's 'Recovery' ('OFS' 57), 'reconnects us with the plants of our own world' so that we may 'see oaks, beeches, and pines in a fresh light'.[51] Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter Four, fantasy may encourage a greater appreciation of often overlooked features in the physical environment through the defamiliarisation effect. Moreover, through the social and ecological 'eucatastrophe' (Tolkien's term for the unexpectedly joyous turn in a fantasy narrative ('OFS' 68)) of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien communicates the necessity of collective action against the forces of exploitation and destruction, however powerful and insurmountable they seem – an important message of what Jonathan Lear calls 'radical hope' as we spiral deeper into global ecological collapse.[52] The radicalism of this hope lies in the way it persists even when confronted with immense and overwhelming loss and destruction. It is a hope embodied in the floral abundance of Ithilien, thriving in spite of the spreading desolation of Mordor.

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[50] Marcella Juhren, 'The Ecology of Middle-earth', *Mythlore* 2.2(1) (1970), 4-6; Beth Russell, 'Botanical Notes on the Mallorn', *Mallorn* 43 (2005), 20–22; Dinah Hazell, *The Plants of Middle-Earth: Botany and Sub-Creation* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2006); Ina Habermann and Nikolaus Kuhn, 'Sustainable Fictions – Geographical, Literary and Cultural Intersections in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*', *The Cartographic Journal* 48.4 (2011), 263-73; Jane Suzanne Carroll, 'A Topoanalytical Reading of Landscapes in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*', in *J. R. R. Tolkien: The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings*, edited by Peter Hunt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 121-138; Judd and Judd, *Flora of Middle-earth*.

[51] Judd and Judd, *Flora of Middle-earth*, p. 3.

[52] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006).

By the time *The Lord of the Rings* had gained global popularity through the 1960s and ’70s, Tolkien’s imaginary landscapes and environmental vision had become so firmly embedded in cultural discourse that social commentators began to use them as analogies to describe the environmental changes occurring around them. In 1972, at the tail-end of what Oliver Rackham called ‘The Locust Years’ (1950-1975) of British forest history due to the destruction of ancient woodland and the spread of non-native conifer plantations, an article appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* entitled ‘Forestry and Us’. In it, the author describes their experience of walking through these plantations as having a ‘Tolkien gloom, where no bird sings’.[53] Tolkien’s response to the article is recorded as a letter to the editor:

> In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies. Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved; elsewhere forests are represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves. The Old Forest was hostile to two-legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries. Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful, but at the time of the story tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-loving enemy. 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. It would be unfair to compare the Forestry Commission with Sauron because as you observe it is capable of repentance. (*Letters* 419-20)

Tolkien points out that the forests in his fictional world are numerous and diverse – that not all have the ‘gloom’ of Mirkwood, which is ecologically restored to Greenwood the Great. The comparison between Sauron and the Forestry Commission has since found its way into contemporary non-fiction nature writing books, such as *Oak and Ash and Thorn: The Ancient*

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[53] Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, *Chronology* (London: HarperCollins, London), p. 764.

Woods and New Forests of Britain (2017), where Peter Fiennes describes how 'the commission finally turned its Sauron-like gaze on Britain's last isolated remnants of broadleaved woodlands' when it sought to replace ancient forest with conifer plantations.[54] While appropriating Tolkien's fiction as analogy for environmental destruction, Fiennes also argues Tolkien sought escape from these ecological realities by finding 'sanctuary in the world of children's writing [...] it was no doubt easier to slip away into an unsullied world of sun-dappled meadows and to pretend that if something diabolical was happening, it was all happening somewhere else'.[55] As I assert in Chapter One, this lazy reading of Tolkien's fiction reveals a deep misunderstanding of fantasy's relationship with contemporary social, political, and environmental contexts. What Tolkien's letter clearly shows, and what his imaginary forests powerfully convey, is a profound ethic of care towards trees and forests, but also a perceptive awareness of the social and environmental changes affecting forests in his lifetime.

At a time in which Tolkien's fantasy fiction was sporing multitudes of derivative fantasy worlds, Le Guin rose to prominence with innovative, genre-bending fiction. Le Guin's stories, like those of many of her contemporary science fiction authors, are permeated with ecological concepts and concerns popularised by a burgeoning environmentalist movement in the 1960s and '70s.[56] At the same time, Le Guin read and admired Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Rings* was to her

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[54] Peter Fiennes, *Oak and Ash and Thorn: The Ancient Woods and New Forests of Britain* (London: Oneworld, 2018), p. 6.

[55] Fiennes, *Oak and Ash and Thorn*, p. 73.

[56] Peter Nicholls, 'New Wave', *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* [online], edited by John Clute, et al., <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/new_wave> [accessed 28 January 2021]; Patrick D. Murphy, 'Environmentalism', *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, and Adam C. Roberts (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 373-82; Brian Stableford, 'Science Fiction and Ecology', in *A Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by David Seed (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 127-42.

a 'demonstration of the value of fantasy literature'.[57] While Tolkien's narratives convey a sense of loss and lamentation over the destruction of the natural world, Le Guin sees her own fantasy series of Earthsea as serving to 'remind [us] of what we have denied, what we have exiled ourselves from [...] that the human is not the universal'.[58] This was an idea frequently discussed in the workshops, where participants contrasted the space of inner-city Birmingham to a more-than-human world which they could palpably experience in the forest and attend to through fantasy texts. Le Guin defends the 'pre-industrial [...] pre-human and non-human' world of Middle-earth as part of 'fantasy's green country' in contrast to the anthropocentrism characteristic of much realist fiction.[59] The 'green country' of pre-industrial England is reimagined in Morris's and Tolkien's fiction, but Le Guin's experience of forests would have been very different to Morris's and Tolkien's given that she spent her life in California and Oregon, home to the vast redwood forests of the Pacific coast. We might say Le Guin brings the memory of the forests of England and Europe which she inherits from the fantasy tradition together with her own experience and knowledge of American forests. This thesis does not seek to explore how real forests in each of the author's lives might have influenced their fiction, however. To do so would not only be conjectural, but restrictive in approach. While fantasy worlds are undoubtedly 'made out of the Primary World' ('OFS' 59), the unique quality of the fantastic imagination is in its 'making or glimpsing of Other-worlds' (41) beyond the horizon of lived experience.

[57] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists', in *Dreams Must Explain Themselves and Other Essays, 1972-2004* (London: Gollancz, 2018), pp. 309-19 (p. 312).
[58] Le Guin, 'The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists', p. 317.
[59] Le Guin, 'The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists', pp. 316-17.

Le Guin's fiction can be mapped as a constellation of otherworlds which offer ways of navigating the social, cultural, political, and ecological complexities of our own planet. Trees and forests flourish throughout Le Guin's *oeuvre,* which branches across science fiction and fantasy genres. Le Guin herself reflected that she had:

> a certain obsession with trees, which, once you notice them, keep cropping up throughout my work. I think I am the most arboreal science fiction writer. It's alright for the rest of you who climbed down, and developed opposable thumbs, and erect posture, and all that. There's a few of us still up here swinging.[60]

In *Planet of Exile* (1966), Le Guin immerses us in the alien forest of Askatavar, with giant basuk trees growing across a seasonal cycle equivalent to sixty Earth-years; in *City of Illusions* (1967), we are shown a post-apocalyptic vision of afforestation of Earth. In her short story, 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow' (1971), we encounter the biospheric consciousness of World 4470, a planet whose forests form a neurological network; in 'Direction of the Road' (1974), we listen to the witness statement of a sentient tree, living through centuries of changes to the local landscape. *The Word for World is Forest* tells a tragically familiar tale of a group of forest-dwelling humans whose way of life is threatened by intergalactic capitalists. Across Le Guin's long writing career, the Immanent Grove in her fantasy series, Earthsea, grows to be a forest of deep and lasting significance in the fantasy genre. At the same time, to focus only on her Earthsea books would be a disservice to the breadth and dynamism of the way Le Guin imagined forests throughout her corpus. Considering Earthsea, as well as the fantasy fiction of Morris and Tolkien, alongside her more overtly science fictional texts such as *The Word for World is Forest* and 'Vaster than

[60] Foreword to 'The Word of Unbinding', *The Books of Earthsea* (London: Gollancz, 2018), p. 923.

Empires and More Slow', allows us to see more clearly the interconnections between the fantastic imagination and scientific discourse of ecology both within and beyond what is traditionally deemed "fantasy".

The patterning of the arborescent motifs of Leaf, Tree, and Forest in Tolkien's creative process may be likened to the arcane art of Patterning that is practiced in the Immanent Grove – the ancient forest embodying the ecological magic of Le Guin's imaginary archipelago of Earthsea. Evoking the boundlessness of the fantastic imagination, we are told the Grove stretches 'As far as the mind goes' (*Tales* 601). Much like Tolkien, Le Guin turns to arborescent motifs to express the magical art of the fantastic imagination. 'We all have forests in our minds', Le Guin writes in the introduction to 'Vaster than Empires', 'Forests unexplored, unending. Each of us gets lost in the forest, every night, alone'.[61] In *The Word for World is Forest*, this is conceived alternatively as the art of Dreaming, through which the Athsheans explore a visionary forested landscape invested with deep significance and meaning, embedded within the physical world around them. 'Dream' in the language of the Athsheans is 'root', the underlying essence of physical realty.[62] Words can only go so far in Earthsea, even with the magical language of True Speech, whose name is the thing itself. In the Grove, even the wisest wizard's 'words are nothing', here we must 'Hear the leaves' (*Tales* 721). Though most wizards in Earthsea do not understand it, the art of Patterning ultimately relies upon immersing oneself attentively in the physical reality of the natural world. The intensely detailed and immersive quality to the fantasy

[61] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow', *The Wind's Twelve Quarters and the Compass Ros*e (London: Gollancz, 2015), p. 167. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.
[62] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Word for World is Forest* (London: Gollancz, 2015), p. 80. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.

forests described by Morris, Tolkien, and Le Guin embody this art of Patterning. The magical power of the fantastic imagination lies in the way it allows us to explore forests that exist within the mind, whilst reconnecting us viscerally to the real forests of our world.

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My research draws upon the now flourishing field of ecocriticism. Over the course of this field's intellectual development, scholars have called for an expansion of its hermeneutical range.[63] Early ecocritics focused predominantly upon North American and British romantic poetry and non-fiction nature writing.[64] More recent critics have turned their attention to environmental themes in a broader range of cultural media and forms. Among these we can find exponential growth in studies examining how trees and forests are imagined in a variety of literary forms, genres, and periods.[65] Fantasy is historically and imaginatively linked, root-tip to root-tip, with such literary forests – especially those found in the medieval romance, fairy tale, and Gothic traditions. At the same time, fantasy's forests are extensive, diverse, and distinct, and therefore

[63] Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace (eds.), *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); Ursula K. Heise, 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism', *PMLA* 121.2 (2006), 503-516; Patrick D. Murphy, 'Environmentalism', *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, p. 37.

[64] Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (Oxon: Routledge, 1991); Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Laurence Coupe (ed.), *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2000); James C. McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

[65] Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance* (1993); Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest: The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairytales* (London: Granta, 2012); Elizabeth Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (New York: Palgrave, 2020); Burton, *Trees in Nineteenth-Century English Fiction* (2021); Victoria Bladen, *The Tree of Life and Arboreal Aesthetics in Early Modern Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

demand a critical attention which is alert of the unique qualities and potential of the fantastic imagination in a time of ecological crises.[66]

Increasingly, scholars are becoming aware of the value of fantasy and science fiction in the ecological imagination.[67] Chris Baratta states that science fiction and fantasy have been 'beneficiaries in the emergence of ecocriticism' and claims the genres have been fulfilling the aims of ecocriticism 'for almost a century' – something Brian Stableford notes rather more resentfully, arguing ecocriticism has been actively dismissive of literature beyond 'naturalistic fiction'.[68] In an anthology of essays that seek to rectify this oversight, *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene*, Marek Oziewicz argues that 'none of the major works (of environmental humanities) to date have considered fantasy and myth as productive spaces' for ecological concerns.[69] In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), novelist Amitav Ghosh bemoans the failure of contemporary realism to respond meaningfully to ecological crises. Instead of celebrating non-realist modes such as fantasy and science fiction for their history of engagement with questions of ecology, however, Ghosh argues these are distinct

[66] Weronika Łaszkiewicz provides an excellent primer for thinking about trees and forests across a range of contemporary fantasy fiction in 'Into the Wild Woods: On the Significance of Trees and Forests in Fantasy Fiction', *Mythlore* 36.1 (2017), 39-58.
[67] Don D. Elgin, *The Comedy of the Fantastic: Ecological Perspectives on the Fantasy Novels* (Westport: Greenwood, 1985); Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Murphy, 'Environmentalism', pp. 373-82; Stableford, 'Science Fiction and Ecology', pp. 127–42; Eric Otto, *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012); Chris Baratta (ed.), *Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012); Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson (eds.), *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2014); Chris Brawley, *Nature and The Numinous in Mythopoetic Fantasy Literature* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014); Anthony Lioi, *Nerd Ecology: Defending the Earth with Unpopular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).
[68] Chris Baratta, 'Introduction', *Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), pp. 2-3; Stableford, 'Science Fiction and Ecology', p. 140.
[69] Oziewicz, 'Introduction', *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene*, p. 4.

from what he calls ‘serious fiction’.[70] Le Guin herself has long identified that realist fiction has largely failed to engage with more-than-human realities, arguing ‘realistic fiction is drawn towards anthropocentrism, fantasy away from it’.[71]

Examining fantasy’s engagement with forest ecology complicates questions about what constitutes realistic and fantastic modes of representation when it comes to more-than-human realities. While I broadly agree with Le Guin’s statement, it is also important to bear in mind complex and subtle exchange of modes and formal conventions in any text of any literary tradition. For example, Richard Powers’s recent, award-winning novel, *The Overstory* (2019), a work of ‘serious fiction’ which Ghosh celebrates as ‘giving trees a wonderfully vivid fictional life’, ultimately relies upon a fantastic mode of representation to achieve this imaginative leap into more-than-human ontology.[72] *The Overstory* can thus be said to fulfil what Tolkien describes as one of the primary desires of *Faërie*: ‘to hold communion with other living things’ (‘OFS’ 15). Approaching this from the opposite direction, Tolkien also asserts that fantasy ‘does not blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make’ (55).

One of the most valuable critical approaches to definitions of fantasy remains Attebery’s concept of the ‘fuzzy set’, a mathematical term he uses to describe fantasy as a group of texts which share, to a variable extent, common tropes.[73] At the core are texts containing many of these

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[70] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 66.
[71] Le Guin, ‘The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists’, p. 318.
[72] Amitav Ghosh, ‘Life Stories: Books About a Planet in Peril’, *The Guardian*, 4 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/04/books-make-sense-wounded-planet-amitav-ghosh> [accessed 1 April 2023].
[73] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 12.

tropes, while at the blurred periphery are texts which contain only some, or otherwise employ these tropes in equivocal ways. I follow Attebery's open approach to fantasy in my choice of texts, some of which are rarely described as "fantasy" in the traditional sense, such as Morris's utopian romance, *News from Nowhere*, and Le Guin's science-fiction novella *The Word for World is Forest*. Scientists have a multitude of definitions of what a forest is (as many as eight hundred, according to one study), and 'different definitions are required for different purposes and at different scales'.[74] There is no reason why literary scholars ought not approach definitions of fantasy in a similar way. Ultimately, however, this research has been focused less on what fantasy *is*, and more on what fantasy *does.* This is not to say that such questions about genre are unimportant. Rather, I am more interested in pursuing the kind of literary scholarship heralded by the editors of *Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community Survival from Speculative Fiction* (2022) that is engaged in the activist potentialities of imaginative fiction.[75] The text is approached not as a cultural specimen, to be pinned down and taxonomised from a position of detached objectivity, but as an actively evolving and agential entity, intimately involved in the wider socio-ecological systems in which it is written, read, and studied.

This thesis does not offer a comprehensive overview of forests in the fantastic imagination. The sheer number and variety of forests I could have chosen to examine demanded a carefully selective approach. At the same time, as this is the first major study of its kind, I felt it would be valuable to offer through this selection a sense of the wider significance of forests in the

[74] *United Nations Environment Programme*, 'Forest Definitions and Extent', <https://web.archive.org/web/20100726140947/http://www.unep.org/vitalforest/Report/VFG-01-Forest-definition-and-extent.pdf> [accessed 1 April 2023].
[75] Ida Yoshinaga, Sean Guynes, and Gerry Canavan (eds.), *Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community Survival from Speculative Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).

fantasy tradition. This formed the rationale for focusing on Morris, Tolkien, and Le Guin: not just because forests play an important role in their fiction, but because they are writers with far-reaching influence or popularity, situated at key positions both in the history of modern fantasy and, in parallel to this, a history of immense social, cultural, and environmental changes that have occurred since the late-nineteenth century which radically altered our relationships with forests.

My investigation into the forests of fantasy fiction has naturally led me into the literatures of forest ecology and silviculture, plant sciences, and forest history, but also wider fields of the social sciences, such as human geography and psychological studies of the mental and physical health benefits of access to the natural environment. In principle, ecocriticism has always been interdisciplinary. In practice, however, some ecocritics perhaps too comfortably inhabit the familiar niches of their discipline. While this research follows largely conventional approaches to the literary text, sheer curiosity about what a literary text does and can do, combined with an urge to interact in a materially embodied sense with the environments represented in the texts, has led me into a wider ecology of disciplines, including the social sciences. The emergence of 'empirical ecocriticism' has opened an exciting space for a social science-based approach to investigating the efficacy of literary fiction to alter environmental values, attitudes, and behaviours of the reader.[76] This burgeoning field will likely become more productive and widespread with the publication of *Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social*

[76] See Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner, and W. P. Malecki, 'Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Texts and Empirical Methods', in *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 27.2 (2020), 327-336.

Change (2023).[77] I hope my own research will inspire literary scholars to refine the methods I used in Ruskin Land, discussed in Chapter Four, by applying them in different environments, using other forms of literature , with diverse groups of people, to unlock the potential of fiction to engage wider society with the ecological realities of our times.

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Forests are often conceived as spaces out of time, somehow separate or distant from everyday realities of contemporary society. Whether as perilous realms where one is led astray from the wider world, or sanctuaries in which one finds refuge and respite, the forest is – much like fantasy itself – a place we can escape to. Yet escape into the woods can be a powerfully transformative act. As the nature writer, Roger Deakin, expresses, 'To enter a wood is to pass into a different world in which we ourselves are transformed'.[78] In Chapter One, Escape, I scrutinise the idea of fantasy as the literature of escapism in order to reclaim the term from those who dismiss or deride the writing or reading of fantasy as disconnected from the world as it is, was, or ever can be. Rather, I argue that the fantasy forest positions us at a critical distance from the anthropocentric fantasies threatening our world. For the Hobbits at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, entering the wildwood of the Old Forest forces them to reconsider their position within and responsibility towards the world beyond the peaceful but parochial Shire. When the Hobbits confront Old Man Willow, and the history and continuation of deforestation he expresses, they realise that they are inescapably a part of rather than apart from the geopolitics of Middle-earth. Tolkien turns the tables on his critics, demonstrating that realism itself can be a

[77] Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, et al. (eds.), *Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023).
[78] Roger Deakin, *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. x.

form of quiescence, denying the strange realities of the wider world beyond our doorstep. While escape in the Old Forest is deeply disturbing, in Evilshaw, the forest of Morris's *The Water of the Wondrous Isles,* the forest is a psychologically restorative space of growth and recuperation. Here is where the heroine, Birdalone, gains the emotional resilience and courage to truly escape from a life of enslavement and childhood trauma. The benefits Birdalone derives from her experiences in the wood reveal the psychological aspect of escape in ways that anticipate scientific discoveries into how spending time in natural environments such as forests impact mental health and wellbeing. Finally, I turn to the forests of Athshe in Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*, a fertile place to think about the wider politics of escape. I argue that, rather than avoiding the complexity of political realities, the fantasy forest provides us with compelling critiques of, and vivid alternatives to, the systems of social and ecological exploitation that shape our relationship with forests today.

Fantasy is defined by Enchantment – whether that is the magic within the stories themselves, or through the sense of wonder these stories give readers when immersed within them. In Chapter Two, I consider the psychological and ethical implications of enchantment as it is depicted in fantasy fiction, from the illusionist magic that envelops Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*, to the sensuously embodied, mind-expanding aesthetic and ethical experience of wonder Frodo feels in Lothlórien, to the earthily ecological magic counteracting anthropocentric delusions of power in Le Guin's Immanent Grove of her Earthsea books. In each case, the sense of enchantment derived from the texts themselves becomes associated with the magic depicted within them. For example, in the perplexingly ambigious Wood Beyond the World, Morris intertwines naturalistic descriptions with the symbols and motifs of folklore and Arthurian myth

in ways that make us sympathise with Walter, who finds himself questioning where the line between the real and unreal lies in this magical Wood. Readers are alerted to the potent and potentially dangerous powers of the imagination in shaping our perception of forests, while becoming immersed into the enchanting reality underlying the magical Wood in the novel. Seeking to explore this aspect of enchantment further, I follow Frodo as he is led, blindly at first, into the sylvan realm of Lothlórien. Here I examine the affective, psychological, and ethical aspects of the experience of wonder. Wonder is directed at, and arises out of, an aesthetic and intensely sensuous appreciation of forest environments. Ordinary and often overlooked features of the forest are re-presented to him as wonderfully mysterious things. I compare this with Le Guin's Immanent Grove, embodying the magical ecology of Le Guin's imaginary archipelago. I consider the influence of the disenchantment thesis as a historical narrative which describes the attenuation of wonder with the rise of modern scientific, mechanistic view of the natural world. The neglect of the Immanent Grove and the Old Powers it embodies in her stories, as well as the inevitable dwindling of Lothlórien following the departure of the Elves from Middle-earth, offer tales of disenchantment which nevertheless enchant the reader. In so doing, they affirm the value and continuation of enchantment even in a supposedly disenchanted, environmentally devastated world.

In Chapter Three, Experiment, I propose that one of the vital functions of the fantastic imagination lies in its ability to generate compelling thought experiments in which we can immerse ourselves and test out alternatives to the way we live with forests today. The experimentalism of the fantastic imagination enables constructive worldbuilding from the ruination of world-destroying fantasies. Here I apply the term 'experiment' to describe the way

the scientific accuracy in fantasy worlds encourages readers to test their perception of material reality, as well as the potential for alternative societal structures in a way not dissimilar to the scientific method. It is through exploring fantasy forests that we begin to understand how these stories can complement an interdisciplinary understanding of forests. Moreover, fantasy forests aid us in thinking about how we can live more sustainably with forests in a time of rapid ecological change. This is most clearly demonstrated in Morris's *News from Nowhere* – a vision of London in the late twenty-first century as a sustainable urban forest, rooted in Morris's appreciation and understanding of the medieval world, his personal and political involvement in the protection of Epping Forest and commoners' rights in the late-nineteenth century, and his prevailing desire to reimagine an urban landscape he saw as rapidly antithetical in its contemporary form to both human wellbeing and ecological health. Considering fantasy forests in conversation with changing scientific discourse allows us to think more deeply about the ever-shifting boundary between the real and unreal in both. Reading the vegetal consciousness of World 4470 in Le Guin's 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow' in light of recent scientific research in mycorrhizal networks and "plant intelligence", I examine the relationship between scientific and fantastic imagination in constructing metaphors to understand and explain nonhuman sentience, particularly in relation to the ethics of anthropomorphism. In the process, I demonstrate that the fantastic imagination provides a valuable contribution to scientific discourse by testing the parameters of the possible. This inherent experimentalism is no mere play of the imagination, however, but carries profound implications for how we conceive of a more-than-human ethics of coexistence when creating a more sustainable relationship with forests. Finally, I argue that the coexistence and interaction between real and imaginary phenomena in fantasy forests – a technique which is fundamental to worldbuilding – allows readers to test how far the

forest in the textual world departs from what we ourselves can perceive in real forests around us. In Fangorn, I aim to demonstrate the value of fantasy to the scientific imagination by attempting to understand the biology of the tree-like Ents using various and contradictory species concepts used in taxonomy. Ents may be said to be useful fantasies, in much of the same way as the concept of a species is, because they show the intrinsic dynamism and flux of living beings and the fundamental limitations in any system of classification.

Over these chapters, nine fantasy forests form nine nodes through which these three themes – Escape, Enchantment, and Experiment – are examined. But there is a tenth forest which has played a vital role in shaping the direction and aims of this research. This final forest is the locus of the fourth chapter, Engagement, situated not within a textual world but in our own: Ruskin Land. I analyse the data I collected in the workshops from walking interviews, focus groups, reflective journals, and artwork the participants produced during the workshops. I cluster these responses into five main themes, the first three corroborating ideas running through the first three chapters, the remainder presenting unanticipated and supplementary effects of the reading walks. First, I discuss one of the most significant ways in which the fantasy forests shaped the participants' experience of Ruskin Land. This is through what I call 'sensory enrichment', directing or augmenting their conscious attention towards particular features or aspects of their immediate surroundings, and stimulating greater sensitivity to and appreciation of the forms, textures, colours, sounds, and scents of the forest. I explore their aesthetic, ethical, and affective engagement with the forest in relation to the sense of wonder I examined in Chapter Two and to psychological studies surrounding the concept of Nature Connectedness. Participants stated that the workshops and walks had a profound effect on their sense of wellbeing in ways reminiscent of the discussion in Chapter One about the

link between mental health and experiencing natural environments. Another theme emerging from the data was the way in which the participants' memories of childhood experiences, immersed in either real or fictional forests, came to influence their individual responses to the forest. Finally, I reflect on the participants' reports of increased creativity and creative thinking, and analyse the artworks produced during the workshops in response to the real and imaginary forests.

Though these chapters read in an order in which they were written in, it is important to emphasise that the data which I discuss in the fourth chapter was being gathered as the first three chapters were being written. This allowed the research process to be iterative, reciprocal, and collaborative in ways that I believe to be critical in developing my ideas and arguments. The themes that formed the first three chapters emerged organically from my own close reading of the texts and intellectual engagement with the academic literature in the first year of research. This provided the workshops with a sense of direction as well as connection with each corresponding chapter, structuring the reading walk around key passages I was focusing on at the time, and helping form the semi-structured interviews and focus groups on the themes and ideas in the chapter I was either writing or revising at the time. This also meant that participant responses, and my own experience of the forest site at Ruskin Land, fed back into my literary analysis. Crucially, this research process ensured the data gathered during the workshops was treated not as an afterthought, or a way of reaffirming my own preformed ideas, but as an agential and integral part of the thesis itself.

Through the combination of qualitative data analysis and ecocritical close-reading of the texts, through working closely with an external conservation and education organisation, and through the mutually enriching practice of reading fantasy with a group of readers within the environment reimagined within fiction, this research is itself an experiment in a collaborative,

creative, and ecologically-engaged approach to literary scholarship. I conclude with some final thoughts on the scope and aims of this thesis in the context of ecological crises today and reflect on opportunities for future research using a more diverse range of fiction as a form of environmental engagement.

CHAPTER ONE

ESCAPE

Long ignored or dismissed as “escapist”, fantasy is pejoratively associated with illusion, daydreaming, and delusion, perilously disconnected from the world as it is or could ever be. Such a view overlooks the genre’s long tradition of active resistance to the illusions, dreams, and delusions of limitless economic growth and extractivism of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. I aim to reclaim the term escapism in this context, arguing that what the richly forested worlds of fantasy literature allow readers to escape from is the narrow scope of anthropocentrism. Here readers encounter a larger reality that forests, ecosystems formed through complex entanglements of diverse organisms, embody so vividly. To escape, in this sense, means to have ourselves positioned at a critical distance from immediate or conventional social, cultural, and political contexts, encouraging us to ask meaningful questions about the way we live with forests today.

Fantasy scholars and writers have long used the terms ‘escape’ and ‘escapism’ to (re)define fantasy literature’s relation to the world outside the text. I will map the literary critical terrain of escapism, paying attention to the way the term, positively or negatively defined, is spatially imagined. The internal debates about fantasy’s escapism are inextricable from the ways in which real and fictional spaces, within and beyond the literary text, are appreciated and understood in cultural consciousness. Forests, perhaps more than any other space in the Western literary imagination, crystalise a time and place perceived to be disconnected or withdrawn from modern society and its discontents which form the object of study for the contemporary realist novel, seen

in contrast to non-realist fantasy literature. This thesis does not seek to escape into *The Wood Beyond the World*, but rather into the wider world woods and forests represent. While they may be popularly imagined as places of escape, forests are integral to our past, present, and future. By revealing the significance of forests as a literary space within the fantastic imagination, and the significance of the fantastic imagination in shaping our perception of forests today, I seek to reconnect real and imaginary forests to generate more sustainable ways of living with them.

Setting – the physical geography and temporal situatedness of the imaginary world in which the narrative takes place, seen in relation to the contemporary real world – is at the centre of debates around fantasy's supposed escapism. 'Since the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, at least,' fantasy writer Michael Moorcock states in *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, scorning *The Lord of the Rings*, 'people have been yearning for an ideal rural world they believe to have vanished – yearning for a mythical state of innocence (as Morris did) as heartily as the Israelites yearned for the Garden of Eden.'[1] If a fantasy story is set in a preindustrial, 'green country', as Le Guin describes it, there is often the assumption that the writer is regressing not only into a bygone age, but into a naïvely "green" romantic idealism, retreating from the harsh realities of the modern metropolis and the apparently inevitable historical trajectory of industrial capitalism.[2]

Morris, to follow Moorcock's example, was a revolutionary socialist whose political and creative pursuits challenged the socio-environmental devastation wrought by industrial capitalism. Moorcock's offhand comment merely repeats the charge of escapism long made against him. Norman Talbot comments on how 'That fuzzy, mean-minded label "escapist" has

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[1] Michael Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy* (London: Gollancz, 1987), p. 126.
[2] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists', p. 316.

been especially malign in limiting and misguiding Morris's audience'.[3] To Phillippa Bennett, this is especially true for his late prose romances, which have been neglected or misrepresented by critics as the 'escapist fantasies of an aging man'.[4] For example, when J. R. Ebbatson considers why Morris might turn to this mode of fiction in his final years, he suggests some political, literary, or personal defect: a 'seductive opiate to the machinations of the Socialist League claque', 'an undemanding outlet for his literary creativity', or a 'compensation for his unsatisfactory marriage'.[5] This idea can be detected even among recent fantasy scholars, such as Jamie Williamson, who argues his romances 'served as a kind of respite and means of relaxation to the main thrust of Morris's energies'.[6] Phrases such as these suggest that Morris's final works were a mental distraction (or delusion) rather than a serious intellectual activity – an aimless wander into the woods beyond urban or domestic spaces to avoid the complexity of political or personal life. Morris's biographer Fiona McCarthy points out, however, that 'In Morris's iconography of nature a forest was the place where you both lost yourself and found yourself'.[7] Morris did not imagine wooded worlds so that he could escape from reality. Rather, as Le Guin writes, 'seemingly by a denial or evasion of current reality, fantasists are perhaps trying to assert and explore a larger reality than we now allow ourselves'.[8]

[3] Norman Talbot, 'Introduction', William Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994), pp. v-xxvi (p. viii). Presumably, this audience includes those who would be interested in the imaginative roots of the fantasy genre, as well as those sympathetic to his political ideas.
[4] Bennett, *Wonderlands*, p. 210.
[5] Ebbatson, 'Visions of Wild England', p. 14.
[6] Jamie Williamson, *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), p. 120.
[7] McCarthy, *William Morris*, p. 15.
[8] Le Guin, 'The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists', p. 319.

"Escape" can carry ambivalent and even paradoxical meanings. Simply defined, it means 'to gain one's liberty by flight; to get free from detention or control, or from an oppressive or irksome condition'.[9] Escape is psychophysical: an act of liberation, of being released from physical imprisonment, but also from what William Blake called our 'mind-forg'd manacles'.[10] To escape is to leave your cell and step into the wider world. Yet it also means 'to avoid or retreat from the realities of life'.[11] This evokes an image of turning your back on the world, curling into the dark corner of the cell, even deluding yourself that the cell *is* the world. Tolkien suggested detractors of fairy-tales and fantasy sometimes wilfully confused the first definition, 'the Escape of the Prisoner' (moving from a confined or controlled space into an open or open-ended space) with the second, 'the Flight of the Deserter' (retreating from or forsaking reality) ('OFS' 61). Tolkien sought to affirm the positive aspect of fantasy's Escape in spatial terms, arguing that fantasy engaged with 'the world outside' which 'has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it' ('OFS' 60). Reaffirming C. S. Lewis's argument that in fantasy 'we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it', fantasy scholar Chris Brawley writes that 'what we really escape in this type of literature is the illusion of ordinary life; through mythopoeic fantasy, we rediscover the world around us'.[12]

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[9] 'escape, v. 1. a', *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2023) <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 17 July 2023].
[10] William Blake, 'London', *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), line 8, p. 150.
[11] 'escape, v. 1. d', *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2023) <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 17 July 2023].
[12] C. S. Lewis, 'The Dethronement of Power', in *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien's* The Lord of the Rings, edited by Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 12-16 (p. 16); Brawley, *Nature and the Numinous*, p. 101.

Tolkien was not without his critics, however. Respectively, fantasy scholars Katheryn Hume and Rosemary Jackson argued that fantasy's powerful cognitive effects to reimagine reality made fantasy a sophisticated literary genre or mode, deserving of renewed critical attention. However, rather than undermining the charge of escapism aimed at fantasy, both deflect it towards certain authors – most forcefully, against Tolkien. Inadvertently echoing his defence of fantasy's Escape in 'On Fairy-Stories', Hume recognised 'the literature of vision' in fantasy, inviting readers to experience a new sense of reality' and 'engage our emotions on behalf of this new version of the real'.[13] Further, fantasy has 'the literature of revision' which 'lays out plans for revising reality, for shaping futures'.[14] Yet, Hume dismissively categorises Tolkien's fiction as belonging to 'the literature of illusion' – 'escape literature' because it merely 'enfolds us in comforting illusions'.[15] Similarly, Rosemary Jackson argued that fantasy literature was deeply subversive, but only comes to that conclusion by oddly defining fantasy narrowly enough to exclude Tolkien, who is not 'purely "fantastic"' because he apparently only represses or retreats from reality.[16]

In contrast, Moorcock implies that there is a type of escapism that is at the same time subversive or revisionary, challenging us to confront reality in the act of withdrawing from it: 'fiction should offer us escape and force us, at least, to ask questions; it should provide a release from anxiety but give us some insight into the causes of anxiety'.[17] In the same essay, however, much like Jackson and Hume, Moorcock fails to recognise the subversive side of escape in

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[13] Katheryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 55, p. 56.
[14] Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis,* p. 56.
[15] Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, p. 55
[16] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 4, p. 9.
[17] Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, p. 138.

Tolkien's fiction. Much like Hume's strange contention that Tolkien's fiction 'offer us roses without thorns and pleasures without payment', Moorcock argues that Tolkien's style of fantasy is 'frequently enjoyed not for its tensions but for its lack of tensions. It coddles; it makes friends with you; it tells you comforting lies. It is soft'.[18] Repeating Edmund Wilson's notorious early review of *The Lord of the Rings* as 'juvenile trash', Moorcock describes it as a work of 'infantilism' with an 'infant's eye view of the countryside'.[19]

Having attributed the unfortunate enduring popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* specifically to the 'appeal of the "Greenwood"', Moorcock states that he is impervious to this sylvan enchantment 'probably because as I write I can look from my window over twenty miles of superb countryside to the sea and a sparsely populated coast', that there exists 'seemingly limitless landscapes of great beauty and variety, unspoiled by excessive tourism or the uglier forms of industry'.[20] It is ironic then that for Moorcock, Middle-earth represented a world of naïve sentimentality, out of touch with the contemporary landscape of modern Britain; urbanised but largely unharmed by industrial capitalism in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. The very real ecological devastation that Tolkien witnessed, in which forest cover in the UK reached its lowest point of just 5% at the beginning of the twentieth century, is mythologised as the manifestation of Sauron's war on Middle-earth.[21] The "real" landscape outside Moorcock's

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[18] Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, p. 57; Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, p. 122.

[19] Edmund Wilson, *The Nation*, 14 April 1956, <https://www.jrrvf.com/sda/critiques/The_Nation.html> [accessed 9 July 2021]; Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, p. 125, p. 126.

[20] Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, p. 125, p. 126.

[21] *Forestry Commission*, 'Area of Woodland: Changes Over Time' (Forest Research, 2017), <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/statistics/forestry-statistics/forestry-statistics-2017/woodland-areas-and-planting/woodland-area/area-of-woodland-changes-over-time/> [6 October 2021]. Note that in 1086, forest cover was around 15%, an estimation corroborated by Woodland historian Oliver Rackham in *The History of the Countryside* (London: J. M. Dent, 1986). Ecologist G. F. Peterkin estimated that there was a

window is picturesquely framed in a way that overlooks the fact that the British landscape – like Middle-earth – has been heavily polluted, degraded, and deforested. Although forest cover was improving by 1978, when Moorcock was admiring his view, immediately after the Second World War countless ancient woodlands were irreplaceably cleared for agriculture or felled and replaced with conifer plantations for timber production, with extensive and 'devastating consequences'.[22] Increasing forest cover and improving the way we manage woodlands remains one of the most effective ways to tackle biodiversity decline and cut carbon emissions in the UK; yet, Britain currently has a forest cover of around 13%, with just 2.5% being ancient woodland.[23] Further, a recent report by *The Woodland Trust* states that only 7% of the country's forests are in 'good ecological condition'.[24]

In imperilled times, stories offer comfort and consolation. They also offer a way to imaginatively and collectively engage with the often complex, psychologically challenging realities that face us. To demonstrate this, I begin by venturing into the ominous Old Forest with the Hobbit protagonists at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*. Here the Hobbits encounter a deeply disturbing reality of deforestation which transforms their understanding of the forest and the wider world beyond the Shire. Much like Old Forest, Evilshaw in Morris's *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is rumoured to be a perilous realm. In this story, however, the wood becomes a site of psychological healing, whose restorative effects upon the story's heroine provide an

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period of peak forest cover of 75% between 7000 and 5000 years ago – see *Woodland Conservation and Management,* 2nd edition (London: Chapman & Hall, 1993).

[22] *The Woodland Trust*, 'State of the UK's Woods and Trees 2021' (The Woodland Trust, 2021), <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/49731/state-of-the-uks-woods-and-trees-2021-the-woodland-trust.pdf> [accessed 2 December 2021], pp. 25-26.

[23] *Forestry Commission*, 'Area of Woodland'; *The Woodland Trust*, 'State of the UK's Woods and Trees 2021', p. 12.

[24] *The Woodland Trust*, 'State of the UK's Woods and Trees 2021', p. 12.

imaginative reinforcement of the vital link between forests and mental wellbeing. Finally, the forests of Athshe in Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* demonstrate that, far from being a retreat into an apolitical, ahistorical space disconnected from human society, forests in the fantastic imagination are radical spaces in which forms of socioecological exploitation can be challenged.

I

Old Forest

Uncomfortable Lore

Before they can enter the Old Forest, the Hobbits must pass through the gate in the High Hay – the hedge that separates the colony of Buckland and, by extension, the rest of the Shire, from the forest and all the lands that lie beyond. The High Hay is the boundary between the agricultural land of the Shire and the wild, ancient Old Forest. Unlike the woods depicted on the map, 'A Part of the Shire' (1954), such as Woody End and Bindbole Wood, the Old Forest is isolated and seemingly unvisited – a *terra incognita* to the Hobbits living comfortably in the centre of the map.[25] We can compare the Hobbits to the Rohirrim, who 'cared little for what lay beyond the borders' (*LotR* 550). The Hobbits have fenced themselves in – spatially, temporally, and ontologically – to protect themselves from the outside world. However, hedges mingle the arboreal and agricultural together ambiguously, 'uniting', as Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans argue, the 'agrarian idyll with evocations of liminality'.[26] The High Hay is as much a threshold – psychological and physical – as a boundary, marking a significant narrative transition as the known, everyday countryside gives way to a strange and increasingly fantastic arboreal world. As a permeable 'ecotone' (an area of transition between biological communities or

[25] An earlier version of the map which Christopher Tolkien drew in 1943 includes three woodlands not mentioned in the text or in other maps: '*Grubb Spinney*, *Windwhistle Wood*, *Ham Hall Woods*' – see Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion* (London: HarperCollins, 2014), p. lvi. While the first version of 'A Part of the Shire', drawn in 1938, marks just Old Forest and Woody End. See Christopher Tolkien, *The Return of the Shadow: The History of The Lord of the Rings*, vol. 3 (London: HarperCollins, 2002), frontispiece; pp. 106-7.

[26] Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans, *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), p. 154.

ecosystems, such as between a forest and a field), the hedge 'was not a complete protection. The Forest drew close to the hedge in many places' (99). The counsel of the elf Gildor Inglorian, whom the Hobbits met earlier in Woody End, here resonate with truth: 'it is not your own Shire, […] Others dwelt here before Hobbits were; and others will dwell here again when Hobbits are no more. The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out' (83).[27] Critics, mistaking the Shire for Middle-earth as a whole, disregard Tolkien's epic as simply an escapist nostalgia for a vanished world. 'Nestled into the horizon as they are in their burrows,' environmental philosopher and ecocritic Timothy Morton writes of the Hobbits in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), 'the wider world of global politics is blissfully unavailable to them'.[28] If the Shire at the beginning of the story was the entirety of Middle-earth and remained as such, as a romanticised vision of a prelapsarian Garden of England ecologically uncorrupted by the dark Satanic mills of the industrial revolution, then the criticism of Tolkien as an escapist would not be unfounded. However, we soon learn that, though undoubtedly charming, charismatic, and unexpectedly heroic, Hobbits have 'greed, small-minded parochialism and philistinism', or what Tolkien described in one of his letters as a 'mental myopia' (*Letters* 329) that is far from an idealised characterisation of English rural communities.[29] Indeed, Hobbits are at times quintessential Little Englanders. The Hobbits are reminded by Gildor that the Shire is not Middle-earth but a small part of it, whose past, present, and future is an epic of social and ecological enslavement and its impassioned resistance. Tolkien turns the tables on his critics by

[27] Gildor understands this wider scale of time and space as someone who knew the Shire when it was a realm of the Dúnedain in the kingdom of Arnor. Before that, the North-Western shore of Eriador east of the Shire, known as Lindon, was the only remaining part of Beleriand, a vast expanse of land which was sunk into the sea at the end of the First Age.
[28] Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 97.
[29] Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 38.

exposing that realism itself, and the inflexible boundaries of real and unreal it imposes, can be a form of quiescence and parochialism which deny other ways of perceiving or living in the world. When the Hobbits pass through the threshold of the High Hay and enter the Old Forest, they do not simply forsake the reality they know. Rather, these are the first tentative steps they take towards an expanded vision of a wider world, and a deeper understanding of their place within it.

It is a small but significant detail that the Old Forest is not named a 'Wood' like the woodlands in the Shire but a 'Forest' – a word used by the Norman aristocracy for land designated for royal hunting, which commoners were prohibited to enter. According to Oliver Rackham, a common feature of medieval forests are perimeter hedges, much like the High Hay around the Old Forest.[30] The etymological root of 'forest' is the Latin *foris*, meaning 'outside', delineating areas outside cultivated land, like the Old Forest is to the agricultural Shire. Curiously, then, the Old Forest is both a space 'outside' the orderly farmland of the Shire, and a realm of its own with its own distinct laws. Unlike the Shire woodlands, the Old Forest is out of bounds.[31]

The forest is diverse in both tree species and age, with many appearing to have the bizarre irregularity of form that characterises ancient trees: 'straight or bent, twisted, leaning, squat or slender, smooth or gnarled and branched; and all the stems were green or grey with moss and slimy, shaggy growths' (111). This is corroborated by the 'A Part of the Shire' map [Fig. 1], which clearly shows depictions of trees in the Old Forest as being larger, likely older, than the

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[30] Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, pp. 164-72, p. 63.

[31] Though evidence of woodland management practices of the Hobbits is scarce, beyond hedge-laying and maintaining the High Hay, a wooded area of the Shire the protagonists pass through is described as a 'coppice' (p. 71), indicating an active and sustainable harvesting of wood, presumably for fencing, fuel, or building materials.

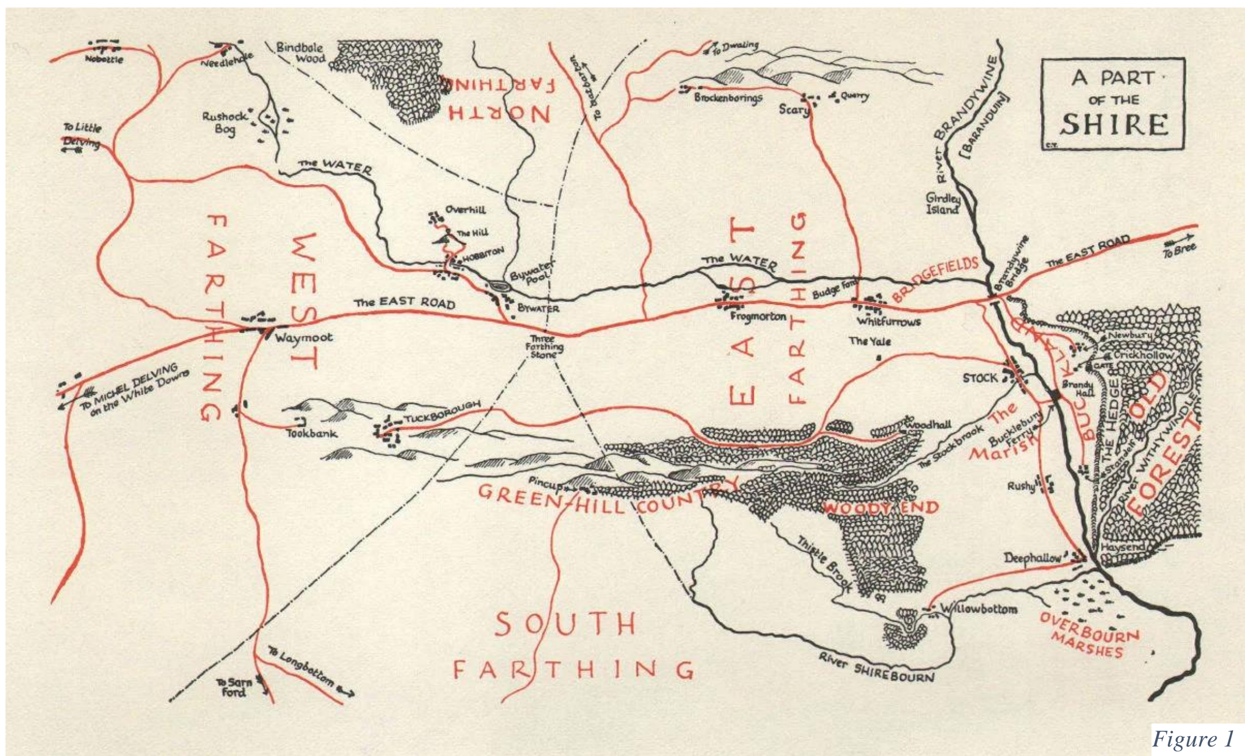

Figure 1

trees of Woody End and Bindbole Wood. The ‘moss and slimy, shaggy growths’, the latter either liverworts or epiphytic lichen such as *Usnea* spp., commonly known as ‘old man’s beard’, are indicators of undisturbed ancient woodland.[32] Lichens are also found in the ancient Fangorn Forest, once continuous with Old Forest, where trees, festooned with ‘weeping, trailing, beards and whiskers of lichen!’ (461), are guarded by the eldest Ent, Treebeard, who is also suitably ‘covered with a sweeping grey beard, bushy, almost twiggy at the roots, thin and mossy at the ends’ (463). The abundance of lichen and moss that ‘drip with moisture’ (111) may also indicate that these forests are temperate rainforests. These are ecosystems that exist on the western seaboard today – much like in the ones lying to the west of Middle-earth in the Third Age – as isolated fragments. In *The Lost Rainforests of Britain* (2022), writer and campaigner, Guy

[32] Alexandra M. Coppins and Brian J. Coppins, ‘Indices of Ecological Continuity for Woodland Epiphytic Lichen Habitats in the British Isles’ (London: British Lichen Society, 2002).

Shrubsole, discusses the influence of Britain's ancient forests on Middle-earth's forests with Tolkien illustrator, Alan Lee, whose paintings of Fangorn and designs of Treebeard for the *Lord of the Rings* film series (2001-2003) were themselves inspired by the lichen-bearded rainforest trees of Dartmoor.[33] Tom Bombadil tells the Hobbits, 'It was not called the Old Forest without reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods' (130). And Elrond later states that 'of the Old Forest many tales have been told: all that now remains is but an outlier of its northern march. Time was when a squirrel could go from tree to tree from what is now the Shire to Dunland west of Isengard' (265). Tolkien seems to be echoing a local folk history of the Forest of Arden, popularised by William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, deforested in the medieval period but once covering much of Warwickshire and what is now Birmingham.[34]

As Rackham argues, however, it is important not to 'confuse the history of woodland with the history of woodland *folk* or the history of what people have *said* about woodland'.[35] Rackham refutes what he calls the 'pseudo-history' of British woodlands filtered into cultural consciousness, which is that until relatively recently Britain was covered in a continuously dense, ancient forest.[36] A recent study of the evolution of forest cover in Europe over the past 12,000 years does suggest that during the first half of the Holocene period, particularly between 8,500

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[33] Guy Shrubsole, *The Lost Rainforests of Britain* (London: William Collins, 2022), pp. 153-57.
[34] 'Once so great, it was said, that a squirrel could travel the entire length of the county without once needing to touch the ground, Arden in Shakespeare's day was only a shadow of its former self'. Ann Barton, *The Shakespearean Forest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 8. The area includes the extant Moseley Bog, alleged (without substantial evidence) to be one of the inspirations for the Old Forest.
[35] Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, p. 23. Curiously, Rackham prefaces this discussion with a quotation from C. S. Lewis's fantasy adventure, *Prince Caspian* (1951) to illustrate that the real history of woodland is far more interesting than the oft-repeated factoids of pseudo-history: 'The sort of "History" that was taught in Narnia under Miraz's rule was duller than the truest history you ever read and less true than the most exciting adventure story' (p. 23).
[36] Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, p. 23.

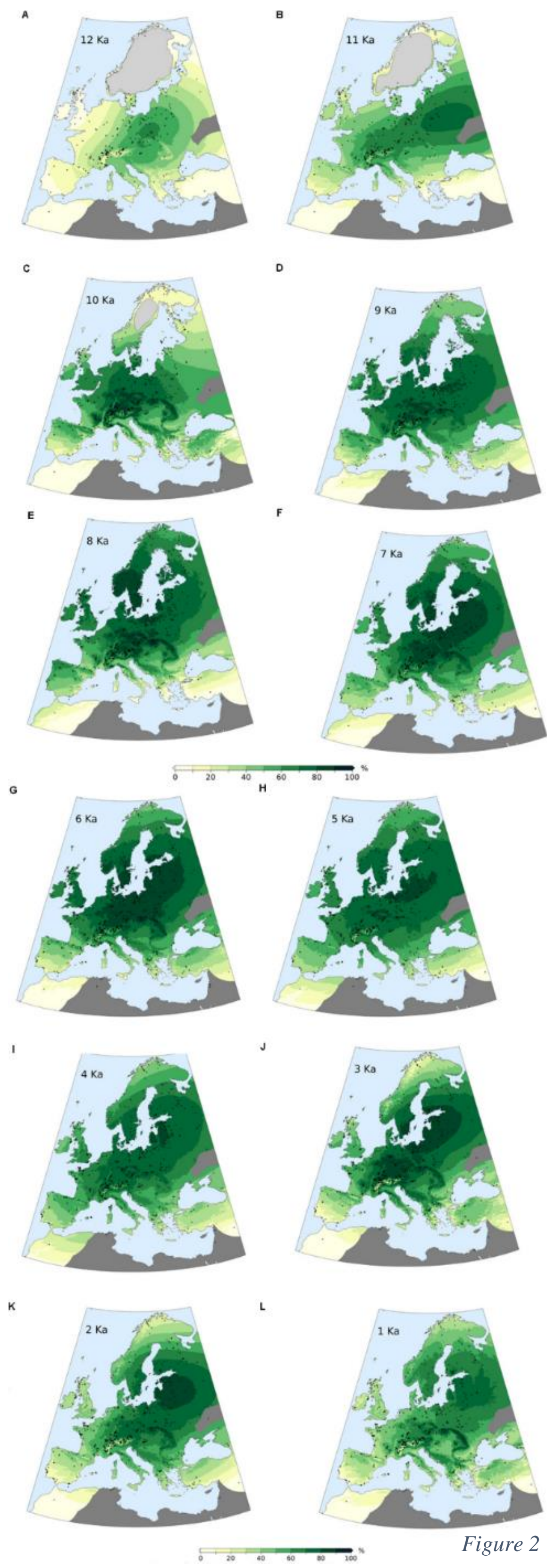

Figure 2

and 6,000 years ago [Fig. 2, C-G], Britain, like much of Europe, had extensive forest cover, which in the second half declined steadily then rapidly from the Medieval period onwards, 'likely as a result of anthropogenic deforestation' [Fig. 2, H-L].[37] At the same time, what Rackham called the 'pseudo-history' of Britain's prehistoric Wildwood has been challenged by conservationist Frans Vera, who suggests dynamic cycles of disturbance by wild animals such as beavers and wild aurochs created an ever-changing patchwork of woodland, scrub, and grasslands.[38] This is a landscape which the 'rewilding' conservation movement, made popular in Britain through George Monbiot's book *Feral* (2013), now seeks to recreate.[39]

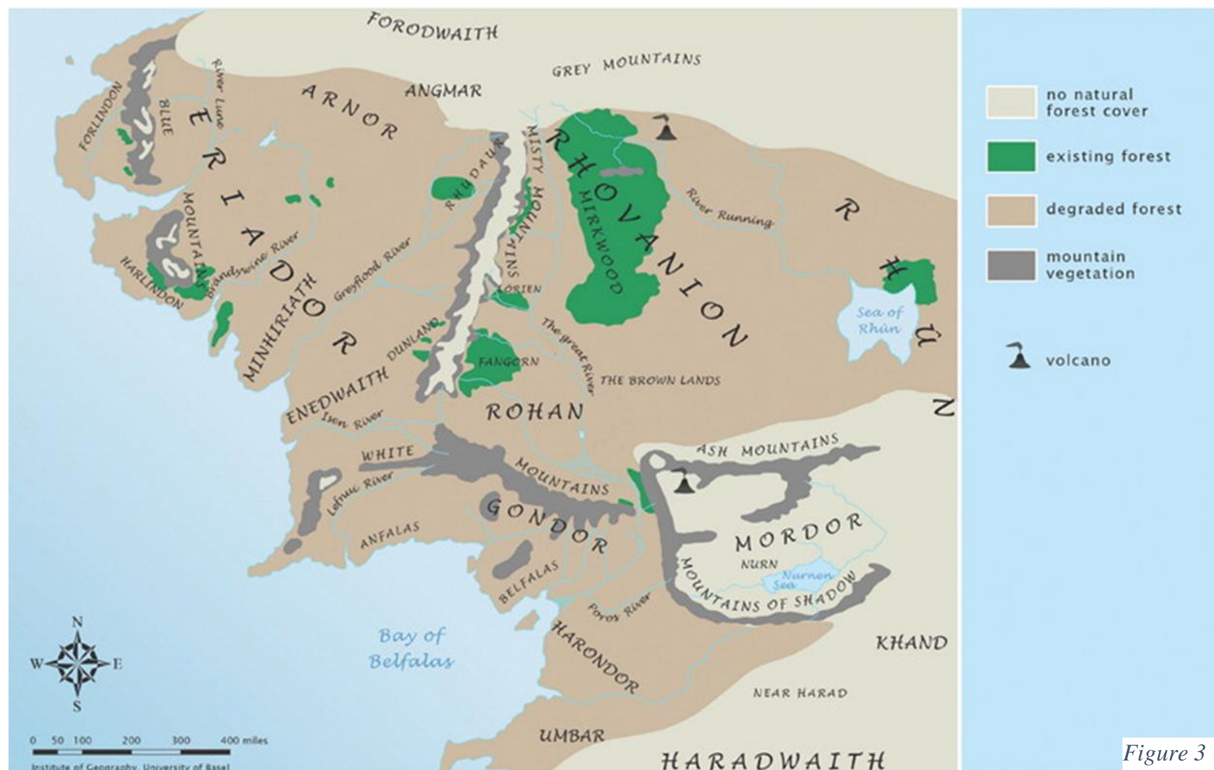

Figure 3

[37] Marco Zanon, et al., 'European Forest Cover During the Past 12,000 Years: A Palynological Reconstruction Based on Modern Analogs and Remote Sensing', *Frontiers in Plant Science* 9.253 (2018), 1-25 (p. 2).
[38] F. W. M. Vera, *Grazing Ecology and Forest History* (Wallingford: CABI, 2000).
[39] George Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (London: Penguin, 2013). The charity, *Rewilding Britain*, was subsequently founded to promote rewilding projects in Britain. One of the most compelling case studies for the successes of rewilding conservation in Britain is the Knepp Wildland site in West

Habermann and Kuhn's maps of Middle-earth's climate and topography [Fig. 3] reveal what they call a 'missing forest problem' over 'why the tree cover in the low lying, flat and humid areas between the Shire and Gondor is not dense' as it is on the eastern side of the Misty Mountains.[40] The explanation they give is that, much like in European history, people have 'destroyed the forest through protracted wars and perhaps extensive ship building, which obliterated the natural resource upon which the power of Gondor was based and ultimately caused the weakening of the western kingdoms and the rise of Mordor'.[41] The history of forest cover in Middle-earth is likely to be more complex, however, than Habermann and Kuhn suggest. Certainly, extensive deforestation occurs throughout the history of Middle-earth, which was characterised by the Elves for its abundance of trees, as the song to Elbereth demonstrates: '*o galadhremmin ennorath*' or 'from tree-tangled Middle-earth' (238). However, according to *The Silmarillion* (1977), it also appears that Arda, long before the arrival of Men or even Elves, had mixed, diverse landscapes.[42] In the Spring of Arda of the First Age, when the Valar Yavanna sowed the first seeds on the Isle of Almaren, there were 'mosses and grasses and great ferns, and trees whose tops were crowned with cloud' – a cosmogonical myth paralleling an evolutionary history of early terrestrial plant-life, which first included bryophytes, and then gymnosperms such as clubmosses, ferns and towering conifers, before the arrival of flowering grasses.[43] The land is then diversified by herbivory, which broke up the forests: 'beasts came forth and dwelt in the

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Sussex, whose story is told by Isabella Tree in her influential book, *Rewilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm* (London: Picador, 2018).

[40] Habermann and Kuhn, 'Sustainable Fictions', p. 269.

[41] Habermann and Kuhn, 'Sustainable Fictions', p. 270.

[42] 'Arda', or Earth, refers to the whole world containing the continent of Middle-earth as well as Aman to the west, home to the Valar.

[43] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: HarperCollins, 2013), p. 28. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.

Figure 4

grassy plains, or in rivers and the lakes' (*Silm*. 28). The 'Map of Beleriand' [Fig. 4] marks the vast forest of Taur-im-Duinath and the forests of Doriath, such as the Forest of Brethil, Neldoreth, and Region, with 'great pine forests' but also 'bare tors' in the highlands of Dorthonion (136), the 'wide plain' (134) and 'fields' of Ard-galen' (136), or the 'meads', 'marshes and isles of reeds' and the 'delta' south of Nan-tathren (137).[44] Thus, we see the same issues in the scholarly debate about Middle-earth's forests being discussed among rewilding conservationists today, whose advocates argue that 'diverse mosaics of habitat types' are the

[44] The 'Map of Beleriand' was redrawn by Christopher Tolkien for the publishing of *The Silmarillion* (1977) based on an annotated map drawn by Tolkien himself (c. 1930s), reproduced in *The History of Middle Earth* (vols. V and XI).

evolutionary context in which biodiversity thrived in the Early Holocene, and which should be the model to increase biodiversity in Britain.[45]

The legendary history of the Old Forest told by Elrond and Bombadil is different from the rumours told by the Hobbits of the Shire. The Hobbits sat in the Ivy Bush pub at the beginning of the story say that the Old Forest is ‘a dark bad place, if half the tales be true’ (*LotR* 22). Fredegar Bolger insists that ‘People don’t go in there’ because ‘the stories about it are a nightmare’ (107). It seems that, just as the High Hay is the threshold which both connects and disconnects the Shire from the Old Forest and beyond, the Hobbits’ stories connect and disconnect them from the Old Forest and the wider, historical realities of Middle-earth. The stories that surround the forest serves to keep the Hobbits from going in and experiencing it directly, while at the same time keeping the forest, however distant and distorted, within their cultural imagination.

‘Are the stories about it true?’ (110) Pippin asks Merry, as the Hobbits pass through the gate in the High Hay and first enter the forest. The stories of the Hobbits living on the western side of the Brandywine about the Old Forest are quickly disputed by Merry, who replies: ‘I don’t know what stories you mean, […] If you mean the old bogey-stories Fatty’s nurses used to tell him, about goblins and wolves and things of that sort, I should say no. At any rate I don’t believe them’ (110). Pippin’s question is the same one as the folklorist Andrew Lang reports children asking about fairy-tales, as Tolkien quotes in ‘On Fairy-stories’: ‘“Is it true?” is the great question children ask’ (‘OFS’ 39). Tolkien argues that, rather than being evidence of children’s ‘“unblunted belief”’, it stems from the ‘desire to know which kind of literature he is faced with

[45] Christopher J. Sandom and Sophie Wynne-Jones, ‘Rewilding a Country: Britain as a Study Case’, in Nathalie Pettorelli, Sarah M. Durant, and Johan Du Toit (eds.), *Rewilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 222-47 (p. 228).

[…] the fantastic, the strange (that is rare or remote facts), the nonsensical, and the merely "grown-up"' (39). Merry's reply seems to regard the stories told about the forest on that side of the river as merely fantastical or nonsensical but admits that there is a strangeness to the Old Forest: 'Everything in it is very much more alive, more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire' (*LotR* 110). Merry's attitude to the 'old bogey-stories Fatty's nurses used to tell him' echoes the words of Ted Sandyman, who ridicules a Hobbit's report of seeing walking 'Tree-men' on the border as 'children's stories' (44). The difference is that Merry, like the Old Forest itself, is 'more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things in the Shire'. Merry recognises that, although the truth of the Old Forest is far from the 'children's stories' told about them, they do embody a truth: the 'Forest is queer' (110).

The Old Forest is not only storied, but seems to listen to such stories, and even have its own stories to tell, '[the trees] whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language' (110). Trees violently respond to Frodo singing a song which foretells how '*all woods must fail*…' (112). The forest appears to remember ancient transgressions, such as the Númenóreans' deforestation and colonisation of Middle-earth in the Second Age in which they instructed the native people in the 'hewing of wood' so that 'the houseless woods drew back' (*Silm*. 314), not unlike the Shire's own deforestation and colonisation of the strip of land now known as Buckland. The trauma of this history is exacerbated when the Hobbits 'came and cut down hundreds of trees, and made a great bonfire in the Forest, and burned all the ground in a long strip east of the Hedge' (*LotR* 110). The Hobbits, whose stories protect them from the troubled historical realities of the forest, fail to understand and respect it.

The Hobbits' journey from the woodland edge into the deep, dark heart of the Old Forest, the Withywindle Valley, 'said to be the queerest part of the whole wood – the centre from which all the queerness comes, as it were' (113), is marked by increasingly outlandish events as the trees become hostile, an escalating tension which culminates in the Hobbits becoming hypnotised and imprisoned in the roots of Old Man Willow. When the Hobbits reach the centre of the forest, we become immersed within a scene entirely dominated by willows in a way reminiscent of Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows* (1907), in which 'a singular world of willows, winds, and waters, instantly laid its spell':[46]

> There wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, arched over with willows, blocked with fallen willows, and flecked with thousands of faded willow-leaves. The air was thick with them, fluttering yellow from the branches; for there was a warm and gentle breeze blowing softly in the valley, and the reeds were rustling, and the willow-boughs were creaking. (115)

It is appropriate that willows grow at the centre of the Old Forest's enchantment, not simply because of its ecological distribution in the moist soil on the banks of the Withywindle ('withy' meaning willow) River. 'The willow's natural habit of spontaneous self-setting from cuttings is embodied in its name, *Salix*,' as nature writer Roger Deakin explains, 'which stems from the Latin verb *salire*, to leap. It literally springs to life'.[47] The 'spontaneous self-setting' of stoloniferous willow trees (having creeping roots or runners able to produce clones), allow them to proliferate along riverbanks. This explains their abundance in the Withywindle, but also suggests, perhaps, the impression of an almost magical ability to uproot and reposition

[46] Algernon Blackwood, 'The Willows', *Roarings From Further Out: Four Weird Novellas* (London: British Library, 2019).
[47] Deakin, *Wildwood*, p. 98.

themselves. The heat and gentle noises of the river and leaves creates a drowsy atmosphere. It may also arise from the association of the willow bark with a folk remedy that contains a natural analgesic, stalacin, which is converted to salicylic acid, used today in the manufacture of aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid).[48] That Old Man Willow's magic has mind-numbing effects on the Hobbits perhaps stems, at least in part, from this pharmacological association. It is possible that the wizened, fissured trunk of Old Man Willow, suggesting eyes or a mouth, is a crack-willow. As Richard Mabey explains in *Flora Britannica*, 'the trunk grows fast but is apt to split open under its own weight […] encouraged by its favoured habitats, which are damp, floodprone fens and river valleys'.[49]

Throughout this episode, as Verlyn Flieger argues, there is a sense of uncertainty on the part of the Hobbits over whether what they are experiencing is their emotional projection or whether it is objectively happening. This perceptual uncertainty is transferred to the reader through the careful way in which their experiences are narrated:

> The Hobbits *feel* hot; sleepiness *seems* to creep up their legs and fall upon their eyes; leaves flutter *on the edge* of hearing; they rustle *like* laughter; they *seem* to hiss in pain and anger; Merry and Pippin can *almost* hear words […] Two conflicting perceptions are in force here, and the reader is not yet told which to credit'.[50]

The artfully impressionistic narration, exemplifying the potent and deceptive enchantment of Old Man Willow, powerfully evokes the psychological sensations in a forest; the density and movement of vegetation, the flickering sunlight and the trickery of shadow.

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[48] Judd and Judd, *Flora of Middle-Earth*, p. 318.
[49] Richard Mabey, *Flora Britannica* (London: Reeds International, 1996), p. 139.
[50] Verlyn Flieger, *There Would Always Be a Fairy Tale: More Essays on Tolkien* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2017), p. 136.

Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the Hobbits are in mortal danger of being swallowed by a tree. The Old Forest could not be further from the description of the Hundred-Acre-Wood in the *Winnie the Pooh* books, which Moorcock derides *The Lord of the Rings* as the epic rendition of. Moorcock believes it belongs in 'the nursery-room', an escapist fantasy that 'is meant to soothe and console'.[51] Clearly, the Hobbits' venture into the Old Forest is not a fairy frolic through a storybook woodland. The episode demonstrates that Tolkien's epic is closer to Hume's definition of the 'literature of vision', which 'aims to disturb us by dislodging us from our settled sense of reality', than the escapist 'literature of illusion', which 'offers us roses without thorns and pleasures without payment'.[52] Exemplifying how fantasy forests are often places of a 'painful yet necessary metamorphosis', the Hobbits' ordeal is transformative.[53] Old Man Willow is the embodiment of a deeply disturbing reality, a tree so consumed with vengeful grief and trauma of the ecological devastation inflicted against it that it threatens to bury and consume the Hobbits within its entwining roots. Far from escaping, the Hobbits are literally imprisoned.

Old Man Willow is not evil *because* he is enchanted, or in any way 'more alive' than normal trees, as the admirable Ents later prove. Nor is it because his heart is materially (not just spiritually) rotten: Treebeard later tells Merry and Pippin that 'some good old willows' live down the Entwash who were 'quite hollow, indeed they were falling all to pieces, but as quiet and sweet-spoken as a young leaf' (468). Nor is evilness specifically related to the fact that he is a willow. *Nan-tathren* ('willow-vale') in the First Age is described by the wanderer Voronwë as a

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[51] Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance,* p. 122.
[52] Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, p. 56, p. 57.
[53] Weronika Łaszkiewicz, 'Into the Wild Woods: On the Significance of Trees and Forests in Fantasy Fiction', *Mythlore* 36.1 (2017), 39-58 (p. 54).

place of the 'fairest' willows, whose 'rustle of their innumerable leaves is a spell of music: day and night would flicker by uncounted, while still I stood knee-deep in grass and listened'.[54] In both cases, wicked or wonderous, the willow's sublime enchantment (from the Latin *incantare*, 'in-song') works through music and song. The chants, rhymes, and riddles of Tom Bombadil which subdue the Willow seem to work through the same sonorous magic.

What, then, is the nature of Old Man Willow's 'black heart'? Encountering Old Man Willow is an enlightening experience for the Hobbits – a near-annihilation in the belly of the willow which is at once their salvation. The arrival of Tom Bombadil frees the Hobbits from Old Man Willow, who is admonished but not condemned. Bombadil then leads them to the other side of the Withywindle, after which he tells them stories of the Old Forest that allows them to see 'the other side' of the story:

> He told them tales of bees and flowers, the ways of trees, and the strange creatures of the Forest, about the evil things and good things, things friendly and things unfriendly, cruel things and kind things, and secrets hidden under brambles. (129)

The polarities swing the syntax back and forth between mutually arising opposites, each revealing not simply a list of Manichean dualisms but the fundamental reciprocation of all things, of living beings such as 'bees and flowers, the ways of trees, and the strange creatures of the Forest' in a moral universe of 'evil things and good things'. Contrary to Tom Shippey's contention that the universe in Tolkien's legendarium is, at least in part, Manichean, Ralph Wood convincingly argues that Tolkien takes a 'thoroughly Augustinian' theodicy.[55] Old Man Willow

[54] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 46. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.
[55] Ralph Wood, 'Tolkien's Augustinian Understanding of Good and Evil: Why *The Lord of the Rings* is not Manichean', in *Tree of Tales: Tolkien, Literature, and Theology*, edited by Trevor Hart and Ivan Khovacs (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), pp. 85-103 (p. 102).

is not intrinsically evil, nor even corrupted by the forces of Melkor or Sauron, as Tolkien, infuriated, refutes in one of his letters: ‘Cannot people imagine things hostile to men and Hobbits who prey on them without being in league with the Devil!’ (*Letters* 228). Old Man Willow’s hatred and desire for power arise because of the deforestation, the ‘gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning’ (130) inflicted on the Old Forest. Bombadil’s tales are ‘not comfortable lore’ (130) because they reveal the darkness which lies dormant even in the hearts of small, harmless, unassuming Hobbits, whose attempts to hold power over the forest is the very same as Old Man Willow’s attempts to hold power over them. Bombadil’s tales and, by extension, Tolkien’s, grant the wisdom that we exist in a wider reality inhabited by other, strange, and sometimes hostile living beings, who nevertheless deserve respect: ‘They began to understand the lives of the Forest, apart from themselves, indeed to feel themselves as the strangers where all other things were at home’ (129-30).

II

Evilshaw

The Restorative Forest

The Old Forest is a dangerous and challenging place, rupturing the Hobbits' cosy conceptions of reality to deepen their understanding of the world beyond their borders and their place within it. I have demonstrated how the charge of escapism aimed at Tolkien and, occasionally, at fantasy itself as a literary mode, overlooks the often deeply disturbing ways in which his characters are forced to reevaluate their assumptions about the real and unreal – assumptions which perpetuate their way of life but also isolate it from wider ecological and geopolitical issues. We have seen that the Hobbits are made aware of their situatedness in a larger narrative of complex social and ecological forces, a story which speaks to our increased awareness of the disturbing realities of ecological crises in which we are all materially and ethically enmeshed.

Yet, in ways no less transformative than the Hobbits' experiences in the Old Forest, woodlands and forests are conceived in fantasy fiction as places of psychological escape, as peaceful refuges that invite characters into calm and contemplative mental states. Though it has long been known intuitively, the mental health benefits of visiting places like forests is now recognised in major studies and reports from governmental organisations and conservation charities, making public health a key element in forest ecosystem services alongside economic

and ecological benefits.[56] Empirical evidence has inspired a growing number of popular science books and nature writing in recent years, while experiences of lockdowns and restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed how (unequal) access to greenspaces profoundly affects mental and physical health.[57] Bearing in mind the expanding scientific evidence and cultural awareness of the mental health benefits of visiting woodlands and forests, the following discussion will explore the wood, Evilshaw, in Morris's *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, as the site in which the story's protagonist experiences a range of psychotherapeutic effects, gaining the emotional resilience, courage, and wisdom necessary for her liberation from cruelty and childhood trauma. In the beginning of the novel, a witch emerges from the ominous wood to steal the young Birdalone away to her cottage on the far side of the forest. However, Evilshaw becomes a space where Birdalone can escape from her wicked captor, who rarely enters it herself. The woods are where Birdalone gains knowledge and appreciation of a wider community of plants and animals, epitomising a sense of kinship with the nonhuman world. In this way,

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[56] *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)*, 'Forests For Human Health and Well-being' (2020), <https://www.fao.org/3/cb1491en/cb1491en.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2021]; *FAO*, 'The State of the World's Forests'; *Forest Europe*, 'Human Health and Sustainable Forest Management' (2019), <https://foresteurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Forest_book_final_WEBpdf.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2021]; *Natural England*, 'A Review of Nature-based Interventions For Mental Health Care' (2016), <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4513819616346112> [accessed 26 October 2021]; *Forestry Commission*, 'Scoping Study on Valuing Mental Health Benefits of Forests' (Forest Research, 2020), <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/documents/7636/ValuingMentalHealth_Final_Report_30Apr20_1619.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2021]; *The Woodland Trust*, 'State of the UK's Woods and Trees 2021'; *The Wildlife Trusts*, 'Social Return on Investment Analysis of the Health and Wellbeing Impacts of Wildlife Trust Programmes' (2019), <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/SROI%20Report%20FINAL%20-%20DIGITAL.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2021]. See Matilda van den Bosch and William Bird, *Oxford Textbook of Nature and Public Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) for a comprehensive summary of empirical data relating to the link between public health and the natural environment.

[57] Richard Mabey, *Nature Cure* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005); Isabel Hardman, *The Natural Health Service: How Nature Can Mend Your Mind* (London: Atlantic, 2020); Lucy Jones, *Losing Eden: Why Our Minds Need the Wild* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), Samantha Walton, *Everybody Needs Beauty: In Search of the Nature Cure* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

Evilshaw provides profound benefits to Birdalone, but it is also where Birdalone realises the intrinsic value of the forest beyond herself.

Morris conveys a belief in the restorative power of the natural world at a time of intensifying industrialisation and urbanisation in Britain at the close of the nineteenth century. Inevitably, Morris's conception of nature's healing powers is not the same as our own conception of mental health and its relationship with access to greenspaces today. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, Birdalone's experiences in Evilshaw present us with an imaginative and compelling case that "escaping" into the woods is something to be valued, especially given the immense psychological challenges to be understood and overcome as a result of our increased awareness of ecological crises.

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The world of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is pseudo-medieval, set on an imaginary archipelago in the vast lake named in the title. At the beginning and end of this story, though, we find one of the most vivid descriptions of a forested landscape in all of Morris's fantasy novels. In the opening chapter we are told that, 'hard on the borders' of the market town of Utterhay is an ill-omened wood named Evilshaw, 'held to be mighty great, or maybe measureless; though few indeed had entered it'.[58] Much like the Old Forest, Evilshaw is storied to be a dangerous and otherworldly place. And, as with the Old Forest, we first hear about Evilshaw by eavesdropping on tales uttered by those who rarely, if ever, venture under its eaves, and who are therefore

[58] William Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (London: Ballantine, 1971), p. 1. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.

unfamiliar with it as a physical landscape.[59] Elizabeth Parker suggests that one of the main reasons why forests are an object of fear in the ecoGothic imagination is that forests are easy to get lost in.[60] The denizens of Evilshaw, according to the townsfolk, range from the mythological 'Goddesses of the Gentiles', to the more folkloric 'faery' (1), both powerful entities, one pre-Christian, the other belonging to belief systems beyond traditional Christianity. This suggests the forest is associated with ancient or sinful beings ('the worst of the dead' (1)), reinforcing two more of Parker's reasons why forests are fearful: 'the forest is associated with the past' and 'the forest is an antichristian space'.[61] Allegory is added into the mix, invoking Dante Alighieri's *selva oscura* when the wood is said to be the 'Gates of Hell' where 'devils swarmed amidst its thickets' (1).[62]

However, we soon learn that the real Evilshaw is no *selva oscura*, and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* no ecoGothic tale. Corrine Saunders traces the way the dark wood of the underworld in classical representations of forests transforms into the more morally and metaphysically ambivalent 'otherworlds' of medieval romance, whose 'connection with medieval reality differentiates it from its classical antecedents'.[63] The historical move towards a more realistic, ambivalent forest in the literary imagination is embodied in Birdalone and the witch's

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[59] The town's unusual toponym indicates both its capacity for rumour and oral storytelling (utter meaning to speak) but also perhaps its isolation from the wood (from the Old English *ūtera* meaning outer, exterior). 'utter adj.' and 'utter v.1' *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2023) <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 17 July 2023].
[60] Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic*, p. 47.
[61] Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic*, p. 47.
[62] Dante's *Inferno* invests allegorical meaning to that phenomenological experience '*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita | mi ritrovai per una selva oscura | che la diritta via era smarrita*': 'In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark forest where the straight way was lost'. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno, The Divine Comedy*, vol. 1, edited and translated by John D. Sinclair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), Canto I. 11. 1-3.
[63] Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, p. 205.

movement into Evilshaw. Tony Pinkney argues that, despite being places where literary traditions morph and genres mutate, forests in Morris's fiction are 'always, almost by definition it seems, a "wood beyond the world", […] an eerie, unmappable and dangerous space outside society'.[64] However, Pinkney's assessment belies the ambiguity of Morris's wooded 'otherworlds', which instead lie, according to Florence Boos, 'somewhere between material presence and symbol'. [65] Philippa Bennett argues that Morris's landscapes are both within and beyond the world – 'descendants' of the forests in *Le Morte d'Arthur* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – which are nevertheless 'constructed from aspects of familiar human environments and serve a humanly relevant purpose'.[66]

Naturalistic descriptions of Evilshaw's real flora and fauna show it to be of this world, rather than beyond it. When the witch leads Birdalone through Evilshaw, it is suggested that a threshold into a fantastic realm has been crossed on the fifth day of their journey, when the grey light of dusk changes suddenly to white, 'as if a new world of light lay before them' (6). However, it is the brightness of natural sunset rather than a preternatural sunrise (6). Ironically, it is Utterhay that belongs to fairy-tale, for the historical reality is that a medieval town would have been wholly reliant upon using its nearby woodland for almost every aspect of daily life: fuel, fencing, building materials, pannage and wood-pasture.[67] The witch's cottage, ostensibly a fairy-tale setting, presents us with a detailed picture of medieval life beside a wood. Birdalone must milk cows and goats to make butter and cheese, plough and sow fields, then grind wheat in a

[64] Tony Pinkney, 'The Dialectic of Nature in *Nowhere*', *The Journal of William Morris* 19.3 (2011), 50–64 (p. 52).
[65] Blue Calhoun, '"The Little Land of Abundance": Pastoral Perspective in the Late Romances of William Morris', *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris* (New York: William Morris Society, 1976), p. 55; Boos, 'An Aesthetic Ecocommunist', p. 36.
[66] Bennett, *Wonderlands*, p. 53, p. 54.
[67] Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, pp. 59-70.

quern to bake bread, lead animals into wood pastures, pick fruit from the orchard, hazel and walnuts from the wood, where she hunts deer with a bow and arrow for venison (11). Though undoubtedly romanticising a medieval past, Birdalone's intimacy with the natural landscape and seasons offers an alternative to Utterhay and its disconnection from the wood.[68] Further, Norman Talbot, reading the story as political allegory, regards Utterhay as the microcosm of industrial capitalism.[69] Indeed, our brief glimpse of Utterhay at the beginning of the story is a window into extreme social depravity and inequality, a vision of the evils of capitalist greed and exploitation, expressed more plainly in the human trafficking of female prisoners of war in the market square of the Burgh in *The Well at the World's End.* In this story, we see Birdalone's mother is impoverished and 'dying of hunger' even though Utterhay is a 'town of thrift and abundance'.[70]

Though the townsfolk's tales are not wholly unfounded, given the witch emerges from Evilshaw to steal children, we soon see that the wood itself is neither dangerous nor truly otherworldly, but a place of delight to Birdalone, who takes joy in the flowers and strawberries and 'many things new and fair as she came upon' (5). A juxtaposition between the real and fantastic, the forest of refuge and a forest feared, plays out between the forest as seen from the outside and from within. Charlotte Oberg states that, 'symbolically, the interlude with the witch in an almost inaccessible forest suggests a kind of enforced separation or isolation from life itself'.[71] But it is also true that Birdalone's removal from Utterhay (and a life of urban poverty), with its enforced separation or isolation from the wood, means that she experiences the real

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[68] Gould, *Early Green Politics*, p. 15.
[69] Talbot, 'Introduction', *The Water of the Wonderous Isles*, p. xiii.
[70] William Morris, *The Well at the World's End*, 2 vols (London: Ballantine, 1971), vol. 1, p. 2. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.
[71] Charlotte Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), p. 125.

Evilshaw and a wider, nonhuman community of life that inhabits it. Ecopsychologist Anita Barrows argues that the 'holding environment' of the infant is its social but also ecological context.[72] Estranged from her family, Birdalone's psychological development is instead nurtured by the 'holding environment' of the wood. Evilshaw remains a haven for the enslaved Birdalone – a place of 'rest and peace' (11). The witch seldom enters the wood and so becomes a place where Birdalone finds mental and physical rejuvenation through a sense of kinship with a community of plants and animals. Birdalone's familiarity with the wood gives her an enormous sense of wellbeing, while the townsfolk's unfamiliarity with the wood is a source of their anxiety. Her daily excursions to Evilshaw make her knowledgeable and appreciative of the natural world; Birdalone comes to learn 'all matters of wood' (8), 'of the ways and the wont of all the creatures around about her' and as a result 'oft found the wood a better home than the house' and 'loved it much', because 'the earth was her friend' (9). Birdalone's sense of affinity encompasses 'the very grass and flowers' (8), which comfort her in the absence of human company. While the wood offers only temporary escape and liberation, it also enables her to return to the witch's house each day and endure her captivity until she can truly escape in the Sending Boat over the water. Until then, Evilshaw nurtures an emotional resilience in Birdalone necessary for her to cope with the toils of her enslavement and the realities and necessities of daily life, for it 'solaced her when she had suffered aught' (9). Birdalone's escape is borne not from a desire to retreat from the problems of everyday reality, but to alleviate and widen one's perspective on them.

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[72] Anita Barrows, 'The Ecopsychology of Child Development', *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, edited by Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner (Berkely: Counterpoint, 1995), pp. 101-110 (p. 103).

The impetus for Birdalone's escape is the enigmatic wood-spirit, Habundia, who materialises from the foliage, hamadryad-like, in 'the shape of a young woman as naked as herself, save that she had an oak wreath round about her loins' (15). Tom Shippey and Patrick Curry argue that Tom Bombadil is a 'genius-loci' in the Old Forest, and we can likewise think of Habundia as the personified spirit of Evilshaw, protecting the characters from dangers in the forests but also correcting their impression of the forests as evil.[73] Habundia brings to mind the sylvan enchantresses of medieval romance, such as Malory's Morgan Le Fey , in that she 'brings together the otherworldly and the human'.[74] Unlike Morgan Le Fey, however, Habundia appears as a benign and dependable maternal figure. Birdalone's statement that she has 'seen nought in field or woodland that is as lovely to me as thou art', including 'the fritillary nodding at our brook's mouth, nor the willow-boughs waving on Green Eyeot; nor the wild-cat sporting on the little woodlawn' or 'the white doe rosing from the grass to look to her fawn; nor aught that moves and grows', appears to privilege the human figure as the perfected state of nature (18). But despite appearances, Habundia is 'not of the children of Adam' (18). The abundance of life that inhabits the woodland, described by Birdalone, is embodied in Habundia, whose name echoes both abundant, as Oberg notes, but also the Latin *habitare*, 'to live or dwell', and can thus be seen as the representation of Evilshaw's native biodiversity.[75] Also abundant is Birdalone's cognitive growth and wellbeing from Habundia's teachings from 'the book of the earth' (40) under the Oak of Tryst, where she 'gat much lore of her wood-mother, and learned wisdom abundantly. And her days were happy' (40). More than an ethereal phantom, we can see

[73] Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, p. 123; Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth*, p.76.
[74] Saunders, *The Forest in Medieval Romance*, p. 170.
[75] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, p. 125

Habundia as the manifestation of what Timothy Murphy calls Morris's earth-bound, 'ecological conception of magic'.[76]

Unlike Habundia, Birdalone cannot sustain herself physically and spiritually from the wood alone. And, curiously, Birdalone does not try to escape through the wood, but only across the water. Her return home depends upon her going not backwards, but forwards into the unknown. Morris's biographer Fiona McCarthy draws attention to the fact that he 'believed there was a certain morality in wilderness, a recuperative value'.[77] The self-awareness and emotional resilience Birdalone gains in Evilshaw encourages her to escape truly from the witch, even if that means venturing beyond the safety of the wood and the Wood-mother's protection, only to return when she has completed her quest in the world beyond.

The grieving widow Atra also seeks refuge in Evilshaw, departing 'moody and few-spoken' and returning 'back ever from the wood calm and kind and well-liking' (366). The psychotherapeutic benefits Atra derives from visiting Habundia in the wood are similar to Birdalone's at the beginning of the story, which indicates 'the need to rely on the power of nature when human wisdom is insufficient'.[78] Yet, during these meetings Atra teaches Habundia 'a wisdom derived from human suffering' rather 'than natural lore'.[79] Kirchhoff suggests that this shows Atra and Habundia's dialectic represents 'the two sides of Birdalone's personality – tragic self-awareness and healthy "animal happiness" – neither of which separately is an adequate

[76] Timothy S. Murphy, 'William Morris and the Counter-Tradition of Materialist Fantasy', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 30.3 (2019), 312-330 (p. 312).
[77] McCarthy, *William Morris*, p. 15.
[78] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, p. 182.
[79] Frederick Kirchhoff, *William Morris* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p. 157.

model for the full development of her personality'.[80] Birdalone's and Atra's escape in the woods are therefore necessary for their wellbeing but not sufficient for their recovery. Like Birdalone, Atra must always return to Utterhay, the dwelling of her human community. Oberg's psychoanalytical reading of the final scenes as 'symbolic returns to the womb (the hut) surrounded by chaos (the forest)' is a simplification of the complicated psychological and social relationships the characters have with the wood at the end of the story.[81] The fraught relationship between Utterhay and Evilshaw lessens with Birdalone's return, but it does not disappear. Amanda Hodgson argues that Birdalone's return, having adventured across 'wondrous isles', demonstrates that 'Morris has employed the quest-form of romance to indicate that what we search for is often to be found not in some far-away place or in fantasy but in the ordinary world of home and everyday realities.[82]

The improvement of Utterhay and its relationship with Evilshaw is gradual, difficult, complex; there is no sudden, magical solution to rupture what are deeply ingrained social and cultural conceptions of the wood. Kirchhoff sees the final scene of Utterhay and Evilshaw as 'an image of irreconcilability of the polarities' that are 'not a synthesis but a dialectic'.[83] Utterhay is no longer utterly isolated from Evilshaw, but it does hold a complicated relationship of interchange between human and nonhuman worlds that is negotiated through Birdalone and her companions. Birdalone's psychological transformation in the wood is a precondition for her true escape and therefore her subsequent growth into the heroine of the story that restores justice and

[80] Kirchhoff, *William Morris*, p. 158.
[81] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, p. 125, pp. 50-51.
[82] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, p. 163.
[83] Kirchhoff, *William Morris*, p. 160.

ecological balance in the story. While the town and the wood seem ‘irreconcilable’, it is Birdalone’s experiences in Evilshaw that allow her to return to Utterhay and begin to improve her community’s relationship to the wood within their world.

III

Athshe

Radical Visions

Fantasy forests are visions of radical transformations. The Old Forest is where the Hobbits become aware of a wider world suffering from social and ecological devastation, while Evilshaw is where Birdalone finds respite and resilience necessary for her true escape from enslavement and, vitally, where she gains a deep understanding of and appreciation for the nonhuman world. These seemingly personal transformations are not contained, however, but lead to wider social, cultural, and political changes. They are the 'falling of small stones', as Gandalf describes Merry and Pippin's encounter with Treebeard in Fangorn, 'that start an avalanche in the mountains' (*LotR* 496). Reading Le Guin's fiercely polemical *The Word for World is Forest*, it becomes clear that imaginary forests are not apolitical spaces, faraway on the hazy horizon of fairyland, but firmly rooted in historical and contemporary social realities. Similarly, all real forests are what political ecologists Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Lee Peluso term 'political forests' because they 'produce and are products of particular political-ecological relations'.[84] Comparing Le Guin's novella to *The Well at the World's End* and *The Lord of the Rings* reveals a shared engagement with political realities in which trees, woods, and forests play an agential role. Reading Le Guin in light of Morris and Tolkien solicits our attention to the wider political implications of fantasy's "escape". In each case, we begin to see how the fantastic imagination is an act of defiance against those social, economic, or political "realities" one is supposedly avoiding by writing and reading

[84] Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Lee Peluso, 'Political forests', *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*, edited by Raymond L. Bryant (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015), pp. 162-76 (p. 162).

fantasy. Indeed, the escape fantasy affords us today is no less than the necessary means by which alternative political systems, in touch with the realities of twenty-first century ecological crises, can be imagined and constructed. Ultimately, however, fantasy is not an escape *plan*, drawn up to be directional. 'All I'm trying to do,' Le Guin writes, 'is figure out how to put a pig on the tracks.'[85] It should become clear that the escape of fantasy is itself a powerful political demonstration, mobilising our imagination not only to challenge the ideologies at root of present ecological crises, but to conceive of alternative systems of relationship in which humans and forests coexist.

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In *The Word for World is Forest*, Athshe, a fictional planet of the near-future, is under threat from interplanetary capitalism and colonialism. Deforestation is inextricable from the slavery and genocide of the forests' inhabitants, a naturalised species of human known as the Athsheans. A revolutionary Athshean, Selver, sparks a rebellion which expels the new colonisers, the Terrans (humans from a now ecologically desolate Earth or 'Terra'). The uprising disrupts deforestation with guerrilla attacks and mass killings – acts which tragically sacrifice their commitment to nonviolence for political agency and to secure the future of their forest home. The novella is set in the wider universe of Le Guin's Hainish books, in which an antecedent species of human from the planet Hain has colonised various worlds including Terra and Athshe.[86] The settlement of

[85] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be', *Dreams Must Explain Themselves and Other Essays, 1972-2004* (London: Gollancz, 2018), pp. 105-26 (p. 111).
[86] The wider constellation of stories taking place in the same universe of *The Word for World is Forest* will be referred to simply as the 'Hainish books', instead of the 'Hainish cycle' or 'Hainish saga', as these terms are rejected by their author because the stories 'do not form a coherent history' – see 'Ursula on Ursula' <https://www.ursulakleguin.com/ursula-on-ursula/#BookOrder> [accessed 4 July 2023]. The stories, like the human species they describe, are nebulously connected.

Hainish populations across numerous planets leads to speciation, in which each colony follows a divergent path of evolution like Darwin's finches, scattered across an interstellar archipelago. After the Hainish civilisation crumbles into oblivion, these islands of humanity are left isolated. In *The Word for World is Forest*, we learn of the formation of the League of Known Worlds, which attempts to establish a system of governance and instantaneous communications (with the aid of the development of the 'ansible' device) between these now diverse human species.

The Word for World is Forest demonstrates Le Guin's profound intellectual and imaginative engagement with ecological concepts and concerns popularised by a burgeoning environmentalist movement in the United States in the 1960s and '70s. It is impossible to view the environmentalist movement as isolated from the broader cultural atmosphere of critical opposition to all forms of exploitation in which several movements gained momentum, such as civil rights and the anti-war movements in the New Left during the late '60s, whose causes began to converge over the government's involvement in the Vietnam War.[87] Anthropogenic ecological devastation or 'ecocide' (coined in 1970 to describe the effects of the defoliant Agent Orange) was increasingly linked to the corporate profiteering of chemical warfare, the logic of technocratic "progress", and the histories and continuations of racism, colonialism and genocide.[88] Written during a sojourn in London in 1968 while Le Guin participated in non-violent protests against atomic bomb testing and the Vietnam War, *The Word for World is Forest* is an

[87] Adam Rome, '"Give Earth a Chance": The Environmental Movement and the Sixties', *The Journal of American History* 90.2 (2003), 525-554 (p. 546).
[88] David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think about the Environment* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), p. 15; Rome, '"Give Earth a Chance"', p. 547.

imaginative interpellation of these events. In her 1976 introduction to the story, reflecting upon this period of her life, she writes that it became

> clear that the ethic which approved the defoliation of forests and grainlands and the murder of non-combatants in the name of "peace" was only a corollary of the ethic which permits the despoliation of natural resources for private profit or the GNP, and the murder of the creatures of the Earth in the name of "man".[89]

Escaping into a pristinely distant, imaginary world is simply impossible for such a writer so actively concerned with the political climate of her day. Le Guin's forest is no simple backdrop to the political events that occur in the story, however. The way in which Le Guin describes the forests of Athshe reveals the complex ways in which the forests of our own world are inextricably connected to a wider political ecology that demonstrates a mutable and dynamic interrelationship between the human and the nonhuman. For Le Guin, like Tolkien and Morris before her, escape is a subversive act: not removing oneself from contemporary realities but allowing oneself to occupy a space beyond them. The inhabitants of these forests enact and model escape from industrial-capitalist exploitation and tyranny, which are seen not as everlasting or invulnerable social, economic, or political "realities" but for what they truly are – specific, contingent, and subject to radical change.

Common in ecopolitical philosophy is the idea that society should be 'reconstructed' to reflect or model itself upon inescapable 'ecological laws'.[90] Core axioms of ecological politics, such as interdependence, diversity, and decentralisation, derived from a political interpretation of

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[89] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Author's Introduction', *The Word for World is Forest* (London: Gollancz, 2015), p. 7.
[90] Matthew Humphrey, 'Green Ideology', *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies,* edited by Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 422-38 (p. 425).

ecological principles, are conveyed in the descriptions of the physical ecology of Athshe's forests. The political implications of interdependence in ecological systems are expressed subtly in a description that opens the second chapter. A meandering syntax, eddying in long sentences around colons and semi-colons, encapsulates the material flux of light, water, energy through the permeable borders of both living organisms and non-living matter. 'Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex', while the ground itself is seen as the 'product of the collaboration of living things with the long, elaborate death of leaves and trees; and from that rich graveyard grew ninety-foot trees, and tiny mushrooms that sprouted in circles half an inch across' (27). What ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo terms 'trans-corporeality', the unpredictable 'interchanges and interconnections' of the material world, is encapsulated in the strikingly sensual intensity and precision with which Le Guin describes a forest ecosystem.[91] Like Alaimo, whose concept is simultaneously political and ecological because of the 'viscous porosity' of 'mediating membranes, which may be biological, social, political', Le Guin describes the interdependence, mutability, and material flow in her imaginary forest so that it embodies her political philosophy.[92] In such a philosophy, politics simply cannot escape ecological realities which paradoxically have no impermeable walls. Unlike the intergalactic capitalists who seek to exploit the planet's forests and exert supreme control over its native biota, the Athsheans' communalist, decentralised society is born out of, and integral to, 'the collaboration of living things' that comprise the forest ecosystem. Like the growth and decay of 'ninety-foot trees', soaring civilisations like the Hainish in Le Guin's stories

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[91] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 2.
[92] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, p. 15.

inexplicably and arbitrarily develop, culminate, collapse, and reform over vast scales of time, expressing the cautious conclusion of her father, the anthropologist Arthur Kroeber, tracing the rise and fall of various civilisations in his ambitious *Configurations of Culture Growth* (1944), that there is nothing in this history that is 'cyclical, regularly repetitive, or necessary'.[93] Le Guin's vision is a radical escape from those political systems which seek to transcend ecological realities, expressing an alternative way of being in the world that is intimately attuned to the interdependence and mutability of a forest ecosystem.

Studying closely the plant communities of Athshe's ostensibly Edenic, wild forests in Le Guin's story reveals this more expansive political ecology at work. The Terran coloniser, Captain Davidson, explains that the 'pine, oak, walnut, chestnut, fir, holly, apple, ash' all came from seeds transported from Pleistocene Earth by the Hainish, who populated it with Terran fauna, 'deer, bird, mouse, cat, squirrel, monkey', in addition to what became the Athsheans (16). The natural history of Athshe is not just a clever piece of world-building, enabling Le Guin to describe an alien forest without the need for elaborate exposition of species and environments of an invented astrobiology. Her backstory in which the Hainish terraform Athshe into a colony using exotic plants and animals retells the history of European ecological imperialism. The physical environment of Athshe is populated with what Alfred Crosby would call its 'portmanteau biota', a collective term meaning both human settlers and the flora and fauna carried with them, which Crosby considers as the critical ecological component in the successive waves of European colonisation in Australasia and the Americas, a process termed

[93] A. L. Kroeber, *Configurations of Culture Growth* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1944), p. 768.

'biocolonisation' by post-colonialist ecocritics today.[94] Le Guin demonstrates how escaping from the confines of contemporary reality into an expanded vision of space and time enables us to see the ostensibly isolated, timeless, pristine forests of our own world as existing in a wider socio-ecological context of change and interchange.

Studying Tolkien's Fangorn by the same approach shows us an ancient wildwood that is nevertheless, like Le Guin's Athshean forests, profoundly altered and actively involved in a more complex political ecology. Merry and Pippin's first impression of Fangorn is that it is a wholly nonhuman and 'frightfully tree-ish' (462) environment, isolated from human society. As the embodiment of the forest itself, sharing with it the name Fangorn, Treebeard is the expression of a nonhuman world that is seemingly objective, apolitical, nonaligned, and unconcerned with the trivial affairs going on in the ephemeral realms of human beings.[95] The Hobbits soon learn from Treebeard that the forest is, of course, like the Old Forest, affected by a long history of anthropogenic ecological devastation. The Ents' very existence is born in the context of deforestation, for Yavanna first created the tree-shepherds to counterbalance the anticipated destruction to her forests that Aulë's own creation, the Dwarves, would cause (*Silm*. 40-42). Simultaneously arborescent and humanoid, Ents appear to be ontological as well as physiological hybrids, able to think and act both within and beyond human scales of time. Treebeard becomes consciously aware that, while human actions take place on a timescale of little significance to the forest and the ancient Ents, the consequences of these actions are far-reaching. Like Le Guin's

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[94] Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, 2nd edition (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 270; Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 4.

[95] In this Treebeard is similar to Tom Bombadil. Like Treebeard, Bombadil's supposed impartiality is not the whole picture, given that he rescues the Hobbits (twice) from danger at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

forest inhabitants, the Ents model a preservationist ethic of sustainability, protecting their forest home from deforestation. The escape that Tolkien's imaginative vision affords us is inseparable from his critique of the rampant destruction of trees and forests in his own lifetime.

Unlike Fangorn, affected by but distanced from society, it is significant that the forests of Athshe are home to communities of beings recognisable as humans. It is impossible to examine the physical ecology of the forests in Le Guin's imagined world without considering its human denizens integrated within this environment. The Athsheans live in 'Forty Lands' distributed across five continents or 'Great Lands' of a similar climate, covered in largely deciduous forests of marginal variation (35). Athsheans have formed a decentralised network of bioregional-type communities, 'each with a different dialect' and 'infinite ramifications of manners, morals, customs, crafts' (35). The biodiversity of the tree species in the forest is figuratively and substantively reflected in the cultural diversity of their societies, each composed of various clans named after a species of tree, and each clan having its corresponding group of 'marriage-clans'. This guarantees, along with open trade and communication, that the communities are decentralised and diverse, but also fundamentally and intimately connected with each other.

It is difficult even for Selver to comprehend the false dichotomy of a purely nonhuman "nature" and human "culture". Entering the village of Cadast, Selver must look 'closely among the live-oaks and other trees' to find the 'houseroofs sticking up a couple of feet above the ground' which were 'fitted in among the tree-roots like badgers' setts' (37). Contrasted to the 'quickstone and plastilate Standard Issue' (20) of the Terran's HQ, the buildings are biodegradable, low-tech, and non-extractive constructions appropriate to the local environment: 'beam roofs' were mounded over with a thatch of small branches, pinestraw, reeds, earthmould.

They were insulating, waterproof, almost invisible' (37). The building materials of the Terrans are described through neologisms which are suggestive of concrete and plastic – ironically, materials which typically exist for a long time in the natural environment. These neologisms emphasise the contrast when read beside the older, compound words that describe the biodegradable materials used by the Athsheans. There is even a sustainable waste-disposal system – a 'roosting-tree' of grey kites which act as 'the garbage service' (39). In one image, Le Guin demonstrates the way the forest is materially and culturally ingrained in everyday life of the Athsheans, when Ebor Dendep is seen sat weaving a basket of fern stems and singing 'a song about gathering ferns, a girl's song' which 'trilled like a cricket's' (37). Indeed, the soundscape of the village, the 'voices calling here and there and the babble of women bathing or children playing by the stream', do not dominate the acoustic ecology of the forest just as their houses do not dominate its physical ecology: the sounds of Cadast were 'not so loud as the morning bird-song and insect-drone and under-noise of the living forest of which the town was one element' (38).

If the Athsheans seem like a fantastic dream-vision, a naïve escape from the complexities of the world we currently inhabit, one only needs to remember that such societies have long existed and continue to exist, endangered by the same genocidal industrial capitalism that seeks to destroy the Athsheans. The colonialist Captain Davidson seems like a caricature until one considers former President Jair Bolsonaro's genocidal attack on indigenous peoples and unprecedented deforestation of the Brazilian rainforest. Through Davidson, Le Guin provides a critique of the way ideologies assume themselves to be realities, fixed and unchanging. Davidson juxtaposes 'practical, realistic men' (63) of the Colonial Administration to Athshean

sympathisers in 'dreamland, along with the creechies' (62). In contrast, the Athsheans' visionary Dreaming sees a dynamic mutuality between their real and dream forest, suggesting that fantasy is no more an escape from reality for us than the 'dream-time' is from the 'world-time' for the Athsheans.

The Athsheans' guerrilla tactics rely on the forest for cover, surprise attack, and dispersal to overcome their colonial oppressors. As the Terran military leader, Colonel Dongh, explains, the Athsheans are undefeatable because the landscape is 'covered with trees and undergrowth', and because Athshean communities have 'no cities, no vital network, no centralised control' (103).[96] Despite this, the Athshean societies manage to unite into a coherent force to revolt against their oppressors without the need of a centralised system of governance. Selver arrives in Cadast to warn the community of the advancing deforestation and inform them of his plan to launch an attack on the Terran HQ. There is a resemblance to the way Merry and Pippin arrive in Fangorn and warn Treebeard of Saruman's rampant deforestation, leading Treebeard to gather the ents into a meeting or 'entmoot' to decide the best course of action. While both decision-making strategies are democratic, however, the inclusive, grass-roots participatory democracy of the Athsheans perhaps aligns closer with the core principles of ecopolitics.[97] Le Guin imagines forms of decision-making in her novella which, far from escaping the complexities of global politics,

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[96] Colonel Dongh goes on to explain that 'You can't disable a guerrilla type structure with bombs, it's been proved, in fact in my own part of the world where I was born proved it for about thirty years fighting off major super-powers one after the other in the twentieth century' (p. 103). Colonel Dongh may be an allusion to either the South Vietnamese military leader, Colonel Phạm Văn Đổng, or his enemy, the North Vietnamese military leader, Lieutenant-colonel Đồng Sĩ Nguyên. In either case, Le Guin recalls the way the French and the Americans were fought off in Vietnam using the guerilla tactics of the Viet Cong. Except, in the story, Le Guin constructs a role reversal in that Dongh becomes the colonialist defeated by guerilla warfare.

[97] Neil Carter, *The Politics of the Environment: Ideas, Activism, Policy*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 42.

anticipate the deliberative democratic tradition of citizen assemblies now being posed as a means to generate solutions to complex issues like climate change.[98] The ‘Old Women’ preside over the Athshean community as venerated maternal figures, but do not steer the outcome of the decision-making process, in contrast to the all-male, paternalistically tree-shepherding Ents. The moot determines the lives of all the plants and animals in the forest, who merely ‘stood in listening silence’ (484). Even the Hobbits can only listen to the longwinded, indecipherable, and intoned Entish ‘*boom, boom, rumboom, boorar, boom boom*’ (479). By contrast, in the polyphonic village meeting of Cadast, after hearing the ‘singsong recitation’ of the messenger, Trethat, there is the auditory participation of a bird, which ‘said’ (not sang) ‘“Whet-whet?” experimentally’ (39), as if the nonhuman is intelligible and involved in the democratic proceedings and the wider cultural reinvention taking place. In both cases, the meetings result in decisive action. A group of Athsheans, led by Selver, decide to attack the HQ, which alerts the League to the injustices of the colonial project, who put a halt to deforestation, while the Ents (and, under the presumed direction of the Ents, the Huorns, who later slay the orcs in the Battle of the Hornburg), after methodical deliberation, decide in a spark of rage to attack Isengard. The Ents quench the fires of Orthanc by smashing the dam built by Saruman’s orcs, allowing the Isen to flood the machinery of war – a kind of post-industrial rewilding of the Ring of Isengard’s deforested wasteland. It is significant that the solution to deforestation modelled here lies not in retreating into the temporary safety of existing forests, but in recovering what was once lost.

[98] In spring 2020, Climate Assembly UK met to discuss how to achieve net zero in the UK, making over fifty policy recommendations, documented in ‘The Path to Net Zero (2020) report: <https://www.climateassembly.uk/recommendations/index.html> [accessed 14 January 2022].

The Word for World is Forest escapes the narrow frame of cultural traditions or norms which see humankind as in control or necessary conflict with its natural environment, conceiving instead of a culture coexisting with forests. While Rob Latham argues that there is a 'lingering Noble Savage Romanticism' in Le Guin's story, Lyubov's erroneous idealisation of the Athsheans can also be seen as a challenge to the way Westerners romanticise indigenous peoples.[99] Lyubov speculates that, because of the absence of violence and warfare in their societies, the Athsheans 'have no history', having formed a 'static, stable, uniform society' and that, 'like the forest they live in, they've attained a climax state' (52). What the anthropologist is alluding to is the concept of a 'climax community', developed by botanist F. E. Clements in what became known as the 'Clementsian succession theory' in theoretical ecology. This describes the gradual succession of biological communities in a given area until the ecosystem reaches a stable, 'climax' state of equilibrium between the non-living environment and its plant communities.[100] The planet of Athshe as a whole can be considered as a site of succession, where seeds carried by the Hainish become established (in a set of processes Clements called 'eccesis'), replacing whatever native biota may have already been present by modifying the environmental conditions ('reaction-replacement process' or 'facilitation') – in this case, the biosphere itself – so that its forests flourish ('stabilise') into a biodiverse, climax community.[101] Similarly, throughout his *Configurations of Culture Growth*, published a year after Clements's death, Kroeber describes

[99] Rob Latham, 'Biotic Invasions: Ecological Imperialism in New Wave Science Fiction', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 37.2 (2007), 103–19 (pp. 117-18).
[100] Herman H. Shugart, 'Succession', in Alan Hastings, Louis Gross, Alan Hastings, and Louis Gross (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Theoretical Ecology* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 1280-289 (p. 1281).
[101] Shugart, 'Succession', *Encyclopedia of Theoretical Ecology*, p. 1283.

various climaxes, cessations, ruptures, confluences, and transformations of cultures.[102] We can see how rupture manifests itself in the foreign invaders, which stimulate change in the stabilised societies of the Athsheans, although whether that change leads to dissolution or positive reconstruction towards a further climax is as open-ended as it is in Kroeber's analysis.

In Le Guin's story, the anthropologist figure of Lyubov converges Clementsian succession theory with a historical theory in which societies become stabilised, suggesting the Athsheans have achieved a society that, due to a lack of sudden change (or 'disturbance' in ecological terms) brought on by violence or warfare, is 'static'. Lyubov accepts that this does not mean the Athsheans are 'incapable of adaptation', as their abandonment of pacifist traditions in the wake of Terran violence demonstrates. However, the argument that the Athsheans are ahistorical perhaps says more about the Terrans' history (and conception of history) than it does the Athsheans' supposed absence of history. Lyubov's anthropological theory as to the Athsheans' lack of history reveals the subtle prejudice in the view that indigenous peoples only enter historical time when they were colonised by Europeans, that their interactions with the environment before this juncture were unchanging. Recent genetic and archaeological studies of the Amazon rainforest have revealed that, far from being a pristine, "untouched" nonhuman environment, the composition of its plant communities and ecology has been profoundly altered by indigenous peoples for millennia, rendering it one enormous 'secondary forest'.[103]

[102] Kroeber, *Configurations of Culture Growth*.
[103] C. Levis, et al. 'Persistent Effects of Pre-Columbian Plant Domestication on Amazonian Forest Composition', *Science* 355.6328 (2017), 925-31; Umberto Lombardo, et al., 'Early Holocene crop cultivation and landscape modification in Amazonia', *Nature* 581 (2020), 190-93.

The escape from present realities writers like Le Guin afford us does not offer comfort from the uncertainty of the future, imperilled by social and ecological crises. The purpose of fantasy's escape is not to promise impossibilities, but to expand our expectations of the possible. There is hope in the halt to deforestation and colonisation, but it a hope that is conditional rather than assured, dependent rather than determined. The mutability of a forest ecosystem means that a clear-felled area already shows promising signs of ecological restoration: the rotted stumps give way to 'fibreweed', under whose 'hirsute leaves the seedling shrubs got their first growth, the sumacs, dwarf aspens, and salviforms which, grown, would in turn protect the seedling trees. Left alone […] this area might reforest itself within thirty years and retain the full climax forest within a hundred. Left alone' (70). Whether or not it is left to Clementsian succession to a climax community is uncertain, but the ecological processes that are already underway give hope to our own heavily deforested Amazon, Sumatra, Congo, Mekong.[104] However, while the logged plain is beginning to recover, there are ecological tipping points: the landmass known as 'Dump Island' is now a 'dead loss' because 'if more than a percentage of the forest is cut over a certain area, then the fibreweed doesn't reseed' (59). We, like the future Terrans in the story, must attend to the fact that 'A forest ecology is a delicate one. If the forest perishes, its fauna may go with it' (59). Le Guin's imaginative political ecology warns us of the mutability of our existence – a mutability that is the grounds for hope as well as despair, contingent upon our collective efforts.

[104] Vietnam's biodiverse rainforests in the Greater Mekong region, decimated through the chemical defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, and heavily deforested in the years preceding it, has been showing signs of recovery since the 1990. See Michael Tatarski and Shanti Johnson, 'Vietnam's Forests on the Upswing After Years of Recovery', *Mongabay* [online], 11 December 2016, <https://news.mongabay.com/2016/12/vietnams-forests-on-the-upswing-after-years-of-recovery/> [accessed 2 December 2021].

With the courage, creativity, and clarity of vision fantasy unlocks within us, may we begin to reimagine humankind's relationship with forests.

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Throughout, I have sought to reclaim the term "escape", made fraught and confused with a long history of misuse in fantasy scholarship, to argue that the escape of fantasy seeks not to avoid or retreat from reality, nor does it deny its existence. To escape into fantasy's forests is to encounter alternative ways of being in the world, liberated from imaginative, psychological, and political limitations imposed upon us, or otherwise reinforced by everyday experience of a world increasingly defined by the human. Reclaiming escape puts into question those "realities" – dangerously anthropocentric and unsustainable fantasies – rapidly destroying those ecosystems on which the very life of this planet depends, including forests. In the ancient, creaking dark of Old Forest, self-serving certainties fracture into contested ground, ruptured by the roots of Old Man Willow. Stories, such as the tales told by Tom Bombadil, force the Hobbits to confront, rather than seek to avoid, complex and uncomfortable truths about their relationship with the forest and the wider world. In Morris's Evilshaw, the psychological benefits and limits of escape are explored through the transformation of Birdalone, whose deepening awareness and understanding of the natural world become a source of wellbeing necessary for personal and social regeneration. Finally, in Le Guin's Athshean forests, escape takes on explicitly social and political dimensions which demonstrate the radicalism of fantasy's escape from the politics of exploitation, reminding us of the necessity of imagining alternative societies in which people and forests coexist.

CHAPTER TWO
ENCHANTMENT

From the mysterious and morally ambiguous illusionism of Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*, to the wonder invoked by the numinous beauty of Lothlórien in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, to the material magic emanating from the Immanent Grove in Le Guin's Earthsea books, forests are places of enchantment in fantasy fiction. The aim of this chapter is to understand how and in what ways these imaginary forests are enchanted. Throughout, I also consider the magic of the stories themselves. By immersing us into enchanting visions of imaginary forests, the stories encourage us to feel for ourselves a sense of enchantment when in the forests of our own world. I argue that this sense of enchantment, embodied and enacted by fantasy forests, is not only possible but necessary in a time of ecological crises.

In this I follow in the footsteps of political philosopher Jane Bennett, whose *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001) tells an 'alter-tale' to Max Weber's original disenchantment thesis which has for so long haunted the Western imagination. In a lecture of 1918, Weber described a historical process by which 'mysterious incalculable forces' had been dispelled by rationalisation and desacralization through the emergence of a mechanistic, scientific materialism, with which one may now 'master all things by calculation'.[1] The argument goes that "Nature" – set apart from and subjugated to an explicitly human (and implicitly male, white, Western) "Culture" – was flattened ontologically into a plane of mindless matter with the advent

[1] Max Weber, 'Science as Vocation', *The Vocation Lectures*, edited by David Own and Tracey B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), pp. 1-32 (p. 13).

of Enlightenment ideas. Historian Jason Josephson-Storm has argued that disenchantment of modernity is itself a myth based on historical superstitions and suppositions. Many figures associated with the 'scientific revolution' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw themselves as 'magicians' on a quest to establish a 'divine science'.[2] Yet these figures can be regarded, paradoxically, as 'magicians of disenchantment', like the corrupted wizards in Le Guin's Earthsea books, dismissing and delegitimising older traditions and epistemologies.[3]

Bennett argues that enchantment is not only present in our lives today, but is an experience which 'may be valuable to ethical life'.[4] Bennett develops this argument in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, asserting that awareness of the agency and 'vital materiality' of the nonhuman counters 'fantasies of human mastery' inculcated by disenchantment.[5] Tolkien scholar Patrick Curry, in his similarly titled *Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life* (2019), argues that the joyous, sometimes overwhelming sense of wonder – in his view, the most fundamental quality of enchantment – invokes a 'non-possessive love' of the nonhuman.[6] In this, Curry is influenced by Tolkien's own conception of enchantment as *Faërie*, borne from the desire to 'hold communion with other living things' ('OFS' 15).

Tolkien differentiates enchantment from what he calls 'Magic', which 'produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World' whose desire, unlike enchantment, 'is

[2] Jason Ananda Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 309.
[3] Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, p. 61.
[4] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 3-4.
[5] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 122.
[6] Patrick Curry, *Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2019), p. 13, p. 91.

power in this world, domination of things and wills' ('OFS' 53). Tolkien himself never saw scientific rationalism as in any way divorced from enchantments of the fantastic imagination – indeed, he argues Fantasy:

> does not destroy or even insult Reason; and does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer the reason, the better fantasy will it make. ('OFS' 55)

It would be more accurate to say that Tolkien's enchantment opposes scient*ism*, or indeed any kind of dogmatism which seeks in arrogance to impose its will on others. One clear example of this Magic is the techno-scientific industrialist, Saruman, who represents the perversion of magical power in Middle-earth. In Le Guin's Earthsea books, magic resembles a hybridised form of scientific epistemology and spiritual belief, but it gradually becomes corrupted by institutional dogma, prejudice, and the pursuit of mastery over nature.

The forests I discuss in this chapter are magical in their own distinct ways, but it is a magic that has a solidity and earthiness, immanent within rather than beyond the world we ourselves inhabit. Even when this enchantment is revealed as a magic of illusionism, as it is in *The Wood Beyond the World*, the images it conjures nevertheless retain a striking resemblance to material reality. The authors' sensitivity to the subtleties and intricacies of real forest ecosystems demonstrates how a sense of wonder does not preclude clarity of vision or analytic thinking. The spell of fantasy induces both cognitive and affective effects on readers, revitalising our perception of ordinary, but nevertheless beautiful and mysterious things: the rich aromas of earth, the colours of the sky, the ornate textures of tree bark, the intelligence of a spider's web, the elegant dance of sunlight and shadow upon a forest floor.

Writers, philosophers and ecocritics have sought to challenge the narrative of disenchantment and its ethical disengagement with the living world to promote a 're-enchantment'.[7] Many of these early advocates of re-enchantment, however, arguably fall into the flawed historicist logic of disenchantment with its efforts to displace one set of universalising attitudes or beliefs with another, ignoring the fact that, for many people and cultures, the world is always already enchanted. Ecocritics and indigenous writers today are challenging the myth of disenchantment by celebrating the ecological wisdom of peoples so long discounted in Western metanarratives of disenchantment and re-enchantment.[8] Admittedly, by studying three white, western, privileged authors, I fail in this project to account for the wonderful diversity of voices and stories about enchanted forests. Equally, however, focusing on three of the most influential writers of the modern fantasy tradition presents a valuable opportunity to explore how a culture apparently locked in the 'iron cage' of disenchantment contains keys to an alternative vision of life.[9]

[7] Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981); Thomas Moore, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life* (London: HarperCollins, 1996); Alistair E. McGraith, *The Reenchantment of Nature: The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis* (New York: Doubleday, 2002); James William Gibson, *A Re-enchanted World: The Quest for a New Kinship with Nature* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2009); Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Lauren Greyson, *Vital Reenchantments: Biophilia, Gaia, Cosmos, and the Affectively Ecological* (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2019).
[8] See Bénédicte Meillon (ed.), *Dwellings of Enchantment: Writing and Reenchanting the Earth* (London: Lexington Books, 2021). Recent special issues have been published in the journal *Environmental Humanities* and the Association of the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE-UKI), *Green Letters*, themed around enchantment and ecology: Mayako Murai and John Parham (eds.), 'Enchanted Environments', *Green Letters*, 25.2 (2021), 107-210; Stine Krøijer and Cecilie Rubow (eds.), 'Enchanted Ecologies and Ethics of Care', *Environmental Humanities* 14.2 (2022), 375–384.
[9] The 'iron cage' is the famous English (mis)translation of Max Weber's original phrase, *stalhartes Gehäuse* ('shell as hard as steel'), which he employs in the concluding pages of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 123. Popularly conceived, the 'iron cage' has become an image representative of Weber's entire outlook about the disenchanting rationalisation and loss of meaning in the modern (European) world.

Rita Felski considers the act of reading to be a modern form of enchantment which induces a kind of 'consensual hallucination' and that stories 'give us the magic, as well as the mundanity, of the everyday; they infuse things with wonder, enliven the inanimate world, invite ordinary and often overlooked phenomena to shimmer forth as bearers of aesthetic, affective, even metaphysical meanings'.[10] Concepts of enchantment and disenchantment have shaped the way literary scholars theorise fantasy literature as counter-hegemonic. Le Guin's own brother Karl Kroeber, a literary critic, asserts that 'Fantasy responds to the modern conditions of rationalized civilisation, culture deprived of enchantment'.[11] Astonishingly, Kroeber follows this statement by opposing fantasy not only to science fiction (in ways that ignore his sister's genre-bending imagination), but to 'science'.[12] The relationship between enchantment and disenchantment is evidently more complex and dynamic than Kroeber suggests. Michael Saler suggests that far from being beguiled by enchantment, in the way Morris's Walter is, our experience of reading fantasy invites us to inhabit multiple worlds – real and fictional – simultaneously.[13] Saler argues that fantasy's unique capacity to immerse the reader in an imagined world is fundamentally connected to its ability to create a convincingly realistic one, requiring analytical and dynamic 'self-reflexive' responses to reality on the part of both author and reader.[14] Because of this, fantasy is a genre suspended between disenchantment and enchantment, its stories borne from and reflecting a sense of disenchantment, which nevertheless

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[10] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 75.
[11] Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 30.
[12] Kroeber, *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction*, p. 30.
[13] Michael T. Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 13.
[14] Saler, *As If*, p. 13.

have the ability to enchant the modern reader.[15] It is perhaps this self-reflexive quality which makes enchantment an ethical as well as an aesthetic experience. As Glen Wilmott asserts in *Reading for Wonder: Ecology, Ethics, Enchantment* (2018), the sense of wonder stimulated through reading profoundly influences how we perceive and engage with the more-than-human world.[16] Seen in this way, enchantment works in opposition to the supposed "escapism" I challenged in the previous chapter. Through enchantment, fantasy has the potential to enrich our understanding and experience of forests beyond the textual boundaries of imaginary worlds.

I begin by venturing into *The Wood Beyond the World* – the first and most enigmatic of Morris's fantasy novels. Following the protagonist into a Wood pervaded with illusions, I explore the ambigious nature of enchantment as both wonderous and perilous in its power to imitate reality. I then explore the state of wonder Frodo feels in Lothlórien as an aesthetic, but also ethical experience. Here enchantment is a feeling that arises from what is often ordinary or overlooked aspects of the forest environment, inviting appreciation and contemplation on the ethical status of the more-than-human. Finally, I argue that Le Guin's Immanent Grove embodies and enacts an ever-living enchantment in spite of an intensifying process of disenchantment threatening socioecological systems in Earthsea. The Grove stands as the embodiment of Le Guin's ecological conception of magic – an enchantment that must be attended to if we are to repair our own damaged world.

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[15] Saler, *As If*, p. 12.
[16] Glenn Wilmott, *Reading for Wonder: Ecology, Ethics, Enchantment* (London: Palgrave, 2018).

IV

The Wood Beyond the World

Shimmers of Suggestion

The experience of reading Morris's deceptively simple novel, *The Wood Beyond the World*, is like straying off a path and becoming entangled in a thicket. We follow its protagonist, Golden Walter, as he ventures to a strange land, enters the eponymous Wood, and encounters two enchantresses: the evil Lady and her virtuous slave, the Maid, with whom Walter will elope towards the end of the story. Tom Shippey introduces the novel in the 1980 reprint as working through the 'shimmer of suggestion', its Wood shrouded in a 'cloud of unknowing' where 'all appearance is illusion'.[17] Illusions and ambiguities suffuse the novel – in terms of the mysterious and duplicitous characters Walter meets, as well as the beautiful Wood in which they dwell.

In the wonderous but 'Perilous Land' of *Faërie*, the enthralling power of 'Magic' means that it is often mistaken for true 'Enchantment' which, Tolkien asserts, 'does not seek delusion, nor bewitchment and domination; it seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves' ('OFS' 54). Juxtaposed, the Lady and the enslaved Maid appear to embody these two kinds of magical power. Yet, on closer examination, the magical power each employs begins to resemble the other, complicating not only our conception of enchantment but the ethical positions of the characters, and the moral "message" of the story – if, indeed, there is one. Is the distinction

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[17] Tom Shippey, 'Introduction', *The Wood Beyond the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. xiv, p. xvi, p. xiv.

between Enchantment and Magic not intrinsic but contingent upon the motivations of the magician? If so, is Magic justified if it is used for good ends?

Much like Morris's intricate botanical wallpaper designs and patterns, the image of the Wood is both naturalistic and an elaborately composed artifice. Largely resembling a European deciduous forest, the Wood is also richly embellished with the fantastic symbols and motifs of medieval romance. How do we begin to distinguish between the real, imaginary, and illusory phenomena of the Wood? Is the Wood enchanted because it is home to magical people, or because it is itself, in some way, an enchantment?

While the story neatly closes with a happily-ever-after for Walter and the Maid, we are never quite out of the woods, the 'cloud of unknowing' hanging heavy over us long after we have finished reading. Rita Felski comments reproachfully that 'Contemporary critics pride themselves on their power to disenchant, to mercilessly direct laser-sharp beams of critique at every imaginable object'.[18] Instead, I leave open the many difficult questions Morris's novel poses about enchantment. I do not attempt to "lift the veil" on Morris's novel and answer these questions conclusively. Several of these questions I will take up further with Tolkien and Le Guin but, for now, it suffices to say that what Morris does is demonstrate how rich and multifaceted the concept of enchantment is.

In many ways, Morris's novel embodies the paradoxical kind of magic it depicts. It effects an enchantment that engenders as much as it evades critical explication. Seen in this way, the figure of the magician becomes associated in our minds with the figure of the author, both of

[18] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 54.

whom can conjure a vision of an enchanted Wood with vivid intensity and mimetic power. We share in Walter's frustrations and wonderments, caught between the temptation to become fully immersed in this otherworld, and the desire to distance oneself from it, speculating some other layer of meaning always lying hidden beneath the surface appearance of the prose. Michael Saler argues that, by the fin-de-siècle, the imaginary worlds of "as if" narratives challenged essentialist readings with an 'ironic imagination' in which a reader performs a kind of cognitive balancing act between real and provisionally "true" fictional worlds.[19] Morris's novel exemplifies Saler's argument. In this enchanted Wood, we are never quite sure whether we are within or beyond the world.

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Phillippa Bennet has argued that the 'geographical web of extraordinary places' in Morris's last romances 'are deliberately ambiguous – residing "beyond" or at the "end" they are both in and out of the world'.[20] The Wood is described in a simple, naturalistic, and archaic prose style, transporting us into a world of the remote past that is nevertheless earthy and strangely familiar. Matic Večko argues that the mimetic quality of 'naturalistic descriptions' give the novel 'a cohesive secondary world,' yet one that is 'estranged from consensus reality by the use of the marvellous'.[21] Beneath a surface realism are subtle suggestions that there is more to this forest than meets the eye. Despite 'having no sign of any dwelling of man', when Walter first enters the Wood, the trees appear to have been thinned or planted 'even as might be in a great king's park'

[19] Saler, *As If*, p. 21.
[20] Bennett, *Wonderlands*, p. 53.
[21] Matic Večko, 'William Morris and the Critical Utopia of High Fantasy', *Acta Neophilologica* 42.1-2 (2009), 45-55 (p. 48).

(49).[22] The spacing of the trees, 'not growing in a close wood or tangled thicket, but set as though in order' (49) has undoubtedly increased the availability of light reaching the understory, later described as 'bright and sunlitten' (54), to create the conditions for a 'flowery greensward' (49).

In real medieval hunting parks governed and managed by Forest Laws, well-spaced trees and clearings were created not according to aesthetic taste but to serve the purpose of hunting game. As Oliver Rackham states, the underwood of medieval parks was cyclically removed and the trees managed through coppicing and pollarding.[23] Rackham nevertheless states that 'Beauty and colour went with traditional woodmanship'.[24] Morris's Wood contains 'Deer of diverse kinds', and several scenes depict hunting, such as when Walter's shipmates come to the new land (33-34) and when Walter hunts with the Lady in the Wood (94-106). The hunt is practiced both by a magical denizen of the Wood, and by the crew from the ostensibly real medieval town, Langton on Holm – the locus of what James and Peggy Knapp would call 'fictional realism' in the text.[25] The hunting scene with Walter and the Lady imitates the allegory of the 'love-hunt', a literary tradition of medieval romance and its classical antecedents.[26] This strange interplay between fantasy and reality is emphasised by the performativity of the hunt. Walter pretends to court the Lady whilst trying (and failing) to resist her sexual temptations, and the Lady herself plays the role of a sylvan goddess: 'clad she was for the greenwood as the hunting-goddess of the

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[22] William Morris, *The Wood Beyond the World* (London: Ballantine, 1971), p. 47, p. 49. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.
[23] Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, p. 157.
[24] Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, p. 73.
[25] James, F. Knapp and Peggy, A. Knapp, *Medieval Romance: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 17.
[26] Saunders discusses the love-hunt.as it appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Marie de France's 'Chevrefoil' in *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, p. 31, p. 51. While Gillian Rudd, in *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late-medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), considers the amorous hunt in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* (p. 57).

Gentiles' (93). The description evokes Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt and focal mythological figure in James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890). The hunt in Morris's Wood, then, is typical of both medieval romance tradition and the late-Victorian medievalist imagination in which literary allusion is complexly intertwined with historical reality.

Morris's well-kept wood is composed of diverse species of tree: 'oak and ash, and sweet-chestnut and wych-elm, and horn-beam and quicken-tree' and 'bird-cherry' (49). Shippey writes that 'the most minute details demand scrutiny and gain clear focus' in the novel and speculates on the possible allusions to fairy-tales and folk symbolism of cherries.[27] But we might also consider the simple explanation that Morris's bird-cherry appears here because cherry trees are typically found on the edges of woodland. Morris's landscape is as much to do with verisimilitude as symbolism. The sheer diversity of the tree species growing in a small area of the Wood suggest it is a cultivated landscape, its scenery carefully arranged according to the design of Morris (or perhaps some unknown forester in the story). The Wood appears to be home only to the Lady, the Maid, the King's Son, and the Dwarf (or Dwarves – it is not clear if there are more than one), yet the land surrounding the Golden House shows signs of silvicultural activity such as coppicing, common in medieval woodland: here the trees are 'smaller' (75) and 'younger' (76) with 'birch' (76), and 'hazel-brake' and 'hazel coppice' (138).

It may seem odd that Morris would include superficial details such as these, which seem to bear no particular significance to the narrative. However, through these naturalistic descriptions, the Wood becomes convincing as a real location and not a vague figment of Walter's imagination. More than this, perhaps, they hint that someone dwells within it, despite

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[27] Shippey, 'Introduction', p. xiv.

his first impression. Morris subtly reveals the artifice of this naturalistically described if not strictly "natural" Wood. Its beauty and sensual delights are carefully presented to Walter. The temptation of cherries and the 'scents of that fair land […] like the odor of one great nosegay' (49) on the woodland edge give him ecstasy and wonder. Yet they also lure him further into the mysterious Wood and into the Lady's clutches, as if she herself were offering the fruit and flowers to enthral him. Even the most naturalistic aspects of the Wood, then, become a source of suspicion.

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Tony Pinkney argues that forests in Morris's imagination are 'an essential romance topos', a place where 'an apparently naturalistic world can metamorphose in the blink of an eye to romance'.[28] Indeed, the sudden emergence of the Dwarf into the scene displaces us from this meticulously described, naturalistic woodland into the world of myth and fantasy. The transition between a 'naturalistic world' and 'romance' is often sudden, but sometimes it is more gradual, blurring a sharp delineation between them. Walter recognises the Dwarf from an earlier vision he had in Langton on Holm before he departed to this strange, new land, along with the Lady and the Maid. At first, it seems only Walter is able to see these figures until his father's scrivener, Arnold, glimpses them disappearing as if 'sunk into the earth' (16). Walter is certain that 'there was at least something before my eyes which grew not out of mine own brain' – indeed, that he is not 'brainsick, a dreamer of dreams' (17).[29] We are tempted to believe that they and, by

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[28] Tony Pinkney, 'The Dialectic of Nature in Nowhere', *The Journal of William Morris Studies*, 19.3 (2011), 50– 63 (p. 53).

[29] The phrase recalls the line 'Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time' in the Prologue to William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise: A Poem*, 3/4 vols (London: Ellis, 1868-70), vol I, p. 3, line 22.

extension, the ‘outward world’ (190) beyond the magic Wood, are a figment of his troubled imagination, distractions from the tragedies that have befallen him. Ultimately, however, Walter’s vision cannot be explained away as a dream, delusion, or projection – that Arnold himself sees the figures testifies as much. Equally, even if we accept the reality of the Wood and the characters who dwell there, we learn the vision is nevertheless an illusion, cast by the Lady to lure Walter to her realm. Bennett argues Walter’s final ‘trust in the authenticity of his visions’ brings him to the Wood Beyond the World and his path to self-fulfilment. When Walter slays the Dwarf towards the end of the novel, he questions whether he will somehow come alive again, or else vanish like the vision at the beginning of the story (146), for which he is mistaken. We are never quite sure as to the true extent of the illusionism at work in the novel.

In Morris’s Wood, illusions are mistaken for real things, while at other times real things are mistaken for illusions. We see a similar confusion occurring in Tolkien’s Mirkwood – whose name, translated from the Old Norse *Myrkvidr* from the poem *Lokasenna* in the *Poetic Edda*, is suggested to have been borrowed from Morris’s *A Tale of the House of Wolfings*.[30] The journey of Bilbo and the Dwarves through the forest in *The Hobbit* is marked by various illusions taking place on multiple axes of plausibility. Spaces and features within the forest are imbued with an illusionist magic, such as the Enchanted River that induces deep sleep, dreams, and amnesia (143, 146-7), or the flickering glade of the feasting Elves which appear and disappear like a will-o'-the-

[30] Carter, *A Look Behind* The Lord of the Rings, pp. 169-70. However, there appear to be only minor similarities between Tolkien’s and Morris’s Mirkwoods. As Jason Fisher argues, many of the features of Tolkien’s Mirkwood may have a philological rather than literary origin. The Old Norse *myrkr* is suggestive of ‘murk’ or darkness which characterises Mirkwood. But its Indo-European root, *mer, meaning to flicker, may refer to the flickering elf-fires that appear in the wood, while the phonologically similar Finnish word *myrkky*, which ‘doesn't mean “dark” at all; rather, it means “poison,”’ in ways that are suggestive of the poisonous spiders, as well as Sauron’s spreading, corruptive magic in the forest. See Jason Fisher, ‘Dwarves, Spiders, and Murky Woods: J.R.R. Tolkien's Wonderful Web of Words’, *Mythlore* 29.1/2, 1-15 (p. 8).

wisp (147-51). Yet we also see intrinsic, nonmagical qualities of the forest as deceiving Bilbo and the Dwarves, such as the dense foliage that shadows them in darkness and hides creatures in the undergrowth (138-9), to the way its topography deceives Bilbo when he climbs a tree in a dip in the landscape, tricking him into thinking the forest extends indefinitely (146). While the forest composition and structure of Morris's Wood is unlike the dark, dense feel in Mirkwood, both woods are constructed as spaces of concealment, distorting the characters' perception of the real and unreal.

In one scene in Morris's story, a lion emerges suddenly before Walter and the Lady. Walter performs the role of a chivalrous knight and slays the lion. Afterwards, Walter is ordered to go back to the clearing and retrieve its skin and discovers its carcass has now vanished. It transpires that the bizarre appearance of the lion was a false vision conjured by the predatory Lady herself. The lion recalls the one depicted in 'The Forest' [Fig. 5], a tapestry produced by Morris & Co in 1887, surrounded by acanthus leaves woven with filigree patterning, over which is inscribed with verse later published as 'The Lion' in *Poems by the Way*: 'the beast that be in woodland waste, now sit and see nor ride nor haste'. While the lion sits rather out of place in the novel, it is certainly indigenous to the realm of Arthurian romance that is stylised in 'The Forest'. In Chrétien de Troye's twelfth-century poem *Le Chevalier au lion*, Yvain rescues a lion from a

dragon in Brocéliande, the enchanted forest (identified by some scholars as Paimpont Forest in Brittany), being home to Morgan Le Fay's Vale of No Return, where she ensnares knights much like the Lady does in the novel. Similarly, Tolkien evokes the medieval romance motif of the *Chasse du cerf blanc* in Marie de France's lays of *Guigemar* and Chretien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide*, when a 'snowy white' (*Hobbit* 143) hind is described as suddenly jumping across the Enchanted River in Mirkwood.[31] Saunders argues the white deer in medieval romance makes their forests 'partially believable by [their] portrayal as a hunting preserve, and yet remaining a highly symbolic world of adventure'.[32] We can understand the white deer as an animal which vaults between the ordinary and the otherworldly, emblematic of the wider blend between history and fantasy in medieval forests which Tolkien evokes in Mirkwood. However, unlike Tolkien's white deer, Morris's lion is nothing more than a false image, a self-conscious intrusion of fantasy into a naturalistic scene.

The potency of this illusion causes Walter to lose his grip on reality:

> And what may I deem now, but that this is a land of mere lies, and that there is naught real and alive therein save me. Yea, belike even these trees and the green grass will presently depart from me, and leave me falling down through the clouds. (127)

Walter's sense of disillusionment is so extreme that he momentarily enters a state of metaphysical solipsism, thinking that even the solid earth on which he stands, the very 'trees and the green grass' around him, are a "fantasy" in the pejorative sense of the word.

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[31] Though rare and ethereal, white deer do occur due to the genetic condition known as leucism.

[32] Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, pp. 60-61.

Towards the end of the story, the Maid picks and adorns herself with 'eglantine' and 'roses' (175), 'meadow-sweet', 'eyebright', and 'forget-me-not', and magically renews them so that 'all was fresh and bright as if it were still growing on its own roots' (175). Performing the spectacle in front of the people living beyond the Wood known as the Bear-folk, the Maid appears before them as a Goddess just as the Lady herself. Walter himself fears that 'the Maid was of the fays, or of some race mightier' who 'had but won his love to leave him and forget him for a new-comer, after the wont of fay-woman, as old tales tell' (200) – but this fear quickly passes, and he becomes overcome by trusting love. The contrast between elaborate artifice and organic aesthetics becomes encapsulated in metaphor: the flowers appear on her raiment 'as with gems', making her seem 'like a great orient pearl against the fretwork of the gold-smiths' (194). Where we see the Lady's magic as pure illusionism, the Maid uses raw materials of the natural world and imbues them with her magic power. There is also perhaps a benevolent aspect to the Maid's enchantment upon the living world: the life of the flowers become renewed just as the wider landscape of the Bear-folk become richer and more fruitful. Yet, at other points in the narrative, the Maid's magic appears no different to the Lady's: the image of Walter she casts upon the King's Son to deceive the Lady, resulting in both of their deaths, is indistinguishable from the magic the Lady uses to conjure the figures in Langton on Holm.

We can spot the beautiful and potentially perilous enchantress appearing in Morris's other prose romances. In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, which I discussed in Chapter One, there is the magical figure of Habundia, whose beauty and maternal love for Birdalone (whose appearance she mirrors) juxtaposes with the equally skin-changing but malevolent witch who captures Birdalone. In *The Well at the World's End*, the dichotomy manifests in the ways in

which the Lady of Abundance is viewed by different characters at various points in the narrative. Ralph first encounters her being held captive in a wood, much like Birdalone and the Maiden. After he frees her, Ralph journeys to the Burgh, where he hears men speaking about a woman who leads the Fellowship of the Dry Tree, a 'great witch', who is 'their goddess, their mawmet, their devil, the very heart and soul of their wickedness' (*Well* I 65).[33] We are reminded of how the enchantress of Evilshaw (either the witch or Habundia) is rumoured to be 'the Goddess of the Gentiles' (*Water* 1), and the Lady in *The Wood Beyond the World* is seen dressed for the 'greenwood as the hunting-goddess of the Gentiles' (*Wood* 93). In each case, the woods in which each of these women dwell is viewed as perilous because of an explicitly feminine form of magical power associated with either Satanic or pagan figures, a power that works through beguiling illusions. Evoking the witches of *Macbeth* (a play as equally full of deceptions, illusions, and moral complexities), Ralph asks Roger 'Is this woman fair or foul to look on?', to which he replies dishonestly:

> That is nought so easy to tell of, […] whiles she is foul, whiles very fair, whiles young and whiles old; whiles cruel and whiles kind. But note this, when she is the kindest then are her carles the cruellest; and she is the kinder to them because they are cruel. (*Well* I 66)

Later, we see Ralph come into the lands surrounding the Castle of Abundance, whose Lady, he learns from the workers in the fertile fields surrounding the Castle, has brought peace and prosperity to the land and to its people. Unlike the realm of the Golden House in *The Wood*

[33] 'mawmet' is an archaic spelling (perhaps taken from *Mandeville's Travels*, to which Morris makes numerous allusions to in this story, of 'mammet', which the OED defines as 'A false god; an image of a false god'. 'mammet, n.' *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2023) <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 17 July 2023]. Appropriately, then, the figure of the 'mawmet' is associated not only with pre- or non-Christian deities but with idolatry – the belief in false images.

Beyond the World, the land is peopled and worked as well as beautiful – a more realistic if utopian vision of communal rural life. Yet the Lady herself is absent, and Ralph must rely on images and tales, told by others or written down in a book, to fathom who she is. In a chamber in the Castle is an ornate arras depicting forests and gardens, and 'amidst all this greenery were figured over and over again two women' (I 99) depicted in scenes reminiscent of the witch and Birdalone at the beginning of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. We learn they also illustrate the tale Ralph reads in 'a Book Concerning The Well at the World's End' (I. 103). Only when Ralph meets her again in the wildwood, and hears her tale from her own mouth, rather than through stories, images, and the gossiping of others, do we get a sense of her true identity. Throughout his prose romances, Morris plays with the paradox of the sylvan enchantress depicted in art and literature, such as the multifaceted Morgan Le Fay in Arthurian legends.[34] But Morris does this by warning us to not always or not wholly trust how things appear or are represented. In the process, the dangers of delusion and deception become associated, not with the sylvan enchantress, but those living beyond the wood who have limited knowledge of her and yet seek to frame and undermine her.

In Tolkien's Lady of the Wood, Galadriel, we can find traces of the Maid, Habundia, and Lady of Abundance. Tolkien portrays his sylvan enchantress as similarly possessing benevolent magical power that is intimately connected to the qualities of the forest itself. Much like the Lady of Abundance, Galadriel is feared by those living outside the wood. On their approach into Lothlórien, Boromir warns that 'of that perilous land we have heard in Gondor, and it is said that

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[34] See Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

few come out who once go in; and of that few none have escaped unscathed' (*LotR* 338). Boromir later makes a similar remark about Fangorn Forest, saying 'it is now many lives of men since any of us visited it to prove or disprove the legends that have come down from distant years' (374), which itself reminds one of the stories told by the Hobbits about the Old Forest, which I discussed in Chapter One. It also recalls the legends told of Evilshaw at the beginning of *The Waters of the Wondrous Isles*, which 'deemed it more than perilous' 'though few indeed had entered it' (1). At the same time, Aragorn does not dismiss such stories of the dangers of the Golden Wood, warning Boromir that it is 'Perilous indeed, […] fair and perilous; but only evil need fear it, or those who bring some evil with them' (*LotR* 338).

We do see glimpses of a perilous Galadriel, appearing for a moment like the Lady in *The Wood Beyond the World*, when she is tempted to take the Ring from Frodo. She fantasises what she would become a

> Queen. Not dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth! All shall love me and despair! (366)

Galadriel begins by deceiving herself that she would use the Ring for good, speaking of a power which transcends morality – both 'beautiful and terrible', 'Fair' and 'Dreadful'. But the fantasy fades and Galadriel is seen to 'pass the test' (366), deciding in better judgement that the magical power of the Ring would only corrupt her, as Gandalf had wisely decided before her, in contrast to the folly of his own magical mirror-image, Saruman, or Aragorn in contrast to Boromir. Curiously, with this sober return to Galadriel's true self, she appears in likeness to Morris's Maid, 'a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad' (366). Similarly, while the Lady in Morris's Wood abuses her power, the Maid relinquishes it. Coming to the city of Stark-wall, the Maid says she no longer needs to 'fall back upon the guile and wizardry which I had filched from my very foes' (*Wood* 208-09). It seems that virtue of these enchantresses lies not in what kind of magical power they use, but in how and whether it is used at all.

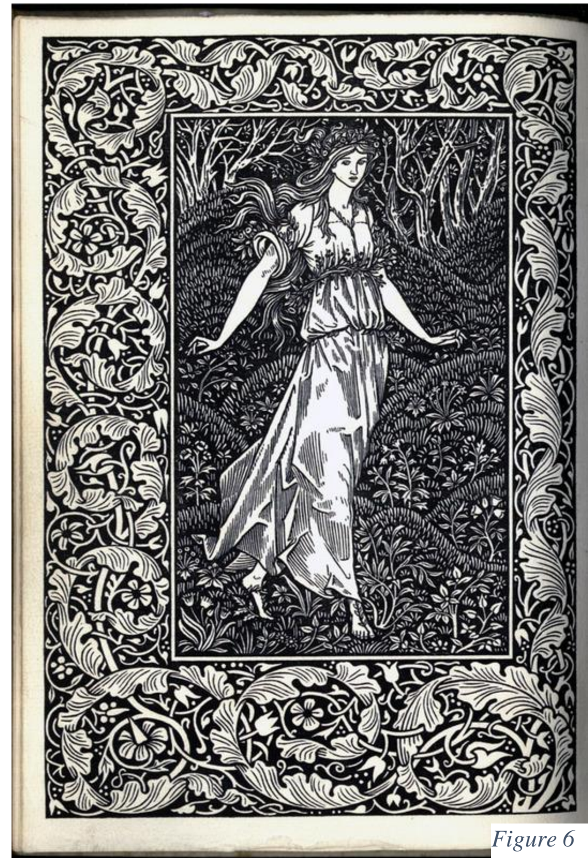

Figure 6

In Morris's Wood, the wonderous but deceptive enchantment the Maid uses to bedeck herself with living flowers is replaced by the simple white coat she wore before, but which 'was now embroidered with imagery of blossoms in silk and gold' (235). In Edward Burne-Jones's Frontispiece to the Kelmscott edition of the novel [Fig. 6], the Maid appears in a simple white

frock, wreathed, and garlanded with the floral abundance of the scene of the flowery greensward (49) described earlier in the novel, as well as the botanic embellishments of the page's border. The border of the frontispiece is composed of the flowery images of the scenery it frames, arranging the landscape it depicts into artistic design and pattern. Similarly, the Maid picks and arranges flowers into garlands and wreaths her body. We can even see stems and foliage creeping up between the figure's toes and around her ankle, blending together the human form and the forms of nature. That the Maid's clothes become embroidered with representation of flowers suggest that what we are left with, after the magic of illusionism is eschewed, is artistic beauty. More specifically, it is an artistic style that is embodied in Burne-Jones's frontispiece and celebrated in Morris's lectures, designs, and fiction: an art that is an enchantment because it works in sympathy with the living world from which it draws its inspiration.

Inviting Frodo and Sam to look upon the Mirror, Galadriel ponders over what exactly the word 'magic' refers to:

> This is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not understand clearly what they mean; and they seem to use the same word of the deceits of the Enemy. (*LotR* 362)

'To the Elvish craft, Enchantment, Fantasy aspires,' Tolkien said in 'On Fairy-Stories', and here Galadriel's Mirror perfectly reflects fantasy's enchantment in the way it seemingly 'produces a Secondary World' ('OFS' 53). Lucie Armitt considers the scene as 'a clue about how to read texts: it cautions patience and careful attention, employing the worthy character Sam as our model readerly representative', who "reads" a vision that is both 'revelation' and 'concealment'.[35] We can approach Morris's novel in a similar way – as a kind of magic mirror. We are captivated by the enchanting visions presented to us, enraptured by the vividness of its

[35] Lucie Armitt, *Fantasy: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 39.

imaginary world. Yet we also feel as though there is more than meets the eye – that beneath the dark and inscrutable surface of the novel there are untold depths inviting endless interpretation and speculation.

V

Lothlórien

Recovering Wonder

Frodo is put under 'the Elvish craft, Enchantment' ('OFS' 53), when he first sees Cerin Amroth, the tree-ringed barrow deep within the forest of Lothlórien, 'heart of Elvendom on earth' (*LotR* 352). After being led blind into the wood by the Elves so that the location of their sylvan realm remains hidden, when his blindfold is removed Frodo 'looked up and caught his breath', then simply 'stood awhile still lost in wonder' (350). Tolkien conceives enchantment as *Faërie*, both a 'state' and a 'realm', terms suggesting a psychological but also physical space – a 'land, full of wonder' where one may 'wander' ('OFS' 9, 3). Wonder is an aesthetic and, as I shall argue, ethical experience emerging out of a dynamic relationality between the perceiving subject and the forest environment. Far from being bewitched by illusions and deceptions, wonder enchants characters into heightened states of sensory awareness in which the forms, colours, textures, sounds, and even smells of the forest become vivid and expressive. Lucidly expressed in the texts, fantasy's enchantment invites us to perceive the forests of our own world with acuity and a greater proclivity for wonder.

Frodo appears to experience a 'hesitation', which Tzvetan Todorov theorised as the cognitive suspension between fantasy and reality, when his blindfold is removed.[36] The sudden

[36] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), p. 27.

exposure to daylight presumably causes Frodo's pupils to constrict, temporarily rendering Lothlórien in a bizarre and dazzling lustre. Sam is seen 'rubbing his eyes as if he was not sure he was awake' and says that he 'feels as if I was *inside* a song, if you take my meaning' (351). The meaning of Sam's curious statement, as he hesitates between the real and unreal, is a deep, philological truth: 'enchantment' is rooted in the Latin *incantare*, *cantare* meaning 'sing'.[37] Yet the enchantment of the mysterious light of Lothlórien, 'for which his language had no name' (350), does not fade as it does in John Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', like a 'dream' or finish abruptly like 'a faery's song', transporting the subject back 'On the cold hillside'.[38] Tolkien wrote that 'though Dream is not unconnected with Faërie', reducing Faërie to mere dreaming misunderstands the 'primal desire […] the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder' ('OFS' 14). Frodo experiences a clarity and freshness of vision in which waking reality appears anew. Shapes and lines 'appear clear-cut' while colours shine luminously, from the 'snowy white' bark and 'pale gold' canopy of *mallorn* trees, upon which 'gleamed a white flet', to the 'green hillsides' bespeckled with 'small golden flowers shaped like stars' (*elanor*) and flowers 'white and palest green' (*niphredil*) which 'glimmered like mist' (350). The description of the Immanent Grove in Le Guin's *The Farthest Shore* (1972) is similarly rich with sensory detail. The olfactory and gustatory merge in a metaphor of synaesthetic precision when the Archmage, Ged, enters the Grove: 'under the branches the air smelled earthy and fresh, and had a taste in the mouth like live springwater' (*Farthest* 257). Here the metaphoric, elemental alchemy of air, soil, and water also suggest literal ecological interactions in a forest ecosystem: trees release oxygen and volatile organic compounds into the

[37] Fitting, then, that Tolkien's cosmogonical myth begins with the *Music of the Ainur*.
[38] John Keats, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 184-86, ll. 24, pp. 35-36.

air, mixing with the rain-damp, complex fragrances of the humus in which they grow, 'rich with the rotten leaves of all the years' (256). The moment of wonder Ralph experiences when he stops to rest in the Wood Perilous in *The Well at the World's End* is likewise multisensory. Ralph watches how 'the sun's rays fell aslant through the boughs of the noble oaks', smells 'the scent of the grass and bracken trodden by the horse-hoofs of that company' which 'went up into the warm summer air' and listens to 'the faint sound of a little stream in the dale below mingled with all the lesser noises of the forest' (*Well* I 45). Morris's forest is literally a space of dreams – Ralph (as he so often does) falls asleep in the wood, put under the spell of 'some dream made up of masterless memories of past days' (45).

While Frodo's moment of wonder is primarily a visual experience, in contrast to Ged's and Ralph's, the climactic unveiling of Cerin Amroth and the intensity with which Frodo feels a sense of wonder rests, ultimately, on his experiences while blindfolded. Before we arrive at Cerin Amroth, revealed in all its splendour, Frodo already appears enchanted. Following the footsteps of the Fellowship into the centre of the wood, Tolkien guides the reader steadily across the textual landscape, only disclosing aspects of the forest as they are perceived. Rather than being disoriented, Frodo becomes more aware of his surroundings and his situatedness within it. He can distinguish the smell of 'trees and the trodden grass' (*LotR* 349), much as Ralph is able to detect the 'scent of the grass and bracken trodden by the horse-hoofs' (*Well* I 45). He is also able to identify 'many different notes in the rustle of the leaves overhead' (*LotR* 349), like how Ralph picks out the 'faint sound of the stream' from the forest's ambient biophony (*Well* I 45). Frodo localises sounds of 'the river murmuring away on his right, and the thin clear voices of birds high in the sky' and feels 'the sun upon his face and hands', allowing him to perceive the varying

topography of the forest, even identifying 'when they passed through an open glade' (*LotR* 349). As cultural geographers Paul Rodaway and Yi-Fu Tuan have argued, sensory organs are, in essence, geographical tools, orienting and situating the subject in the external environment.[39] Paradoxically, Frodo's blindfolding makes Lothlórien more visible to readers, while artfully delaying and thereby intensifying the peak experience of wonder – an effect one may experience for oneself, as I discuss in Chapter Four.

In philosophical studies of the emotion as an aesthetic experience, wonder is said to arise with, through or because of the senses.[40] Philosopher Philip Fisher asserts throughout that wonder is 'tied to the visual'.[41] Highlighting the significance of wonder in both scientific thought and aesthetic appreciation, Fisher favours the ocular as the prime medium of wonder, and in so doing neglects the valuable role nonvisual senses have in the experience. Indeed, the very notion of individuated sensory modalities has more recently been called into question by the philosopher of neuroscience, Matthew Fulkerson, who suggests a 'sensory pluralism' in which there is a complex, multimodal interactivity between a variety of senses in any given experience.[42] It is remarkable that Frodo's experience of wonder in Lothlórien is, at first, an entirely nonvisual experience. That the visual is the centre of Fisher's attention, keeping other senses at the periphery, is indicative of a long historical tradition in the philosophy of senses, but it may partly

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[39] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974); Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[40] Ronald W. Hepburn, *Wonder and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984); Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Sophia Vasalou, *Wonder: A Grammar* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015). See also Curry, *Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life*, and Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.

[41] Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, p. 1.

[42] Matthew Fulkerson, 'Rethinking the Senses and Their Interactions: The Case for Sensory Pluralism', *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): 1–14.

stem from the fact that the majority of the examples he draws upon to illustrate his argument are from the visual arts. Even though reading itself lacks the sensual stimulation of other forms of aesthetic experience, Morris, Tolkien, and Le Guin's descriptions powerfully evoke the multisensory phenomenology of wonder. In the process, wonder is both simulated and stimulated, encouraging us to feel for ourselves the sensory richness of forest environments.

The preverbal and often ineffable nature of wonderous enchantment can be difficult to express, even when it takes the relatively well delineated form of visual experience. Tolkien writes that Faërie is 'indescribable, though not imperceptible' ('OFS' 10). Through Frodo, Tolkien attempts to articulate the significance of an experience that seems beyond analysis or explanation. Frodo 'saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful' (350). Viktor Shlovsky's concept of *ostranenie* or 'defamiliarisation' is illuminating here because he posits that 'The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things'.[43] Frodo's perception of colour is heightened because of enchantment's defamiliarisation, each colour representing some deeper meaning to him as if they had an entirely new set of signifiers. But to create 'names new wonderful' would make the colours utterly inexpressible to readers; Frodo can only gesture towards that which lies beyond comparably flat and vague words: 'gold and white and blue and green'. 'We should look at green again,' Tolkien writes in 'On Fairy-Stories', 'and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red' ('OFS' 57). Arguably, Frodo is familiar not so much with the colours

[43] Viktor Shklovsky, *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, edited and translated by Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 80.

themselves, but the dim and dusty verbal notions of colours, stripped away with the uncovering of his eyes so that he is able to perceive them nakedly, free from arbitrary signifiers.

The wood is bathed in a quasi-mystical light 'for which his language had no name', with the dappled gold and silver of the *mallorn* trees. These colours blend the lights of Laurelin and Telperion, the Two Trees of Valinor which grew when the Elves first awakened, and whose final fruit and flower became the Sun and Moon after they were destroyed by Melkor and Ungoliant at the end of the Years of the Trees.[44] The *mallorn* are thus imbued with the memory of the legendary Trees, embodying the mingled bliss and sorrow of the living world. The wood is given many names by different characters (Lothlórien, Lórien, the Golden Wood, *Dwimordene*, *Lórinand*, *Laurelindorenan lindelorendor malinornelion ornemalin*), each of which attempts to summon the source or quality of its enchantment. Lothlórien is prefigured in Tolkien's early poem, imitating the fourteenth-century dream-vision, *Pearl*, which he translated two years earlier, as 'The Nameless Land' (1927).[45] It is appropriate, then, that the name Lothlórien is translated by Treebeard to mean 'Dreamflower' (467) and that *Lórien* was also the name of the dwelling-place of the God of Dreams, Irmo, in Tolkien's mythology (*Silm.* 19). Like the Lórien of Middle-earth, the Lórien in the land of the Valar is deemed 'the fairest of all places in the world' and serves as a *locus amoenus*: 'often the Valar come themselves to Lórien and there find repose and easing of the burden of Arda' (*Silm.* 19). While it is unclear whether the wood 'itself is in a very real sense a dream sent or dreamed by the God of Dreams' as Verlyn Flieger suggests, the ways in which

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[44] In a letter reflecting upon the Light of Valinor, Tolkien associates it with a spiritual Light that is 'such a primeval symbol in the nature of the universe, that it can hardly be analysed' (*Letters* n. 148).
[45] For a fuller comparison between *Pearl* and Tolkien's Lothlórien, see Tom Shippey, *Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 196-201.

Lothlórien is associated with dreams certainly emphasises the dreamlike, inexpressible wonder of the wood.[46]

Despite the myth and mysticism surrounding these fantasy forests, the source of wonder is very much rooted or 'immanent' within material and immediate reality. Far from being a 'Rare Experience', as Fisher claimed in his book, wonder is often stirred through encounters with quotidian aspects of forest scenes. In the Morris example I discussed above, it is revealing how ordinary the moment is: the setting sun, oaks, grass, bracken, the 'little stream' which only has a 'faint sound', diffused among the 'lesser noises of the forest'. Yet together, perceived through Ralph's calm attentiveness to his surroundings, they engender a state of deep wonder. Bennett explores how Morris's 'topographies of wonder' are often 'common and seemingly unremarkable' yet elicit 'a potent experience of wonder in the sensitive observer'.[47] Towards the end of his quest, Ralph journeys through sublime, volcanic landscapes, reminiscent of the Iceland Morris himself travelled to in the summer of 1871, marvelling at fantastic phenomena such as 'wonderful fiery and green sunsets'.[48] Here, however, wonder is directed at the familiar features of a quiet English countryside – a contemplative kind of wonder which expresses profound appreciation of the everyday and the familiar. In Morris's lecture of 1881, 'Art and the Beauty of the Earth', Morris declares that 'there is no square mile of earth's inhabitable surface that is not beautiful in its own way, if we men will only abstain from wilfully destroying that beauty'.[49] If

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[46] Verlyn Flieger, *A Question of Time: J. R. R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1997), p. 192.
[47] Bennett, *Wonderlands,* p. 79
[48] It turns out Tolkien's famous 'green sun' does not in fact require Secondary Belief ('OFS' 48).
[49] William Morris, 'Art and the Beauty of the Earth', in *The Collected Works of William Morris: With Introductions by his Daughter May Morris*, vol. 22, edited by May Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 155-74 (p. 170).

we were to take heed of Morris's words today, wonder would be directed not just at the rare and exotic, the inaccessible, remote to most, but to the common copse and street tree which have perhaps become overfamiliar in daily life, but which are, nevertheless, vulnerable and worthy of our attention.

Tolkien's *mallorn*-trees and Le Guin's *arahda* are endemic to specific locations rarely visited by outsiders. As we have seen, Lothlórien is associated with the mythical First Age. The Immanent Grove is also revered as wood belonging to distant legends. In the creation story of Earthsea, *The Creation of Ea*, it is said that the Grove existed before all the islands were raised from the sea by the god Segoy and is still imbued with the Old Powers (*Tales* 599). Aesthetically the trees appear very similar: Frodo marvels at 'mallorn-trees of great height, still arrayed in pale gold' (*LotR* 250) similar to the *arhada*, growing 'like immemorial towers' with roots 'like the roots of mountains' (*Farthest* 256). The leaves of the *arhada* 'don't all turn in autumn, but some at every season, so the foliage is always green with a gold light in it' (*Other* 872). This strange phenology reminds one of the *mallyrn*, whose leaves are 'pale green above and beneath were silver, glistening in the sun; in the autumn they did not fall, but turned to pale gold', so that 'through spring and summer a grove of mallinorni was carpeted and roofed with gold' (*UT* 216). Unlike deciduous trees growing elsewhere, the *mallorn* and the *arhada* have a seemingly supernatural ability to keep their leaves through winter, giving the impression that the forests are enchanted, not affected by seasonal change like other trees. Yet Tolkien compares the *mallorn*'s upswept boughs and leaves to those found on deciduous trees such as a 'beech', while the

blossom ‘clusters like a cherry’ (216), much like how the *arhada* are said to be ‘something like oak, something like a chestnut’ (*Other* 872).[50]

In Lórien, Frodo wonders at rare flowering plants not seen elsewhere in Middle-earth, the winter-blooming *niphredil* and *elanor*, but from their description they do not seem very different from the common snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*) (also flowering in winter) and lesser celandine (*Ficaria verna*). In a letter to an Amy Ronald, Tolkien states that *niphredil* is ‘simply a delicate kin of a snowdrop’ but compares *elanor* not to lesser celandine but to a pimpernel – probably the yellow pimpernel (*Lysimachia nemorum*) (*Letters* 402). In the same letter, Tolkien discloses a botanical knowledge intertwined with a deep sense of wonder about common plant species such as these:

> All illustrated botany books (or better, contact direct with an unfamiliar flora) have for me a special fascination. Not so much the rare, unusual, or totally unrelated specimens, as in the variations and permutations of flowers that are the evident *kin* of those I know – but not the same. They rouse in me visions of kinship and descent through great ages, and also thoughts of the mystery of pattern/design as a thing other than its individual embodiment, and recognizable. How? (*Letters* 402)

Common plants are to Tolkien a source of wonder, perceived (directly or indirectly, through taxonomic description and illustration) to ‘embody’ within their living forms the mysteries of descent across vast scales of time. Lothlórien’s flowers are certainly rare in Middle-earth, yet they are the ‘evident kin of those [we] know’. The flora of Lothlórien also arouse within Frodo a

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[50] As Judd Judd demonstrate, drawing from this description in addition to Tolkien’s coloured pencil drawing, *The Forest of Lothlórien in Spring* (c1940s), *mallyrn* can be classified and described using taxonomic keys as if they were real species: ‘Leaves alternate, spirally arranged, simple, ovate to elliptic, pinnately veined, with secondary veins ± parallel, running into the leaf margin, the apex acute to slightly acuminate, the base acute to obtuse, the margin obscurely serrate, with the upper surface of the blade pale green, and the lower surface silvery (due to a dense layer of reflective hairs), and with the petiole somewhat flattened, causing the blades to flutter in the breeze; stipules present, but quickly deciduous. Inflorescences auxiliary, short, pendulous fascicles. Flowers radically symmetrical, bisexual, the sepals five, distinct, pale green, triangular; the petals five, distinct, elongate-oblong, rounded at the apex, yellow-gold and imbricate in bud; the stamens 10; and the single carpel with a superior ovary and short style. Fruit a nut with a smooth, silver shell containing a single seed’. *Flora of Middle-earth*, p. 216.

vision of the legendary ‘Elder Days’ (*LotR* 350), somehow manifested in the living present.[51] Tolkien’s love of history, and of the living forms of nature in which this past is embodied, infuses Frodo’s sense of wonder in Lothlórien. Significantly, it is a wonder which entwines the aesthetic and the scientific, in Tolkien’s theistic conception of evolutionary processes as ‘the mystery of pattern/design’. As Carl F. Hotsetter argues, Tolkien’s mythopoeia of pattern is unlike the hylomorphism of ‘young Earth creationism’ or ‘Intelligent Design’ because ‘the ability of patterns to blend and diverge over time is in a sense “built into” them,’ rather than guided by the intervention of God – life evolves or ‘unfolds’ over time according to an ‘inherent potentiality’.[52]

Despite first appearances, Frodo’s sense of enchantment is largely situational, occurring not in a fantastical fairyland but a forest very much rooted in our own world. Thus, much like Tolkien’s own botany books, the description of Lothlórien’s *mallyrn* and wildflowers have the potential to transfer this wonder and wondering to plant species which have perhaps become over-familiar to us. More than this, Frodo wonders at the ‘hue of rich grass’ as the ‘sun of the afternoon glowed’, casting ‘long green shadows beneath the trees’ (350). Frodo’s perception of fundamental, physical phenomena – the interplay between light and shadow, form and colour – are defamiliarised to become the source of wonder. His blindfolding becomes figurative of the wider literary effect of defamiliarisation at play here, in which physical reality is revealed from a fresh perspective. Frodo’s ‘doors of perception’, to use William Blake’s words, become

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[51] The *niphredil* that studs the grass of Cerin Amroth, burial mound of the Elven King Amroth, is redolent of the *simbelmynë* or ‘evermind’, a similarly star-like white flower (which Tolkien compared to the European anemone) that grows on the burial mounds of the Kings of Rohan, commemorating and thereby keeping alive the memory of ages past in one’s mind (507). See entry for ‘Evermind’ in J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘Nomenclature of *The Lord of the Rings*’ in *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*, edited by Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (London: HarperCollins, 2014), pp. 750-83 (p. 780).
[52] Carl F. Hotsetter, ‘Evolution (Theistic)’, *The Nature of Middle-earth: Late Writings on the Lands, Inhabitants, and Metaphysics of Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2021), p. 407.

‘cleansed’.[53] In Tolkien’s own words, no doubt echoing Blake’s, the moment characterises the potent magic of fantastic imagination, ‘Recovery’, which is able to ‘clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness’ (‘OFS’ 58).

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Frodo’s feeling that he ‘had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more’ (349), repeated when he remarks how the grass, despite being winter, is ‘as green as Springtime in the Elder Days’ (350), is mistaken. Like the *arhada* of the Immanent Grove, the *mallyrn* are ‘not immortal’ (*Farthest* 257). Indeed, *mallorn*-trees are perhaps more vulnerable to the passage of time than other trees in Middle-earth, their flourishing dependent upon the care of the sylvan Elves and the Ring of Power, Nenya, which Galadriel possesses and whose magic to preserve and conceal protects Lothlórien from the spreading Shadow. Lothlórien is inextricably part of Middle-earth and ultimately vulnerable to time. The forest never existed in the ‘Elder Days’ but is effectively a Second Age plantation of non-native species, transported from Tol Eressëa. As Verlyn Flieger has convincingly argued, Tolkien toyed with the idea of making Lórien a kind of island in time as well as space.[54] Instead, however, temporal distortion becomes figurative in a place in which, as Tom Shippey states, ‘old poems, old beliefs, and fictional geography are much more closely intertwined’.[55] As they depart from Lórien down the Great River, Anduin, the forest ‘seemed to them: a bright ship masted with enchanted trees, sailing on to forgotten shores, while they sat helpless upon the margin of the

[53] William Blake, ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 188.
[54] See Flieger, *A Question of Time*, pp. 89-117.
[55] Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, p. 246.

grey and leafless world' (377). In this wistful image the forest becomes an enchanted ship sailing to the 'forgotten shores' of the past, while their own boats appear static in the disenchanted, 'leafless' land of the present. It is, of course, the present which sails forward, away from the unmoving land of the past. It is Lothlórien which is in fact 'helpless': for all its Elvish enchantment, even the forest which appears crystallised in perpetual repose cannot hold back the flow of the Great River of time.

Earthly and unearthly temporalities are also contrasted in Morris's imagination. The titular Well at the World's End, the figurative wellspring of the only true magic in Morris's story, bestows upon those who drink it an unnaturally long life. Yet, throughout the novel, it is not the seemingly sempiternal that is wondered at, but cyclical change such as vegetive growth:

> at last the very spring was come, and the grass began to grow after the showers had washed the plain of the waterborne mud, and the snowdrop had thrust up and blossomed, and the celandine had come, and then when the blackthorn bloomed and the Lent-lilies hid the grass betwixt the great chestnut-boles, when the sun shone betwixt the showers and the west wind blew, and the throstles and blackbirds ceased not their song betwixt dawn and dusk. (*Well* II 50)

The material magic of the season is conveyed through vividly naturalistic detail rendered through a narrative timelapse, presenting the perennial arrival of spring as a kind of marvellous, alchemical transformation and source of wonder for Ralph and Ursula. The long sentence paces through sequences of plant species and their flowering times, typical of English springtime ('snowdrop', 'celandine', 'blackthorn' blossom, 'Lent-lillies' or wild daffodil), with singing 'throstles' (song thrushes) and 'blackbirds' – birds typically among the first to be heard at dawn in early spring. Much as the vegetive growth of spring is a source of delight in *The Well at the World's End*, in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, Birdalone is described as feeling 'wonder, that now the grass grew thick down to the lip of the water, and all about from the water up were many little slim trees, and some of them with the May-tide blossom yet on them' (*Water* 275). Natural

forest regeneration on the Isle of Nothing, which had previously been under a malignant enchantment causing the island to remain as an ecological desert, now becomes a source of enchantment that is of a different, more earthly origin.

Charlotte Oberg argues that such scenes demonstrate Morris's view of nature was 'paganistic', in the sense that nature is presented in his romances as 'manifestations of the sacred'.[56] Timothy Murphy argues Morris's is a 'materialist fantasy' because of his 'ecological conception of magic' – a term which might usefully be applied to all three writers.[57] However, while Murph considers Le Guin as 'an heir of Morris because of her immanent, non-cumulative conception of magic', Tolkien's implicitly Christian 'religious fantasy' is placed in an oppositional, divergent fantasy tradition.[58] However insightful Murphy's analysis as to the precise source of enchantment in Morris and Tolkien's fiction, he overstates the differences between the 'bourgeois Catholic Tolkien' and the 'socialist atheist Morris'.[59] What becomes clear, by considering the source of wonder in each of the three writer's forests, is that in each case, enchantment induces wonder in the everyday and the familiar, naturalistically described and yet evoking profound awareness and appreciation for forests both within and beyond the text.

Phillippa Bennett argues in her reading of Morris's last prose romances that wonder is 'a psychological, physiological, emotional and ultimately ethical experience', and that characters

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[56] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet,* p. 168.

[57] Timothy S. Murphy, 'William Morris and the Counter-Tradition of Materialist Fantasy', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 30.3 (2019), 312-330 (p. 312).

[58] Murphy, 'William Morris and the Counter-Tradition of Materialist Fantasy', p. 312.

[59] Especially given the fact that Morris at one time planned a career as an Anglo-Catholic clergy and can hardly be considered as anything but 'bourgeois', being fabulously wealthy on account of his inheritance and income from his father's copper mine.

‘are inspired by that experience to change their worlds’.[60] The idyllic moment in which Ralph rests in the Wood Perilous is immediately interrupted by the arrival of Burgh-men with the Lady of Abundance in thrall. Ralph will free the Lady and, in doing so, become involved in the wider political conflict resulting in the revolution against the tyrannical rule of the Burgh-men and stopping ‘the ravage of fair lands’ (*Well* II 241). There is logical sequence of events in the plot, but beyond that it is not obvious how exactly Ralph’s appreciation of the forest around him evident in this early scene manifests in the kinds of attitudinal and behavioural, and wider socio-political, changes that culminate in the Battle in Upmeads in the final chapters. Certainly, Morris entwines the exploitation of the natural environment with the exploitation of human communities, both in his political lectures and in his fiction, in ways that are prophetic of ecosocialism. Nevertheless, in this story’s conclusion, the emphasis is on the restoration of towns such as the Burgh of Four Fifths and Utterbol from political oppressors – woods are mentioned only because they are ‘cleared of foule robbers and reivers’, whose threat is really socioeconomic rather than ecological (241). Le Guin’s connection between wonder and ecological ethics is also implicit, but pervasive in her Earthsea books. When the powerful wizard, Early, threatens to destroy the Grove, Elehal, the first Master Patterner and one of the founders of the School of Roke, replies ‘don’t come to Roke Knoll until you know the ground you stand on’ (*Tales* 625). The wonder-inducing Immanent Grove is such because it is the living embodiment of the Old Powers, an ecological magic literally rooted in the earth, undervalued and misunderstood by the various (male) wizards in Le Guin’s stories (including the young Ged, in addition to Cob, Aspen, Early and Thorion) who use their magic to dominate the living world and hold power over death.

[60] Bennett, *Wonderlands*, p. 8.

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For Frodo, the wonderous beauty of Lothlórien is restorative, a *locus amoenus* that serves as a much-needed relief (for the reader as well as the characters) following the darkness and violence in the Mines of Moria and the tragic death of Gandalf. The forest allows them time to grieve and recuperate in safety so that the Fellowship can continue their quest. More than this, however, Frodo has an experience of wonder with profoundly ethical affinities which he carries into the depths of Mordor, sustaining his motivation to destroy the One Ring. Atop Cerin Amroth, Frodo is about to climb up onto the flet when he 'laid his hand upon the tree beside the ladder' (351). Upon physical contact, Frodo feels intensely that the *mallorn* is not just an aesthetic object but an ethical subject:

> never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within it. He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself. (351)

There is a tactile receptivity in the way Frodo's skin comes into direct contact with tree's bark – or rather, 'skin', for the *mallorn* becomes an independent living being with comparable sensitivity to Frodo himself, disclosing 'the life within it'. The moment of wonder demonstrates that the 'magic of Faërie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations', one of which is the satisfaction of the desire 'to hold communion with other living things' ('OFS' 13). Through what Jane Bennett calls enchantment's 'cross-species encounter', the haptic sense becomes the conduit to a recognition of the tree as something vibrantly alive. Habitually perceived, the tree is subsumed in a human context of use and value, whether instrumental or aesthetic. Here, Frodo's wonder gives rise to an ecocentrism or what Edward O. Wilson termed 'biophilia', grounded in

an awareness of the tree's intrinsic value, the 'delight of the living tree itself'.[61] Philosopher Ronald Hepburn states that wonder is '*other-acknowledging*. It is not shut up in self-concern or quasi-solipsistic withdrawal'.[62] Frodo's wonder is as cultivated as the forest – managed to serve Elvish aesthetics, yet Tolkien suggests this aesthetics is done with an ethics of care: 'Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved' (*Letters* 419). Tolkien argued that enchantment, as opposed to magic of the controlling and dominating kind, frees the perceiving subject from 'possessiveness' ('OFS' 58). Frodo realises that the *mallorn* is not merely an aesthetic object, possessed and appropriated into anthropocentric conceptions of it, but a living being.[63]

The wonder of Lothlórien is carried with Frodo into the depths of Mordor, sustaining him on his quest to destroy the Ring of Power. To achieve this quest, Frodo must inevitably leave Lothlórien, and re-enter Arda Marred. To stay with the sylvan Elves (who dwell, if not in 'self-concern', then 'quasi-solipsistic withdrawal') would result in the wider devastation of Middle-earth. With the destruction of the One Ring is the necessary destruction of Nenya whose power preserves Lothlórien. As an intense but fleeting feeling, wonder, like Lothlórien, is impermanent. Having been gifted a *mallorn* nut by Galadriel, Sam carries it with him on his long quest, finally planting it in the Shire to replace the felled Party Tree at the end of the narrative.[64] Under his care, the tree grows to be a source of wonder for all those who look upon it. Like the *mallorn* tree, wonder, in its inevitable passing, also passes on that which will, in turn, renew itself: an ethics of care and compassion for the more-than-human world.

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[61] Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
[62] Hepburn, *Wonder and Other Essays*, p. 144.
[63] This scene recalls the Hobbits' recognition of Old Man Willow 'apart from themselves' (*LotR* 129), which I discussed in the previous chapter.
[64] Lothlórien also lives on in the name Sam gives to his daughter, Elanor, named after the golden flower.

VI

The Immanent Grove

Itself an Enchantment

The wellspring of enchantment in Le Guin's Earthsea books is the Immanent Grove. As 'the centre and source of all magic' (*Tales* 599), the Grove embodies the mysterious and misunderstood 'Old Powers' or 'Powers of the Earth' (*Other* 855). There are various forms or disciplines of magic in the archipelago, but all spells require invocation in Old Speech, 'the Language of the Making, in which a thing's name is the thing'.[65] This arcane semiosis enables one to understand, manipulate, and control the material world – the earth, seas, weather, plants, animals, other human beings. Because of this, magic can help sustain but also imperil socioecological systems of the archipelago. Like Tolkien's Saruman, various wizards in Le Guin's stories fall into egoistic delusions of power, abusing magic to realise megalomanic fantasies of immortality and supremacy over human and nonhuman others. In so doing, these wizards fail to appreciate the ecological realities of balance, interdependence, and impermanence, encapsulated in the philosophical idea of 'Equilibrium'. The hubris of these wizards leads not only to their own destruction, but the widespread, inextricable destruction and *disenchantment* of the living world. Examining the dynamics of enchantment and disenchantment in the ecology of magical power in Earthsea, I seek to "read" the Grove as the Master Patterner does, finding there the wider processes or patterns at work in the textual landscape of Earthsea. I argue that, through the Grove, Le Guin conveys the immanent magic of the stories themselves, expressing the ways

[65] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'A Description of Earthsea', *The Books of Earthsea* (London: Gollancz, 2018), p. 917.

in which enchantment may be embodied and enacted even in a world that, to many, appears disenchanted.

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At the beginning of *The Farthest Shore*, Ged enters a glade in the Immanent Grove to join the Master Patterner, Avzer, who is seen silently contemplating a tiny spider:

> Between two tall grass blades in the clearing a spider had spun a web, a circle delicately suspended. The silver threads caught the sunlight. In the centre the spinner waited, a grey-black thing no larger than the pupil of an eye. (*Farthest* 257)

Why are two powerful wizards seen attending to this small, seemingly insignificant spider at the beginning of the story? In the ecology of Earthsea, every living and non-living entity interconnects to constitute a 'web' of reciprocity, 'delicately suspended' in the perpetual flux of a dynamic Equilibrium. Because of the intrinsic interconnection between all things, Ged and Avzer can "read" in the spider's intricate patterns a disturbance in the wider patterns of their world, lucidly expressed in the microcosm of a spider's web. The wizards respect the artful creation of the spider, acknowledging that 'she too is a patterner' (257) as she enriches the diverse tapestry of life in the forest with her own emergent patterns. As their eyes centre on the fixed point of the spider (itself like 'the pupil of an eye') their dialogue moves quickly to question the nature of evil, which they recognise to be a 'web men weave' (257). Ged elaborates when he explains to Prince Arren, who comes to Roke with news of a disturbance in the west, that:

> From the hurricane and the great whale's sounding to the fall of a dry leaf and a gnat's flight, all they do is done within the balance of the whole. But we, in so far as we have power over the world and over one another, we must learn to do what the leaf and the whale and the wind do of their own nature. We must learn to keep the balance. Having intelligence, we must not act in ignorance. Having choice, we must not act without responsibility. (294-95)

The spider foreshadows the wizard Cob (a Middle English word for spider – as in 'cobweb') who we later learn has woven his own web of malevolent magic, enticing the inhabitants of Earthsea like flies into a desolate realm known as the Dry Land, the Land of the Dead.[66] Cob uses magical power without responsibility or understanding of Equilibrium, declaring 'Let all stupid nature take its stupid course, but I am a man, better than nature, above nature' (370). In this display of extreme anthropocentrism, Cob believes his power places him, like the tiny spider in its web, at the centre of the world.

Cob's desire for immortality sets in motion a gradual disenchantment of Earthsea. We first hear word of this disenchantment when Arren comes to the fountain at the centre of the School of Roke to warn the Archmage that in the west, 'the springs of wizardry have run dry' (254). In the western isles, wizards 'have forgotten the words and the patterning' (253). Ged himself will come to lose all magical power after the defeat of Cob in the Dry Land. Arren tells him that there was a 'sickness' among the islands' people, and 'their autumn harvest had been poor' (253), yet the islands' inhabitants seemed 'careless', going about 'without looking at the world' (253). Arren tells Ged that this has spread east to Arren's own kingdom of Enlad where the spells cast to protect the islands' livestock at the annual Festival of the Lambs prove ineffective, and many lambs are born dead or deformed (253). What becomes clear is that the fates of magical and ecological systems are deeply intertwined in the web of Earthsea. The 'sickness' seems to be blighting the physical landscape, affecting plants and animals on the islands, but also a psychological condition in which people become disillusioned and

[66] 'cob, n.4.' *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2023) <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 17 July 2023].

disconnected from reality, apathetic to the crisis unfolding around them. This bewitchment spreads to Hort Town, a place plagued with violent crime, economic collapse, political corruption, and social deprivation (284). Here Arren and Ged speak to the wizard Hare who, in a drug-induced torpor, abandons his magical power and indeed his life for an eternal one promised in the Dry Land (282-83, 285-87). One is reminded of the kind of illusory magic at work in Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World* – an enchantment which distorts characters' sense of reality with enthralling visions. In Earthsea, however, illusion is merely one kind of magic among many – and an inferior one at that. We are told that 'magic itself resists untruth. Conjuring, sleight of hand, and false commerce with the dead are counterfeits of magic […] But the art of magic, though it may be used for false ends, deals with what is real, and the words it works with are the true words' (*Tales* 568). Yet, unlike Morris's Wood of beautiful illusions, the Dry Land is no earthly paradise or arboreal wonderland. Rather, it is an ecological wasteland, bereft of life. In juxtaposition to the Immanent Grove, 'No tree or thorn or blade of grass grew in the stony earth under the unsetting stars' (368). The Dry Land is a vision of what Earthsea would become if the disenchanting forces unbalancing the Equilibrium in the archipelago are not prevented.

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In contrast to the dry riverbed at the heart of the Land of the Dead is the fountain and 'well-grown rowan' in the centre of the School of Roke, where Arren brings his message to Ged. The rowan, planted by Elehal at the founding of the School, is described as having 'humped and cracked the marble pavement with its roots. Veins of bright green moss filled the cracks, spreading up from the grassy plot around the basin' (251). Like an artery channelling life-sustaining blood, the fountain and the scarlet-berried rowan channel the flow of enchantment

beneath the School. Its stone foundations are unable to contain the growth of the rowan, cracking and warping around it, yet it is at the same time sustained by it. It is fitting that Elehal, the mage who casts protective charms around the School, plants a rowan at its heart. In British folklore, rowan trees are associated with apotropaic magic, said to be able to ward away evil.[67] The vibrancy of the tree, moss, and grass at the centre of the School juxtaposes with the increasingly infertile lands Arren warns Ged about, and the perpetual drought of the Dry Land we see later in the novel. Immediately following the conversation between Arran and Ged, the Archmage walks up to the Immanent Grove to sit beside Avzer contemplating the spider. The fountain and the rowan tree, emblems of a living enchantment, opens out to the enchanted forest with which all of Earthsea and its magic are connected. Just as the devastation and disenchantment of the western isles foreshadows the Dry Land, the rowan anticipates the scene in the Immanent Grove. Like the rowan, thriving in spite of the human-built environment encircling it, the Grove stands upon Roke Knoll as a testament to the persistence of enchantment even in a world deeply affected by disenchantment.

The ebb and flow of enchantment is inextricable to the ecological health of Earthsea. Le Guin conceives enchantment as a kind of aqueous substance, entering the bodies of living and non-living forms. The magical system of Earthsea is therefore not unlike our global water cycle, essential to ecosystems such as forests. In 'The Finder' (2001), we see Medra enter deep into 'the kingdom of the roots of the trees' in a seemingly endless network of mica-glittering caverns and tunnels filled with 'pools of motionless water' (*Tales* 626). With the magic of Finding, Medra can feel 'through the soles of his bare feet and throughout his body the veins of water underground

[67] Mabey, *Flora Britannica*, p. 203.

[…] as if his body became the body of the earth, and he knew its arteries and organs and muscles as his own' (569). The flow of energy and matter through permeable boundaries of living organisms and physical environments become perceptible as Medra feels himself to be materially integrated into one larger living entity. We might relate this to Stacy Alaimo's concept of 'transcorporeality' in which the 'viscous porosity' of 'mediating membranes' counters a sense of the individual as a closed or isolated subject, delineated by the surface of the skin from the wider nonhuman world.[68] The interlacing root system connecting the Immanent Grove to all forests and indeed all living beings in Earthsea is simultaneously the means by which the archipelago is permeated with enchantment. But there is a darker side to transcorporeality: it is precisely because the islands and its people are integrated into this network of material flow that disenchantment is allowed to spread throughout Earthsea. The islands which make up the archipelago, much like the individual wizards who believe themselves to be isolated and impervious to the patterns of Equilibrium, are integrated into and dependent upon a wider web of interrelationships.

Much like in Le Guin's Earthsea, water is infused with magical power in *The Well at the World's End*, whose titular Well, like innumerable Fountains of Youth in myth and legend, restores the health and extends the life of those who drink it. Timothy Murphy argues that 'the hydraulic magic of the Well flows outward to the sea, and from the sea it diffuses throughout the entire globe according to the immanent laws of material ecology that govern the water cycle' and thus the 'dissemination of magical abundance is an immanent material flow'.[69] Yet in Earthsea,

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[68] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, p. 2, p. 15.
[69] Murphy, 'William Morris and the Counter-Tradition of Materialist Fantasy', p. 318.

the immanence or omnipresence of enchanted waters, and the almost miraculous vitality it brings to the physical landscapes, are qualities which evoke a sense of the numinous. We might also compare the fountain and the rowan at the centre of the courtyard in the School of Roke to Tolkien's White Tree in the Fountain of the Court, which stands dead in the Third Age – a tree of mythic lineage but which is literally dead due to the ruination of Gondor. John Garth points to the fourteenth-century memoir *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* as source material for Tolkien's White Tree.[70] This text may also have inspired Morris's *Well* for it contains both a Fountain of Youth and a Dry Tree. Morris's Dry Tree beside a stagnant pool and his magical Well, Tolkien's dying White Tree and fountain in the courtyard of Gondor, and Le Guin's flourishing rowan and fountain in the courtyard of Roke School contrasted to the Dry Land, each symbolise the vital interdependence of water and vegetation for the health of human society.

All three writers represent anthropogenic ecological disaster with dead or dying trees, or by lands absent of trees altogether. Just before they come to the Well in the corpse-strewn desert at the end of the novel, Ralph and Ursula encounter the Dry Tree standing over a stagnant pool, whose 'leafless' boughs are hung with pieces of armour and weaponry (*Well* 72-3). Similar to Tolkien's dying White Tree, the Dry Tree is figurative of an explicitly anthropogenic socioecological disaster. We are reminded of Avzer and Ged's insight that evil is a 'web men weave' (*Farthest* 257) when Ralph and Ursula 'doubted whether it were not made by men's hands rather than grown up out of the earth' (*Well* 73). Ultimately, Morris's Well is at the end, but crucially not beyond, this all-too-human world. The disenchantment of these imaginary

[70] John Garth, *The Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien: The Places That Inspired Middle-earth* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2020), p. 41.

worlds is always due to exploitation or misrule. In Middle-earth, this is demonstrated most strikingly by Mordor – an arid, denuded landscape, where the sparsely growing vegetation, 'low scrubby trees', 'coarse grey grass-tussocks', 'withered mosses' and 'tangled brambles' are 'harsh, twisted, bitter, struggling for life' (*LotR* 921). In their respective ways, each writer draws upon mythic symbolism in ways that powerfully resonate with the material realities of anthropogenic deforestation and desertification in our own world.

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Disenchantment began long before the events in *The Farthest Shore*. Perhaps the most important of Earthsea's myths, presaging the errors of wizards we see in the stories themselves, is the legendary rift between dragons and humans known as the Vedurnan: 'in the beginning of time, mankind and the dragonkind had been one, but the dragons chose wildness and freedom, and mankind chose wealth and power' (*Other* 819). Afterwards, the first human mages in Earthsea, the Rune Makers, manage to relearn the Old Speech and, in doing so, break the pact of the Vedurnan, and partition the dragons' realm to create a place in which one may live forever, a place which became known as the Dry Land. The wizards cast a magical wall to exclude dragons from this realm, but this wall is destroyed at the end of *The Other Wind* (2001), opening the region to dragonkind once more, and restoring life to the Land of Dead. Vedurnan is therefore a myth of disenchantment that reinforces further disenchantments through the actions of wizards desiring immortality and magical power of the dragons. Equally, it is a legend that affirms enchantment, telling how humans first come to use (and misuse) magical power. Ultimately, it is a legend that ends in restorative justice for the dragons and the ecological restoration of the Dry Land.

Much like how the covenant of the Verdurnan leads to a mass exodus of dragonkind, abandoning the earth-bound archipelago for an eternal realm, there are great diasporas of magical creatures at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. Dragons, Elves, Dwarves, and Ents each dwindle in Middle-earth, leaving humankind to inherit Middle-earth. Like Le Guin's dragons, travelling on the Other Wind, west-of-west, the high Elves leave for a timeless realm known as the Undying Lands of the Uttermost West. For the Ents and Elves, there is a sense of inevitability about their dwindling and eventual disappearance, and with them, the disenchantment of the world. Much like Le Guin's dragons, the population of the Ents is already rapidly diminished before the story begins. The Ents are critically endangered creatures with no hope of recovery, unable to reproduce without the Entwives. Unlike Le Guin's dragons and Tolkien's Elves, however, who abandon the mortal world for an eternal one, the Ents face extinction in this world, transforming into or leaving behind the immobile, silent trees familiar to us.

Le Guin and Tolkien imbue their magical worlds with a sense of disenchantment that speaks to our own sense of loss or absence of the magical in modernity. The disenchantment of Middle-earth is marked not just by a loss of individual magical species, but by an all-pervading transformation of the material world. As Treebeard laments, 'the world is changing: I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth, I smell it in the air. I do not think we shall meet again' (*LotR* 981). Chris Brawley states that while Treebeard's triumph over Saruman presents itself as validation of nature and its survival, the Ents' victory is followed by an 'ever-present hint of despair'.[71] Equally, however, as Anthony Lioi argues, Tolkien's cosmology provides 'an eschatology of

[71] Chris Brawley, 'The Fading of the World: Tolkien's Ecology and Loss in *The Lord of the Rings*', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18.3 (2007), 292–307 (p. 302).

ecological restoration' which resists 'contemporary metanarratives of world destruction'.[72] Lioi argues that, contrary to the disenchantment thesis, Tolkien asserts that 'modernity and enchantment' is continuous, that 'the role of the artist consists in the creation of Secondary Worlds that can be entered, inhabited, and exited through conscious choice'.[73] In other words, both writers defy the disenchantment thesis by enacting enchantment through the texts. The Earthsea series and *The Lord of the Rings* end with ecological restoration in the face of catastrophe in ways that motivate an affective attachment to our own threatened world, offering a vision of hope to many in a time of apathy and despair. That is itself a kind of enchantment.

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In the tale of 'Dragonfly' (1998), Irian, a young woman denied education at the all-male wizarding school on the island of Roke, goes instead to the Immanent Grove where she is taught by the Master Patterner who resides there. Here she begins to understand that its magic is 'in the roots of the trees' (*Tales* 720). The forest presents an image of a complex system that is both intelligent and intelligible. Immersed within and receptive to her surroundings, Irian learns to read a living language immanent within an animate landscape, where even the wisest wizard's 'words are nothing' – she is instructed instead to 'Hear the leaves' (721). The immanent enchantment of Le Guin's forest may flow beyond the textual world and into the trees and forests that grow in our world – after all, as we are told, the 'Grove is connected at root to all forests that ever were, are, or will be' (720).[74] Just as Irian learns to read the Grove, we may learn to read the

[72] Lioi, *Nerd Ecology*, p. 126.
[73] Lioi, *Nerd Ecology*, p. 137.
[74] As of 2020, the Immanent Grove of Roke connects at the root to another planted in the Highlands of Scotland. In partnership with the Trees for Life project, which aims to rewild the Caledonian Forest, members of the Centre for

text as a kind of spell-book, invoking the magic of our own forests in an allegedly disenchanted age.

Unlike the many-named and yet 'Nameless Land' of Lórien, it is the trees themselves that are nameless in Le Guin's Immanent Grove.[75] Like Lothlórien, the Grove's magic is obscure: 'no spells are worked there, and yet the place itself is an enchantment' (*Wizard* 52). In contrast to the 'oak and willow, chestnut and ash, tall evergreens' (*Tales* 718) growing at the forest edge, the trees are 'nameless yet each with its own name' (601), simply referred to as '*Arhada*, in the Old Speech', translating as 'Trees… The trees of the Grove, in Hardic' (*Other* 872). Just as the roots of the trees are 'mingled with all the forests that were or might yet be', the etymological root of the mythic tree's name becomes figuratively connected to all trees and forests in the imagined world. Le Guin's conception of magic is essentially linguistic in power, the magic of 'True Speech, the Language of the Making, in which the name of a thing is the thing'.[76] And it is the living trees which embody the *logos* of the world's creation myth, for the 'patterns the shadows of their leaves make in the sunlight write the words Segoy spoke in the Making' (*Tales* 599).

Le Guin's conception of magic within her stories is, appropriately, linguistic. But there are many kinds of language, and many kinds of magic in Earthsea. Kurremkarmerruk, the Master Namer, is seen in the aptly-named Isolate Tower teaching his students from 'the thick book of

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Fantasy and the Fantastic at the University of Glasgow have had trees planted to honour the graduates of its Fantasy MLitt programme. 'The Immanent Grove', *Trees for Life* <https://treesforlife.org.uk/groves/260391/> [accessed 22 August 2022].

[75] Forests are also associated with dreams and visions in Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*. In the story, the Athsheans enter 'dream-time', a forested landscape mirroring the forests of 'real-time'. The protagonist, Selver, interprets his experiences and dreams, and is called 'sha'ab', a word which means both 'god' and 'translator' (*Word* 84).

[76] Le Guin, 'A Description of Earthsea', p. 917.

names of roots and herbs and leaves and seeds and petals' (*Farthest* 258). Ged, sat far away in the Grove, embedded in the ecosystem of the living material the book refers to, contacts the Master Namer to warn him of the impending threat of ecological imbalance. The students appear to be rote-learning the botanical anatomy of a single species of plant: 'Now the petal of the flower of moly hath a name, which is *iebera*, and so also the sepal, which is *partonath*; and stem and leaf and root hath each his name' (258). Curiously, vocabulary that resembles Biblical ('hath') and botanical ('sepal') language sit alongside each other, merging Adam and the postlapsarian scientist in the figure of the nomenclator, who reads from a book both scripture and scientific textbook.

We are told Avzer first came to Gont as a 'red-plumed young savage' (*Farthest* 257) from the Kargad Lands. Forest ecologist and member of the Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, emphasises the ways in which indigenous wisdom, perennially romanticised and ridiculed by Westerners as the mysticism of "primitives" and "savages", enriches Western scientific methodologies. Kimmerer, discussing the ways in which the language learned through her scientific training as a botanist, and the language of the Potawatomi, imparts different but complementary ways of seeing and knowing the nonhuman. She writes that the 'longing to comprehend this language I hear in the woods' stimulated her to 'speak fluent botany', but that:

> beneath the richness of its vocabulary and its descriptive power, something is missing, the same something that swells around you and in you when you listen to the world. Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects. The language scientists speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar, an omission, a grave loss in translation from the native languages of these shores.[77]

[77] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Washington: Milkweed, 2013), pp. 48-49.

In the Grove, Ged and the Master Patterner are seen to have a more situated, intimate perspective based on close observation of living organisms in their natural environment. The Master Namer, by contrast, learns and teaches with a 'precise' but inadequate 'language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts'. We can see the distinction also in terms of scientific disciplines – whereas Ged and Avzer's Patterning imparts an ecological understanding of how a species is integrated into its physical environment, the Master Namer represents a perspective resembling traditional botany, studying the anatomy of single species of plant. By definition, a pattern is a connection between things, either across time or space, which are made visible through the deliberative arrangement or interpretation of arrangements. We might think of the Master Patterner equally as an artist, a scientist, and mystic, reading into, across, and beyond individual forms of nature to perceive 'patterns' that disclose wider processes. Patterning, then, may be regarded as the practice of attuning oneself to the interrelationships within which one is ultimately integral to and dependent upon. Through Patterning, the forest and, by extension, the material world itself, becomes an active, vocal, and enchanting reality. Ged and Avzer's deep listening and intense observation in the Grove – seeing things in a wider web of interrelationships – reveals wider ecological patterns which would have otherwise gone unnoticed. Ultimately, the Master Namer and the taxonomic study of nature integral to magical power in Earthsea as the art of true naming, becomes allied with the wordless appreciation and apprehension of patterns represented by Avzer in order to protect the archipelago from megalomaniacal wizards such as Thorion.

Attebery states that, in *The Farthest Shore*, indigenous ecological wisdom is joined with a scientific understanding of natural cycles and interrelationships to produce a new literary myth,

or myth-imitation' so that 'a set of old beliefs' are given 'the stamp of scientific approval'.[78] But Le Guin goes further than this. It is not simply that 'old beliefs' become validated by scientific authority. Rather, the validity of quasi-scientific wizardry is challenged by the ecological wisdom of those it marginalises and discriminated against: women (Tenar, Tehanu, Irian), the disabled (Tehanu), and ethnic minorities (Tenar, Avzer). As Jon Alkorta Martiartu has argued, Le Guin suggests 'the voice of the marginalized can be used to produce far reaching changes in society'.[79] In Tolkien's narratives, of course, it is literally and figuratively small people living on the edge of the geopolitical sphere of Middle-earth, the Hobbits of the Shire, who become the heroes necessary for far-reaching social and ecological restoration. As Le Guin develops the political dimensions of her imaginary world across the series of her Earthsea books, so too do the marginalised characters of her world become ever-more powerful agents in the stories. As scientists and conservationists are becoming more aware to the invaluable contribution of indigenous knowledge in the ecological sciences and ecosystem management, Le Guin's Earthsea books demonstrate the necessity of listening to the voices excluded from the scientific establishment for a mutually beneficial collaboration towards socioecological restoration and justice.[80]

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[78] Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 181.

[79] Jon Alkorta Martiartu, '"Beware Her, the Day She Finds Her Strength!": Tehanu and the Power of the Marginalized to Affect Social Change in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Saga', *Mythlore* 39.2 (2021), 89-101 (p. 90).

[80] Raymond Pierotti, *Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, and Evolutionary Biology* (London: Routledge, 2012); Tyler D. Jessen, et al., 'Contributions of Indigenous Knowledge to Ecological and Evolutionary Understanding', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 20.2 (2021), 69-132. The United Nation's *State of the World's Forests* (2022) report recognises that involvement of indigenous peoples is essential for restoring the world's forests – see Chapter Five, 'Smallholders, local communities, and indigenous peoples are crucial for scaling up implementation of the forest pathways', in *State of the World's Forests* (2022), pp. 83-99.

Since it was originally established by the women of the Hand, the School of Roke has excluded and stigmatised women's magic, attuned with the Old Powers, as both 'weak' and 'wicked' (*Wizard* 9). Wizards opposing Thorion, such as the Namer and the Patterner, live not inside these walls of institutional power, but peripheral to it – Avzer in the locus of the Old Powers, the Immanent Grove, and Kurremkarmerruk in his Isolate Tower. But there also allies within the walls, such as the Master Herbal and the Doorkeeper, who stand for progressive reform. After all, it is the Doorkeeper who admits Irian into the School – a radical act that divides the Masters into those supporting or challenging Thorion's power. While the Patterner and the Namer's estrangement from the School gives them critical distance, when faced with Thorion, Avzer admits he 'can only hide in my woods', the Namer 'in my tower' (*Tales* 729). While the Herbal and the Doorkeeper are nearer to the seat of power, such a central position has become a 'trap' for the 'walls we built to keep evil out' now keep evil in (729). That these four Masters work together, from both within and without the walls, representing both ancient and new systems of magical power, demonstrates that the School is capable of progressive change. In 'Earthsea Revisioned', originally a lecture she gave at Oxford University in 1992, Le Guin considers her own progressive change as a writer, turning away from tropes of the male-dominated heroic fantasy over the course of the Earthsea books. She reflects that 'authority is still granted and withheld by the institutions and traditions of men (such as this amazing medieval institution where we are guests this week, on whose august lawns Virginia Woolf was forbidden to walk)' – a university where 'Tolkien taught'.[81] Crucially, revolutionary change in her later Earthsea books relies upon the inclusion of ostracised female figures, such as Tehanu and Irian,

[81] 'Earthsea Revisioned', *The Books of Earthsea* (London: Gollancz, 2018), p. 984, p. 987.

to transform power and authority. Le Guin argues that the end of *Tehanu* (1990) shows that 'strength and salvation must come from outside the institutions and traditions. It must be a new thing'.[82] Oleksandra Filonenko describes Le Guin's own development as a writer as a divergence from the 'patriarchal *pattern*' in fantasy.[83] We might thus consider Le Guin herself as a Patterner, revealing underlying social arrangements that frame the imagination, emerging new, alternative patterns of progressive transformation.

The Old Powers are manifest in the figure of the dragons which, though 'mysterious' even to Le Guin, acts as the 'subversion, revolution, change […] the wildness of the spirit and of the earth, uprising against misrule' in the form of patriarchal socioecological exploitation.[84] In Le Guin's later, more overtly feminist stories, *Tehanu* and *The Other Wind*, male wizards tempted by the seductions of power are fought against by female characters, such as Irian and Tehanu, who transform into these revolutionary dragons, uniting with those wizards who remain committed to the ecological balance of Earthsea. Crucially, the Immanent Grove, 'the centre where earth's powers met,' is where 'the human powers had also met together' (*Other* 874). The revolutionary rebalancing at the end of *The Other Wind* is as much social as it is ecological, for it addresses the grave injustices of the past and in doing so, repairs the relationship between previously disunited groups of people, such as the Kargish and the other archipelagans, men and women, humans and dragons.

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[82] 'Earthsea Revisioned', p. 988.
[83] Oleksandra Filonenko, 'Magic, Witchcraft, and Faërie: Evolution of Magical Ideas in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Cycle', *Mythlore* 39.2 (2021), 27-48 (p. 27).
[84] 'Earthsea Revisioned', p. 990.

What does it mean to read Le Guin's Earthsea books in an age of ecological crises – in the face of disenchanting reality of widespread deforestation, climate change, mass extinction? Across the globe, our own forests are threatened by economic and political forces driven by the self-same desire for power and control that spells disaster in Earthsea. The Immanent Grove, however, stands not only as the source and centre of magical power in Earthsea but as the source and centre of enchantment in Le Guin's Earthsea books. The source of resistance to disenchantment is within the roots and branches of the Grove, which both embodies and enacts a life-affirming magic: 'It is said that no spells are worked there, and yet the place itself is an enchantment' (*Wizard* 52). The Grove's enchantments are no illusion, as in Morris's Wood Beyond the World, but the magic of material reality. Indeed, though it appears that the Grove 'moves about in a mystifying manner', it is in fact 'all the rest that moves' (*Farthest* 256). Yet though the Grove is a constant throughout the books, it is no simple backdrop. Not only is it the site of narrative climax in the stories, the magic manifest in the Immanent Grove is also called upon for the restoration of Equilibrium in Earthsea. Those who enter the forest are almost always overwhelmed with an enchanting wonder akin to Frodo's in Lothlórien. Tenar, for example, towards the end of the final book, *The Other Wind*, 'looked up into the arcades and ogives of branches, the layers and galleries of leaves', 'full of shadows and deep light', and knew that here is 'the centre where earth's powers met' (*Other* 874). Through the Grove, Le Guin shares with her readers an accessible kind of magic, open to all, that does not require one to have special abilities, or knowledge of arcane lore and True Speech – an earthly enchantment that we ourselves may experience in the groves, woods, and forests of our own world.

CHAPTER THREE

EXPERIMENT

The fantastic and the scientific imagination operate through an experimental approach to reality. In this chapter, I argue that fantasy forests can be considered as models and thought experiments with real-world epistemic value. Not all scientific experiments occur in "the real world", yet they are still able to develop scientific theories and ideas *as if* they were real. For example, ecologists use ecosystem models – abstract representations or simulations of ecological processes – to improve understanding about how real ecosystems work and to identify knowledge gaps between theoretical and applied ecology. Philosopher of science Peter Godfrey-Smith suggests that scientific models work in similar ways to 'the imagined objects of literary fiction' such as 'Tolkein's [sic] Middle Earth [sic]' because they 'are imaginary things that we can, somehow, talk about in a fairly constrained and often communal way'.[1] While ecological models are at the very least produced and parametrised from real data collected in the field, there are other kinds of experiments that play a vital role in scientific method, but which are performed entirely within what James Robert Brown calls the 'laboratory of the mind': thought experiments.[2] Philosophers of science have studied how the imagination and thought experiments have fundamentally shaped the development of various scientific disciplines, especially in the natural sciences.[3] Charles Darwin, for example, imagined giraffes with necks of different lengths to understand how this

[1] Peter Godfrey-Smith, 'The Strategy of Model-based Science', *Biology and Philosophy* 21 (2006) 725-740 (735).
[2] James Robert Brown, *Laboratory of the Mind: Thought Experiments in the Natural Sciences*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2011).
[3] Roy Sorensen, *Thought Experiments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Brown, *Laboratory of the Mind*; Christopher Badura and Amy Kind, *Epistemic Uses of Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

might impact their evolutionary survival, while biologist Louis Agassiz tested the validity of taxonomic classification by imagining a world with lobsters, but without other articulated creatures.[4] These thought experiments are not so dissimilar to the experimental taxonomy of Tolkien's Fangorn, in which real and imaginary tree species exist alongside imaginary arboreal species in ways that draw our attention to the challenges taxonomists face when defining and identifying species.

In *The Scientific Imagination* (2020) Arnon Levy and Peter Godfrey-Smith argue that the imagination is vital not only in scientific discovery but as an integral part of scientific epistemology in 'conceiving new theoretical ideas, in exploring the explanatory resources of these ideas, and in working out how to bring theoretical ideas into contact with empirical constraints'.[5] Several scholars spanning the philosophy of science and literary criticism have examined how and in what ways fictional worlds can be considered a thought experiment.[6] In *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012), Mark J. P. Wolfe suggests that fantasy worlds in particular can be read as 'thought experiments about subjunctive worlds in which the consequences of changed Primary World defaults are explored and extrapolated'.[7] Le Guin, however, resists delimiting thought experiments merely to extrapolation of the known:

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[4] Brown, *The Laboratory of the Mind*, p. 31.

[5] Arnon Levy and Peter Godfrey-Smith, 'Introduction', *The Scientific Imagination*, edited by Arnon Levy and Peter Godfrey-Smith (Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 1-16 (p. 2).

[6] David Egan, 'Literature and Thought Experiments', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74.2 (2016), 139-150; Melanie Frappier, Letitia Meynell, and James Robert Brown, *Thought Experiments in Science, Philosophy, and the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Falk Bornmüller, Johannes Franzen, and Mathis Lessau, *Literature As Thought Experiment?: Perspectives from Philosophy and Literary Studies* (Boston: Brill, 2019).

[7] Mark J. P. Wolfe, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 172.

> The purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrödinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future – indeed, Schrodinger's most famous thought-experiment shows that the "future," on the quantum level, cannot be predicted – but to describe reality, the present world.[8]

Nor are thought experiments in science, like fantasy, necessarily concerned with the possible – indeed, some 'are simply impossible in principle'.[9] As I explore in the second part of this chapter, the value of Le Guin's thought experiment in nonhuman sentience in 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow' is not that it produces or predicts scientific understanding, but because it provides a unique insight into ongoing scientific debates about the way nonhuman sentience is imagined and communicated.

I argue that fantasy forests can be considered as thought experiments, but I also stress that what constitutes the epistemic value of such experiments is not confined to the production of knowledge. As David Egan rightly points out, fiction cultivates 'a careful attention to particulars, flexibility in our thinking, a deeper appreciation of the significance of the knowledge we already have or the practices we engage in'.[10] What thought experiments in scientific disciplines may be said to lack is the rich detail, expansiveness, and dynamism of fictional worlds such as the fantasy forests I discuss in this chapter, which cannot be reduced to or defined by their relationship to a single argument or abstract concept. Morris's model of a sustainable urban forest in *News from Nowhere* is a thought experiment in which we can become viscerally immersed, a space in which to think creatively and reflexively about our relationship with forests in multiple ways – socially, politically, culturally. This makes it particularly valuable as a form of what

[8] Le Guin, 'Introduction', *The Left Hand of Darkness* (London: Gollancz, 2017), p. xiv.
[9] Brown, *The Laboratory of the Mind*, p. 1.
[10] Egan, 'Literature as Thought Experiment', p. 149.

Sarah Dillon and Claire Craig call 'narrative evidence' which can be utilised to influence public policies particularly in the face of complex and uncertain futures.[11] Revaluated as 'narrative evidence', *Nowhere* has the potential to intervene directly in the decision- and policy-making process by including communities themselves in an accessible way, making the imaginative possibilities of reshaping our cities to meet the demands of ecological crises both tangible and desirable. Fantasy forests may not produce scientific knowledge in a narrow sense, but what they can offer as complex, collective, and immersive thought experiments is an epistemic value of a different nature. Throughout this chapter I will explore the epistemic value of the fantastic imagination, examining how fantasy forests enable us to experiment with alternative conceptions of perceiving, valuing, and living with forests.

I begin by revaluating Morris's *Nowhere* as an experiment in social and ecological renewal in which trees and forests are re-integrated into human life. The novel experiments with social and political structures from an imagined past and future to offer his contemporaries a vivid alternative to the present, in ways that encourage readers today to collectively envision a more sustainable society. World 4470**,** in Le Guin's 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow', is an example of a radical thought experiment with the power to test the line between real and unreal in how we imagine the sentience of the more-than-human. In light of recent scientific and cultural discourse around "plant intelligence" and mycorrhizal networks of biochemical communication in forest ecosystems, I assert the value of the fantastic imagination to refine how scientists imagine, understand, and explain the sentience of alien others. I trace the confluence of the

[11] Sarah Dillon and Claire Craig, *Storylistening: Narrative Evidence and Public Reasoning* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

fantastic and scientific imagination further by considering Tolkien's Fangorn as a forest in which the real and the imaginary not only coexist but interact in creatively constructive ways. I attempt to classify the Ents using a variety of species concepts taxonomists use today to classify real species and compare this with the Ents' own taxonomic system of identifying, ordering, and recording the living creatures of Middle-earth. Tolkien's experimental taxonomy reveals the issues inherent in any system of classification in a way that demonstrates the epistemic value of fantasy forests.

VII

Nowhere

The Forest of Future Pasts

Morris's *News from Nowhere* is a social experiment that imaginatively transforms late nineteenth-century London into a sustainable urban forest of the twenty-first century. Like many of the utopian experiments proliferating at the time – including the realisation of John Ruskin's vision in the Wyre Forest (see Chapter Four) – Morris's novel offers an alternative to industrial capitalism and the extreme levels of pollution, poverty, and exploitation upon which it is predicated.[12] Although *News from Nowhere* is fiction, Morris's vision of systemic change may prove more useful for us today than historical examples of small-scale, isolated social experiments. Ultimately, very few of us today can go join a commune and live our lives in the woods. In the UK, over 80% of the population currently lives in urban areas.[13] For the first time in human history, cities are where most of the planet's population live, following a trajectory of urban expansion that accelerated in the nineteenth century and which will only continue in our own, with urban populations predicted to double their current size to six billion by 2050.[14] Morris does not simply advocate for de-urbanisation, but a radical transformation of urban spaces in

[12] Historical studies of utopian experiments and green alternatives to industrial capitalism in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain attest to the influence of William Morris and, in particular, *News from Nowhere.* See Marsh, *Back to the Land;* Gould, *Early Green Politics*; Dennis Hardy, *Utopian England, Community Experiments 1900-1945* (London: E & FN Spon, 2000).

[13] *Government Office for Science*, 'Trend Deck: Urbanisation' <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation#englands-urban-population-is-growing-faster-than-the-rural-population> [accessed 20 October 2022].

[14] 'Urban Development – Overview', *World Bank* <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview> [accessed 20 October 2022].

ways that think beyond the timeworn dichotomy between rural and urban in the cultural imagination which, as Raymond Williams famously argued in *The Country and the City* (1973), maintain the socioeconomic inequalities of industrial capitalism.[15]

There is a growing awareness of the many ecological, social, economic, and health benefits (ecosystem services) of trees and forests (green infrastructure) in urban environments.[16] In many ways, however, Britain's cities remain entrenched in nineteenth-century modes of living and working in which the vast majority of people are distanced from trees and forest environments. Greenspaces tend to be unequally distributed in towns and cities, depriving those communities who would have most to gain from their various associated benefits.[17] What is necessary in a state of ecological emergency is change that is widespread and radical – not only to the material infrastructure of cities, but to the underlying social and economic conditions of their existence. In 2022 Inger Andersen, the executive director of the UN Environment Programme, stated that 'We had our chance to make incremental changes, but that time is over. Only a root-and-branch transformation of our economies and societies can save us from

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[15] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973).

[16] H. Davies, et al., 'Delivery of ecosystem services by urban forests', (*Forest Research* 2017), <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/ research/delivery-of-ecosystem-services-by-urban-forests> [accessed 20 October 2022]; *The Woodland Trust,* 'Residential Developments and Trees: A Guide for Planners and Developers' (2019), <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/ publications/2019/01/residential-developments-and-trees/> [accessed 20 October 2022]; *Air Quality Expert Group*, *Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA)* 'Impacts of Vegetation on Urban Air Pollution' (2018), <https://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/library/reports.php?report_id=966> [accessed 20 October 2022]; Y. Barwise and P. Kumar, 'Designing Vegetation Barriers for Urban Air Pollution Abatement: A Practical Review for Appropriate Plant Species Selection', *Climate & Atmospheric Science* 3.12 (2020), 1-12; *NHS Forest*, 'Evidence of Benefits', <https://nhsforest.org/evidence-benefits> [accessed 20 October 2022].

[17] Catharine Ward Thompson, Jenny Roe, and Peter Aspinall, 'Woodland improvements in deprived urban communities: What impact do they have on people's activities and quality of life?', *Landscape and Urban Planning* 118 (2013), 79-89.

accelerating climate disaster'.[18] To implement the systemic changes necessary to confront the immense challenges of this century – to generate this 'root-and-branch transformation' of society – we need Morris's vision of social renewal in a sustainable, reforested city now more than ever.

Faced with imminent collapse of civilisation due to ever-increasing ecological catastrophes, it has never been more important to imagine what might emerge from our postcapitalist ruins.[19] Morris offers readers of the late nineteenth, twentieth, and now twenty-first century the possibility of social and ecological renewal in an afforested London of 2090. What connects us readers across time is the way the novel enables each of us to experiment with past ideas and speculative futures, respectively bringing our dreams and anxieties to bear along with Morris's own over a century ago. Nineteenth-century texts like *News from Nowhere* are important to read today because present fossil fuel extractivism and dependency, globalised economics, and urban expansion emerge from social and economic developments in Morris's lifetime. Far from being anachronistic, the exercise of reading *Nowhere* in light of twenty-first century ecological crises can be considered as 'strategic presentism' – Jesse Oak Taylor's term

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[18] Inger Anderson, 'Inadequate Progress on Climate Action Makes Rapid Transformation of Societies Only Option', *United Nations Environment Programme*, 27 October 2022, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/inadequate-progress-climate-action-makes-rapid-transformation> [accessed 29 October 2022].

[19] Global ecological collapse 'is no fiction or exaggeration', as Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, emphasised following the publication of the latest IPCC report in 2022. See 'Secretary-General Warns of Climate Emergency, Calling Intergovernmental Panel's Report "a File of Shame", While Saying Leaders "Are Lying", Fuelling Flames', *United Nations* (*Meetings, Coverage and Press Releases*), 4 April 2022 <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sgsm21228.doc.htm> [accessed 12 July 2023]. In the previous year, naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough alerted members of the United Nations Security Council that 'Our greatest threat in thousands of years is climate change. If we don't take action, the collapse of our civilizations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon'. See 'World risks "collapse of everything" without strong climate action, Attenborough warns Security Council', *United Nations* (*UN News*), 23 February 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1085452> [accessed 12 July 2023]. Indeed, former United Nations Executive Secretary for Climate Change, Christiana Figueres, and Tom Rivett-Carnac, senior political strategist for the Paris Agreement, argued in *The Future We Choose: Surviving the Climate* Crisis (London: Manilla, 2020) that a cascade of ecological tipping points and the irreversible damage to Earth's life-support systems this would cause risks the future of human civilisation.

for a way of reading that 'does not collapse the past into the present but rather illuminates the contingency of the present by way of the alterity of the past'.[20] We might say that the novel itself operates through a kind of 'strategic presentism', opening a dialogue between the past and present as a way to rethink our relationship with the future, enriching our imaginative skills to become what philosopher Roman Krznaric calls 'good ancestors'.[21] Arguably, conversations between the past and future, both in and through *News from Nowhere,* become more profoundly intimate with the realisation that we now live in the century the protagonist travels to in the novel.

William Guest, a thinly veiled characterisation of Morris himself, suddenly finds himself two hundred years in the future on the banks of a crystal-clear Thames, staring in amazement at the beautiful gardens, meadows, orchards and, most of all, trees and forests which cover much of what was once the city and the surrounding countryside. After a discussion of the history and imagined future of Epping Forest, I follow Guest as he journeys through an afforested Kensington, a rewilded Windsor, and the orchards of Trafalgar Square, considering each as a site in which we can experimentally redesign present London for a more sustainable future. After travelling up the Thames to arrive in Kelmscott in rural Oxfordshire at the close of the novel, the protagonist slips back from the Epoch of Rest into the dreary, restless night of nineteenth-century London, but the spirit of the once despondent activist is lifted by the brilliance of this 'vision rather than a dream'.[22]

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[20] Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture,* p. 10.
[21] Roman Krznaric, *The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World* (London: W H Allen, 2020).
[22] William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), edited by David Leopold, p. 182. All subsequent references are given parenthetically.

News from Nowhere is a political romance of a medievalist postcapitalist society. It demonstrates that the visionary social critic and, as Morris puts it in the opening lines to *The Earthly Paradise,* the 'Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time', were not irreconcilably split personalities but facets of the same writer, striving to reimagine the present.[23] *News from Nowhere* was first published in 1890 in serial form in the socialist newspaper he edited, *Commonweal*, then in 1892 Morris printed around three-hundred copies with the Kelmscott Press in an ornate style evoking the illuminated manuscripts of the fifteenth century. That Morris chose to publish the novel in these two very different forms indicates his twofold motivation in writing *News from Nowhere* was to not only create a beautiful work of art, redolent of the past and perhaps intended to last far into the future (which it indeed has, and may yet be read in the year it is set), but to disseminate the ideas widely among his contemporaries for political change in his own day. We can see the germ of Morris's vision as far back as in *The Earthly Paradise*'s 'dream of London, small and white and clean, / The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green'.[24] Guest's clear distinction between 'vision' and 'dream' becomes more ambiguous when we read the novel in light of the dream-vision of his other time-travelling political romance, *A Dream of John Ball* (1888), in which the protagonist journeys backwards into a medieval past rather than forwards into a medievalist future, or, indeed, the prose romances I discussed in previous chapters: *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Well at the World's End*, and *The Water of the Wonderous Isles*.

[23] William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*, vol I, p. 3.
[24] William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise,* vol I, p. 2.

As I have argued throughout, too often these are read as separate from his wider corpus as embarrassing deviations from his political life and works. I argue that re-evaluating *News from Nowhere* as their counterpart invites us to consider each as part of a wider project of literary and social experimentation. *News from Nowhere* is considered an example of an emerging kind of future-oriented utopia countering the technocratic vision put forward by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888).[25] As a utopia, *News from Nowhere* is more readily seen in the historical context of early science fiction, but rarely approached as a "fantasy". Charlotte Oberg, for example, argues it to be Morris's 'most nearly realist' literary output.[26] It does contain fantastic elements, however, such as the mysterious renewable energy known as 'force' (140) powering the barges on the Thames, though not quite so fantastic as the sending-boat powered by blood magic in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the overlapping developments in Morris's craft as he experimented combining mythical and historical, medievalist and futurist, realist and fantastic modes, particularly towards the end of his life. *Nowhere* demonstrates most clearly how these seemingly disparate worlds interconnect. We can place the novel within a broader context of literary experimentation in the *fin de siècle* in which the genres of "science fiction" and "fantasy" were nascent and intersecting.[27] This was a generative and trans-generic context within which we may also include Richard Jefferies's similarly medievalist vision of postcapitalist England, *After London* (1885) – a novel which had a profound influence on Morris's *Nowhere*.[28]

[25] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 123-150.
[26] Oberg, *Pagan Prophet*, p. 176.
[27] Nicholas Ruddick, 'The Fantastic Fiction of the Fin de Siècle', *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, edited by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 189-206 (p. 189).
[28] MacCarthy, *William Morris*, p. 517.

While London in Jefferies's novel is an abandoned toxic wasteland, Morris thought deeply about how the city might go through a process of social- and bio-remediation. To do this, he experimented with past futures and future pasts, blending of various social models, values, and ideas to concoct new alternatives for the present. As Mark Fisher argued in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), the socioeconomic fantasy of consumer capitalism has always attempted to quash people's ability to imagine life beyond its supposedly inevitable and unchanging reality so that it becomes 'easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'.[29] Today, cultural media capitalises upon histrionic apocalyptic fictions about the end of the world in ways that may distance and distract us from ecological crises such as climate change, but mere optimism can be as much of a barrier to effective engagement as fear.[30] Morris's utopian experiment in *Nowhere*, much like *A Dream of John Ball*, resists the lure of pessimistic apocalypticism or naive optimism, inspiring what Jonathan Lear calls 'radical hope' for the twenty-first century – a hope that faces difficult truths, but which does not concede to them.[31] Certainly, the social and ecological ramifications of industrial capitalism Morris bore witness to in nineteenth-century Britain have globalised and intensified in ways he could have never imagined. Yet, for those living in the twenty-first century, *Nowhere* may continue to be a source of radical hope and inspiration for a better, more sustainable future.

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[29] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*. The statement that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' is attributed to both to Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Zizek.
[30] Daniel A. Chapman, Brian Lickel and Ezra M. Markowitz, 'Reassessing Emotion in Climate Change Communication', *Nature Climate Change* 7 (2017), 850–852 (p. 851).
[31] Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*.

According to the United Nations definition, London today is technically a forest, and the world's largest urban forest with over 20% of the city under the canopy of trees.[32] It will come as no surprise to present Londoners that they are not living in Morris's utopia, however. What is powerful about Morris's social experiment is that London is not simply an urban forest in the sense of the total number of trees within an urban environment.[33] Rather, the urban environment *becomes* a forest in a very real and experiential sense, as it is made up of a network various interconnected treescapes. Geographical transformations to London are inextricable from the wider social, political, and cultural decentralisation of power between communities and the natural world which they inhabit. Morris draws our attention to the complex history of conservation, urban expansionism, and economic growth that occurred throughout the nineteenth century, and which continues to define London's relationship to its trees and forests today.

The inhabitants of Nowhere actively conserve their forests and the communities who depend on them using ancient and sustainable forms of forest management that were vanishing in Morris's lifetime, but which are now being revived as part of a sustainable silvicultural model to tackle biodiversity decline. *Nowhere* offers a glimpse into the difficult relationship between the city and the largest ancient forest in England, partially situated within London itself: Epping Forest. The Forest, located both within and beyond the city boundaries, is an appropriately liminal place to explore the intimate relationship between the past and the future, and the romanticism and political activism in how Morris imagined the two. It is also the space that

[32] Paul Wood, *London is a Forest* (London: Quadrille, 2019), p. 11.
[33] Francesco Ferrini, Cecil C. Konijnendijk van den Bosch, and Alessio Fini ,'Introduction', *Routledge Handbook of Urban Forestry*, edited by Francesco Ferrini, Cecil C., Konijnendijk van den Bosch, and Alessio Fini (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 1-13 (p. 3).

connects both ends of Morris's life. Here is where the precocious young Morris rode around on a pony dressed as a knight, imagining himself into a medieval romance.[34] Yet it was also where he came in later life with members of the Socialist League to show them the hornbeams that grew there, and the contested site in which political radicals gathered in the 1880s and '90s.[35] In later life, Morris recognised the Forest to be a very different place to the one he remembered. Since his early adventuring, it had undergone rapid changes in ownership and management which altered the very nature of the Forest and its uses. To read the novel as a wistful attempt to return to the Epping Forest of his childhood, however, would be a grievous misunderstanding of its complex experimentalism. *News from Nowhere* is a political romance in which his lifelong love of the medieval past and visionary social criticism came together to offer a compelling reimagination of the present.

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Upon finding himself in Morris's future, the protagonist is invited into the appropriately named 'Guest-hall', 'once on the site of the lecture-room of the Hammersmith Socialists' (14) – originally the coach-house of Kelmscott House, where Morris chaired the first meetings of the Socialist League. When asked where he has come from, Guest 'invents a lie with circumstance, guarded by a little truth' that he, like Morris himself, 'was born and bred on the edge of Epping Forest; Walthamstow and Woodford, to wit' (14). Epping Forest is landed on as a subject on which Londoners separated by two hundred years are able to converse. But the Forest has not endured without change. The ferryman, Dick, says 'the trees have had time to grow again since

[34] MacCarthy, *William Morris,* p. 14.
[35] MacCarthy, *William Morris,* p. 15.

the great clearing of houses in 1955' (14). When Robert the Weaver asks whether 'in the nineteenth century the trees were all pollards', forgetting himself, Guest replies that:

> the Forest was almost wholly made up of pollard hornbeams mixed with holly thickets. But when the Corporation of London took it over about twenty-five years ago, the topping and lopping, which was a part of the old commoners' rights, came to an end, and the trees were let to grow. (15)

Guest recalls 'when we Leaguers went a-pleasuring to High Beech' (again, like Morris himself) how he 'was very much shocked then to see how it was built-over and altered', that 'the philistines were going to landscape-garden it' (15). Morris wrote about these same land-use changes in Epping Forest five years after *News from Nowhere* in the *Daily Chronicle*. Protesting against the clearance of the Forest, Morris celebrates 'the very curious and characteristic wood' made up of 'hornbeams' which 'were all pollards' and 'interspersed in many places with holly thickets'.[36] Morris is evidently using Guest to protest against the urban expansionism and deforestation of the Forest.

When Guest recalls 'when the Corporation of London took it over about twenty-five years ago', he is likely referring to the Epping Forest Act of 1878. By the mid-nineteenth century much of Epping Forest was enclosed, restricting commoners' rights such as pollarding as well as public access to the Forest, with landowners (who were often also magistrates) clearing parts of the forest to profit from property sales.[37] Working people whose livelihoods were threatened by enclosure led a campaign to protect their rights and access to the forest, and had the backing of

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[36] William Morris, 'Letter to the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle*' (22 April 1895), in John Bellamy Foster, 'William Morris's Letters on Epping Forest: An Introduction', *Organization & Environment* 11.1 (1998), 93-97 (p. 93).
[37] Watkins, *Trees, Woods, and Forests,* p. 137.

the recently founded Commons Preservation Society and key figures such as Octavia Hill and Morris himself. A mass demonstration was held on Wanstead Flats in 1871 to 'Save the Forest' and was attended by thousands of working-class people, some of whom were arrested for smashing enclosure fences.[38] Eventually their "crime" became a right with the passing of the Epping Forest Act in 1878, with Queen Victoria officially opening the forest to the public in 1882, 'to be used by the poor of the East End, as a sort of recreation space'.[39] Except that this came at a cost: while the forest was saved from clearance at the hands of wealthy landowners, the new Conservators halted pollarding in the Forest. As woodland historian, Oliver Rackham, explains, the Conservators 'terminated the very woodcutting rights which had been the means of frustrating the destruction of the Forest' – in Guest's words, 'the old commoners' rights, came to an end' (15).[40] The Corporation sought to 'preserve the natural aspect' but in doing so mistook the pollards as 'maimed relics of neglect', not only halting the regular pollarding essential to local economy and livelihood but destroying thousands of ancient trees to clear space for less ecologically valuable new saplings.[41] Guest later describes how the management of rivers was similarly given 'over to a body up in London' who cut down trees, destroyed river-banks, and needlessly dredged the river but, for the most part, practiced 'masterly inactivity […] they drew their salaries, and let things alone' (169). The pollarding in Epping Forest, wiped out in the nineteenth century through mismanagement and 'masterly inactivity', is revived two hundred years later by the inhabitants of Nowhere. Guest describes, on his way up the Thames, how willows are coppiced not only for wood but 'with some regard to beauty' in that they were 'no

[38] Gorman, *Saving the People's Forest*, p. 98.
[39] Watkins, *Trees, Woods, and Forests*, p. 137.
[40] Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, p. 179.
[41] Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, p. 179.

polling rows on rows' but 'a thoughtful sequence in the cutting, that prevented a sudden bareness anywhere' (164). The woods also have 'varied growth' (164), adding structural diversity vital for ecological health.[42] Morris is no ignorant urbanite. Unlike the bureaucratic Conservators, managing according to whims of aesthetic taste, he shows a profound sensitivity to the vital role woodlands play in rural life and the importance of protecting not only the Forest itself but the communities who have sustainably managed them for centuries. Unlike the ironically unstainable practices of the Conservators to 'preserve' the forest in its 'natural aspect', Morris recognised pollarding to be a sustainable silvicultural system conserving the forest through the collaborative work of social communities and the environment they have long inhabited.

Rackham states that, due to the errors of the Conservators, 'A hundred years on, much has been lost. The pollards are overgrown, and nothing grows beneath their shade' leading to widespread loss of primroses, polypody, crab and service trees, while 'even hornbeam and oak have declined'.[43] Morris would have seen the beginnings of this process forest degradation over the course of his lifetime. Paul Woods writes in *London is a Forest* (2019) that:

> At the time of Morris's childhood explorations, Epping Forest would still have been managed traditionally, and would have differed considerably from today's dark, empty and, in places, eerie forest. Certainly, the regularly managed pollards would have been much more open, more light would have penetrated the forest floor and the undergrowth would have been more abundant.[44]

[42] *The Woodland Trust*, 'State of the UK's Woods and Trees 2021', p. 56.
[43] Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, p. 176.
[44] Wood, *London is a Forest*, p. 86.

The destruction of this sustainable silvicultural system in the nineteenth century not only impacted the livelihood of local people in this period but led to a long-term decline in biodiversity.

News from Nowhere shows us that the conservation of Epping Forest in the twenty-first century requires a holistic philosophy and practice that sees use, beauty, and biodiversity as symbiotic. Later Guest refers to his surroundings as like a 'Park', recreational greenspaces used by urban-dwellers that became increasingly popular in nineteenth-century cities – but Dick exclaims that 'the whole Thames-side is a park this time of year' (124). The approach the Conservators took to protect Epping Forest exclusively as a recreational space for city-dwellers had a devastating impact on those who lived and worked beside it. Traditional social practices of using the forest and its "natural" beauty were seen in conflict. In contrast to the future of Nowhere, in nineteenth-century London work and recreation increasingly became separate spheres of human life, as did the spaces in which they took place.

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If such a recreational space were to exist in Nowhere it would be Kensington, much of which is now covered in a beautiful deciduous woodland. However, it becomes clear that woodland is equally a place of work, education, and recreation in a way that blurs contemporary distinctions between them. Children of all ages form groups and 'come to play in the woods for weeks together in the summer-time, living in tents' (24). Children and adults not only visit forests such as Kensington, but live in them throughout the summer, for the 'pleasures of it' and because 'it gives them a little rough work' (24). The Epoch of Rest has become such that the very notions of work and recreation have become subverted; now people seek out physical labour as a form of

pleasurable recreational activity. Meanwhile, play among children in the woods is seen as fulfilling vital societal function as a form of outdoor education. Here Morris's views on the importance of encouraging children to spend time outdoors anticipates Richard Louv's warning of the 'Nature Deficit Disorder' in twenty-first century children in *The Last Child in the Woods* (2005) which he links directly to increased levels of obesity, attention disorders, and mental health illnesses.[45] Louv draws inspiration from pioneering work by environmental psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan on what they call 'attention restoration theory' (ART), which posited that concentration levels improve after having spent time in natural environments.[46] The children in Kensington wood learn independence, self-sufficiency, and interpersonal social skills – learning 'to do things for themselves', as well as essential practical skills such as swimming, cooking, mowing, thatching, carpentering (25). While reading and writing skills are generally acquired by all children, it is not imposed upon them against the desires of the individual child, who may take more pleasure and happiness in physical work than 'book-learning' (25-27). They also become more attentive to their natural environment, encouraged 'to notice the wild creatures' (24). Morris's celebration of outdoor education in *News from Nowhere* is now supported by research into the various benefits of 'forest schools', a phenomenon which became popular in Britain in the 1990s which has been found to positively impact children's 'confidence, social skills, language and communication, motivation and concentration, physical skills, and

[45] Richard Louv, *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (New York: Algonquin, 2005).
[46] Stephen Kaplan, 'The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Toward an Integrative Framework', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 15 (1995), 169-82.

knowledge and understanding'.[47] Later in the novel we see how this outdoor education has led to a widespread knowledge and appreciation of the natural world. Guest notices how everyone he met 'could name a flower, and knew its qualities; could tell you the habitat of such and such birds and fish, and the like' (146). We can therefore read Morris's afforested Kensington as the visualisation of what happens when a society integrates forests into an urban environment, countering what lepidopterist Robert Pyle called the 'extinction of experience' – the loss of opportunities to experience nature and thus feel a natural affinity towards the nonhuman world – or to use Edward O. Wilson's term, 'biophilia'.[48] Towards the end of the novel, we see a euphoric Clara, Dick's partner, embodying the epochal shift of biophilia and the de-extinction of experience when she cries out: 'O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and the weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it' (174).

Morris's vision of an afforested Kensington demonstrates vividly how ecosystem services are mutually arising. For example, the biodiverse and healthy tree communities create 'dappled shadow' whose 'balmy freshness' was 'extremely pleasant' in the heat of the summer day (23). Trees are increasingly valued in city planning as green infrastructure for this very reason, providing shade and reflecting heat in an increasingly hotter summers due to climate change.[49] Guest and Dick slowed their pace on their horses then 'sat inhaling the green forest scents, chief amongst which was the smell of the trodden bracken near the wayside' (23-4). We can recall a

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[47] Liz O'Brien and Richard Murray, 'A marvellous opportunity for children to learn: A participatory evaluation of Forest School in England and Wales', *Forest Research* (2006), <https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/fr0112forestschoolsreport.pdf> [accessed 1 November 2022], p. 4.

[48] Robert M. Pyle, 'The Extinction of Experience', *Horticulture* (1978), 64-67; Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[49] James Morison, et al., 'Air temperature regulation by urban trees and green infrastructure', *Forest Research* (2019), <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/publications/the-role-of-urban-trees-and-greenspaces-in-reducing-urban-air-temperatures/> [accessed 22 October 2022].

similar line appearing in *The Well at the World's End*, when Ralph sits in the Wood Perilous and smells 'the scent of the grass and bracken trodden by the horse-hoofs of that company in the warm summer air' (I. 45). It is no wonder then that the inhabitants of Nowhere, like Morris himself, appear to associate the wood with a medieval past: 'they like the romance of the wood' (23). There is even the suggestion that the 'coolness and shade' invokes the 'romance of the wood' as it 'soothed my excited mind into a condition of dreamy pleasure' (23). Psychologists have found evidence that mental health disorders are higher in urban environments.[50] The phenomenon of *Shinrin-Yoku* or 'forest bathing', first advocated by Japan's Forest Agency in the 1980s, is now becoming popular in the West, supported by a wealth of research on mental and physical effects of spending time in a forest environment reporting reduction in stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms as well as improved mood and relaxation.[51] Kensington wood, in ways similar to Evilshaw (discussed in Chapter One), shows us how psychological states and the physical environment are inextricably linked, highlighting how the conservation of greenspaces in urban environments is critical in mitigating both the mental health crisis and the climate crisis in twenty-first century Britain.

As well as serving a variety of social and psychological benefits, the wood at Kensington also plays a critical ecological function. The wood is said to spread far through what was once Central London, then 'northward and west' until the Lea Marshes 'on the other side of which, as you know, is Epping Forest holding a hand to it' (22). Conservationists today stress the

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[50] Vivian Kovess-Masféty, et al., 'European approach to rural—urban differences in mental health', *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. 50.14 (2005), 926–936.
[51] Margaret M. Hansen, Reo Jones, and Kirsten Tocchini, 'Shinrin-Yoku (forest bathing) and nature therapy: a state-of-the-art review', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14.8 (2017), 1-48.

importance of biological corridors particularly in urban environments in which habitat fragmentation is one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss.[52] Morris's wooded Kensington in the heart of London is now connected to marshland and the adjoining Epping Forest, enabling wildlife to migrate between habitats, increasing available resources and genetic diversity in populations and thus the resilience of biological communities. The biodiversity of Kensington wood is evidenced in that 'naturalists haunt it; for it is a wild spot even here' (23). Elsewhere, we can see that London has an abundance of species of wild plants and animals. Along his journey Guest describes a variety of tree species: 'oaks and sweet chestnuts' (23), 'planes and sycamores' (23), 'cherry' (35), 'limes' (35), 'apricot' (36), 'pear' (36), willows' (124), and 'hawthorn' (172). Elms are mentioned frequently throughout the novel, such as the 'tall old elm' Guest sees at the beginning of the novel (4), to the 'elm-beset meadows' of Hampton Court (124), to the 'ancient elms' in rural Oxfordshire (171). The abundance of elms in both the nineteenth century and Morris's imagined twenty-first century contrasts to the absence of elms today, after the vast majority of elm trees were decimated by repeated outbreaks of Dutch Elm disease throughout the twentieth century.[53] Guest also encounters a variety of bird species on his journey: 'blackbirds' (35, 146), 'magpies', and 'ravens, 'sparrowhawks', 'merlin' (147), 'reed sparrows' and 'warblers' (162), 'cuckoo' and 'corn-crake' (171), 'swifts' (173) and 'doves' (174). Although data is scarce, it is expected that many of these bird populations declined over the course of the nineteenth century due to urban expansionism. The British Ornithological Trust reports that the population of cuckoos has declined between 1967-2017 by 77%, turtle doves by 97%, while the

[52] Amanda J. Zellmer and Barbara S. Goto, 'Urban Wildlife Corridors: Building Bridges for Wildlife and People, *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities* 4 (2022), 1-14.
[53] T. D. Harwood, et al., 'Dutch elm disease revisited: past, present and future management in Great Britain', *Plant Pathology* 60.3 (2011), 545-555.

once-widespread and common corncrake now faces extinction in the UK.[54] Reading *News from Nowhere* today is therefore a stark reminder not only of the ecological effects of industrialisation throughout the nineteenth century, but of the catastrophic habitat loss and biodiversity decline in the last fifty years. While ecologists and conservationists model how ecosystems may be improved using statistical data and conceptual frameworks, Morris's novel can be seen as a kind fictional model of ecological restoration in which we ourselves may enter and viscerally experience. As we get ever closer to the year *Nowhere* is set, our power of hindsight becomes a form of cognitive estrangement.

We might say Morris's London has been 'rewilded', a term first used by conservationists to describe a form of ecological restoration around a century after the novel was published. Often, rewilding considers what an ecosystem may have looked like in the past to sustain it for the future, much like how Morris's post-industrial utopia is inspired by reimagining a pre-industrial past. Morris did not seek to simply reproduce the culture and landscape of the medieval past in *News from Nowhere*. Similarly, rewilding 'examines the past not so much to recreate it, but to learn from the past how to activate and maintain the natural processes that are crucial for biodiversity conservation'.[55] Nor is Nowhere a fixed state of realised utopian dreams but a historical moment, dependent on future societal change just as rewilded landscapes undergo perpetual environmental changes. As George Monbiot explains in his popular book advocating rewilding, *Feral* (2013), 'rewilding, unlike conservation, has no fixed objective: it is driven not

[54] D. Massimino, 'Trends in numbers, breeding success and survival for UK breeding birds', *BTO Research Report* 722 (Thetford: BTO, 2019), <www.bto.org/birdtrends> [accessed 1 May 2023].
[55] Jozef Keulartz, 'Rewilding', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedias: Environmental Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) [online], <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389414.013.545>.

by human management but by natural processes. There is no point at which it can be said to have arrived'.[56] Rewilding is not mutually exclusive or antagonistic to the flourishing of human society. In Nowhere, large areas of London are given over to wild plants and animals because the population density has decreased and communities are spread across the country, yet the rewilding of Nowhere has not resulted in a return to wilderness in the sense of an untouched, unpeopled landscape. Guest questions the historian, Hammond, why he refers to the country as a 'garden' if it includes 'wastes and forests', asking 'isn't it very wasteful to do so?' (64) Nineteenth-century conceptions of 'garden', 'wild' and 'waste' no longer mean the same things in twenty-first century, evidenced by the way Guest confuses 'waste' (uncultivated land) with 'wasteful'. The inhabitants of Nowhere 'like these pieces of wild nature' such as forests – but their perception of them as a wilderness does not preclude them being managed areas for sustainable harvesting of timber. Once mainly parkland, the woods in Windsor 'have lost their courtly game-keeperish trimness, and were as wild and beautiful as need be, though the trees were clearly well seen to' (137). Much as Guest lamented how Epping Forest was being destroyed by 'masterly inactivity' and those who wished to 'landscape-garden it', the wildness of Windsor Forest is considered beautiful. Yet in each of these examples, Epping, Kensington, and Windsor, what is 'wild' is perfectly compatible with and indeed dependent upon active management and human habitation.

Cultivated spaces in Nowhere, such as farmland, also benefit from having a greater number of trees. Guest describes what we would call an agroforestry system, advocated as one of the three key pathways to social and ecological recovery in the United Nation's flagship report,

[56] George Monbiot, *Feral*, p. 83.

The State of the World's Forests (2022).[57] Guest notices how fields 'were planted with trees here and there, often fruit trees' with 'none of the niggardly begrudging of space to a handsome tree which I remembered too well' (164). The report emphasises that the relationship between trees and farmland is not just one of compromise, however, but of mutual benefit to biodiversity and agricultural productivity and the resilience of food systems in climate crisis.[58] Just as wild and uncultivated spaces become intermingled, so to do different types of cultivated spaces and their uses, such as farmland and gardens. Guest describes the farmland as a 'garden made for the pleasure as well as the livelihood of all' (164). This can be understood philosophically: the inhabitants of Nowhere do not make the same distinctions between values of use and beauty, between wild and cultivated spaces, or between nonhuman nature and human culture. Towards the end of the novel, another of Guest's travelling companions, Clara, states that the mistake of those living in the nineteenth century is that they were 'always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate – "nature," as people used to call it – as one thing, and mankind as another' (154). Clara explains the implications for ethical treatment of the natural world, in that 'It was natural to people thinking in this way, that they should try to make "nature" their slave, since they thought "nature" was something outside them' (154). Thus, Morris not only disrupts the dichotomies through which his contemporaries defined different natural environments (garden, waste, wood) and their value in human culture, but the philosophical dichotomy of nature from culture to envision a way of life in which each are interdependent.

[57] FAO, *The State of the World's Forests 2022*, p. vi.
[58] FAO, *The State of the World's Forests 2022*, p. vi.

Orchards and fruit trees feature prominently throughout Nowhere to represent the fertility and careful stewardship of the landscape. We can also see the fruit-bearing tree as a vivid symbol of the long-term fulfilment of Guest's and, by extension, Morris's desire for a better society. Fruit-trees such as 'cherry-trees, now all laden with fruit' (35) grow abundantly in the gardens of Piccadilly Market. In contrast to the bustling, commercial centre of Piccadilly in nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century London, the cherries are gathered by children into baskets and given away freely. Capitalist consumerism is replaced with communal prosperity, embodied in the bountiful fruits the children share with all those passing by the road.

Guest learns that an orchard now covers the entire south side of Trafalgar Square, mainly 'apricot-trees', with a line of 'tall old pear trees' leading to Parliament which now serves a practical purpose in the land as a 'Dung Market' (36). The elm Guest notices in Hammersmith at the beginning of the novel stimulated him to imaginatively inhabit 'a pleasant country place' (4). An imaginative transportation occurs again in future London when he travels up the Thames to Hampton Court, a journey which reminds him of those taken in his youth (124). Here, in Trafalgar Square, Guest flits between 'dream' and 'vision' when perceiving his surroundings, except that this time Guest closes his eyes to the 'sight of the sun glittering on this fair abode of gardens' and the Trafalgar of 1890 appears instead as a 'phantasmagoria of another day' (36). The then-present London temporarily becomes a distant dream in the brilliance of the future vision in which the traveller now feels at home. The solid, cold, grey, familiar Trafalgar of Guest's reality dissolves into mere fantasy or 'phantasmagoria', while the dream of future Trafalgar becomes materialised into this sensorial, immersive vision. Hearing the 'whispering trees' and smelling the 'odorous blossoms' of Trafalgar (36), Guest opens his eyes and comes to

his senses on a literal as well as a figurative level. By the end of the novel, Guest realises this 'dream' is in fact a 'vision', and the dark wintry night of 1890 becomes merely a nightmare that will inevitably fade away with a new dawn.

It is no coincidence that Morris chose Trafalgar Square as the site for the orchards of Nowhere. Dick vaguely recalls reading a history book which tells of a fight between 'some people' that took place in Trafalgar in 1887 – three years before Morris published *News from Nowhere* (36). Guest tells him that there was 'no fighting, merely unarmed and peaceable people attacked by ruffians armed with bludgeons' and that the bludgeoned were then imprisoned (37). As Morris's contemporary readers would have instantly recognised, the event being referred to was Bloody Sunday. Morris, along with other prominent left-wing intellectuals, including George Bernard Shaw and Eleanor Marx, marched with a crowd of 10,000 unarmed working-class East Enders to Trafalgar in order to protest against soaring unemployment and colonial rule in Ireland, and were met with police brutality.[59] As a fitting tribute to show that such class war against flagrant tyranny was not in vain, Trafalgar is covered in fruit-trees to signal the flourishing of human life that will eventually come when oppression and injustice is no more. As Morris himself writes in *Useful Work versus Useless Toil* (1883), 'When class-robbery is abolished, every man will reap the fruits of his labour'.[60]

The symbolic significance of the fruit-bearing trees that grow upon this site express not a naïve faith but a radical hope in social progress because its possibility cannot be guaranteed. The

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[59] Clive Bloom, *Violent London: 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 214-226.
[60] William Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil' in *The Collected Works of William Morris: With Introductions by his Daughter May Morris*, vol. 23, edited by May Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 98-120 (p. 107).

‘1952’ battle Dick refers to gives testament to the fact that Trafalgar would see many more of such protests, which Morris’s future readers may also attest to throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: suffragette bombings (1913, 1914), Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament marches (1958, 1961, 1968), Poll Tax Riots (1990), anti-war protest (2001-2003), and rallies against climate change (2009, 2019, 2022). A linear history of social progress is disturbed when Guest’s belief that social injustice in the Medieval period was at least worse than in the nineteenth century is refuted by Dick, who argues at least the tyrants and tormenters were not ‘hypocrites’ who ‘pretended to be humane’ (37). A similar message is contained within *A Dream of John Ball*, in which the protagonist travels back in time to the Great Revolt of 1381, telling the revolutionary priest leading the uprising that oppression and tyranny has not only endured but has increased in the nineteenth century. Yet the time-traveller also tells John Ball that his dream of ‘when men shall have the fruits of the earth and the fruits of their toil thereon, without money and without price’ will not be in vain, that ‘The time shall come, John Ball, when that dream of thine that this shall one day be’.[61] Guest‘s discussion with Hammond emphasises this future society is a fruit which is nevertheless borne after a winter lasting centuries of bitter strife. The inhabitants of Nowhere also accept the uncertainty of their future despite the sustainable society they have built. What Morris’s orchard at Trafalgar testifies to is the necessity of planting and cultivating hope even we ourselves may not reap the fruit in our own lifetime. Trees in Morris’s fiction are political symbols embodying the remembrance of radical history as well as the radical hope for a better future.

[61] William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball & A King’s Lesson* (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1958), p. 96.

VIII
World 4470
The Thinking Forest

How might a forest think? This is a question Le Guin explores in her short story, 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow'. A team of Ekumen scientists explore beyond the limits of the League of Known Worlds to discover the vast, vegetal consciousness of World 4470, whose biospheric sentience is an emergent property of the brain-like interconnectivity of its plant communities. Just as Morris's social experiment challenges normative ways of living by reimagining London as a sustainable urban forest, Le Guin's thought experiment challenges normative ways of seeing by reimagining a forest as an agential, sensitive, and sentient entity. Examining Le Guin's World 4470 alongside Tolkien's Ents, we begin to see how both writers experiment with alternative conceptual models of forest sentience. As readers, we can test the ethical and ecological implications of these models in light of how we think about forests today.

While the idea that an entire ecosystem such as a forest might possess sentience or the ability to think might seem a whimsical fantasy, the line between the real and the unreal is never fixed. Half a century since Le Guin's story was first published, it has become difficult to pinpoint with any certainty which elements remain fantastic. Today, revolutionary and, in some cases, highly controversial scientific discoveries are challenging traditional and anthropocentric ways of thinking about sentience. The *Encyclopaedia of Animal Behaviour* (2010) defines sentience as 'a multidimensional subjective phenomenon that refers to the depth of awareness an individual

possesses about himself or herself and others'.[62] The entry is explicit about the inherent bias in the way sentience is identified, admitting that '[w]hen we ask about sentience in other animals, we are asking whether their phenomenological experience is similar to our own' and that 'it is important to acknowledge the possibility that other animals might have properties of sentience that humans lack'.[63] While scientists and philosophers have acknowledged the sentience of mammals and birds since at least the eighteenth century, and by the end of the nineteenth had developed the concept to describe an animal's consciousness, emotion, reason and memory as adaptive responses to the pressures of natural selection, for much of the twentieth the rise of Behaviourism inhibited further research.[64] Controversially, scientists working in a new field they call 'plant neurobiology' (first heralded in a provocative article in the 2006 issue of *Trends in Plant Science*) are calling for plants to be recognised as exhibiting 'intelligent' and potentially 'sentient' behaviour, despite the absence of a neurological system.[65] Meanwhile, research pioneered by Suzanne Simard into shared mycorrhizal networks of biochemical communication between multiple species of plants and fungi has described these as homologous to a neurological network, suggesting a kind of sentience that emerges from complex, interconnected systems that may even transcend the traditional conception of what an individual organism is.[66] Such ways of thinking about and imagining the mycorrhizal relationships between trees and fungi that are

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[62] Lori Marino, 'Sentience', in *Encyclopedia of Animal Behaviour*, 2nd edition, (London: Elsevier, 2010), pp. 131-33 (p. 131).
[63] Marino, *Encyclopedia of Animal Behaviour,* p. 131.
[64] Ian J. H. Duncan, 'The changing concept of animal sentience', *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 100.1/2 (2006), 11-19 (p. 11).
[65] Eric D. Brenner, et al., 'Plant neurobiology: an integrated view of plant signaling', *Trends in Plant Science* 11.8 (2006), 413-19 (p. 414); Paco Calvo, 'Are Plants Sentient?', *Plant, Cell and Environment* 40.11 (2017), 2858-869 (p. 2858).
[66] Suzanne Simard, 'Mycorrhizal Networks Facilitate Tree communication, Learning, and Memory', in *Memory and Learning in Plants*, edited by Baluška, František, Gagliano, Monica, Witzany, Guenthe (Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 191-213.

disseminated in popular media, and indeed the evidence upon which scientists themselves make their claims, are a subject of intense debate today within the scientific community. Authors of a recent article published in the journal *Nature, Ecology & Evolution* have called for a reconsideration of the anthropomorphism currently present in some science communication', to avoid the 'risk [of] turning the wood-wide web into a fantasy beneath our feet'.[67]

Ultimately, whether one sees the claims of Simard and others as valid, or the analogies they employ as helpful, it is clear that sentience is a concept born from self-knowledge. Naturally, the human remains the model against which the sentience of all other lifeforms is measured. In doing so, though, we seem to lack that 'depth of awareness […] about others' used to identify sentience in other lifeforms. Problematically, the degree of similarity to or difference from human physiology, cognition, and behaviour has equated to the degree to which the nonhuman is considered an ethical subject. Anthropocentric conceptions of sentience mean the nonhuman must always be expected to conform to human expectations and criteria, overlooking the sheer alterity and diversity of life, the vast majority of which can be found in forests.[68]

Le Guin's story provides an enduringly insightful approach to the otherness of non-human sentience without falling into the linguistic and cognitive traps of anthropocentrism or anthropomorphism still common today. The recent surge of popular interest in plant and fungal sentience must be coupled with the creativity and criticality with which Le Guin herself imagined

[67] Justine Karst, Melanie D. Jones, and Jason D. Hoeksema, 'Positive citation bias and overinterpreted results lead to misinformation on common mycorrhizal networks in forests', *Nature, Ecology & Evolution* 7 (2023) 501-511 (p. 508).
[68] 'The State of the World's Forests' (2020), *UN Environment Programme, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations,* p. vi <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/state-worlds-forests-forestsbiodiversity-and-people> [accessed 12 January 2021].

her sentient forests half a century ago.[69] The wider point being made here is that the experimental imagination can play a vital role in refining the models and metaphors used – sometimes unmindfully – by scientists today. Le Guin's sentient forest is a space to think carefully about how we comprehend and communicate the alien sentience of nonhuman lifeforms and attempt to translate this alienness in human terms. Assigning sentience to the nonhuman through careless anthropomorphism, and denying sentience from the nonhuman through uncritical anthropocentrism, are approaches at the polar ends of a scientific debate about sentience which has persisted despite (or perhaps because of) its continuous development as a concept. The antipodes of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism ultimately share a common centre in which the human remains the measure of all things. Le Guin's story is vital to read now because the ethical and ecological issues inherent in how we approach nonhuman sentience have (and will) only become more complex as scientific discourse widens the scope of what it considers to be sentient life.

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When the Ekumen scientists first arrive on World 4470, they encounter only '[p]lants: infinite plants, not one species known to the visitors from the house of Man' ('Vaster' 176). The biosphere is home only to photosynthetic or saprophytic lifeforms, and the scientists are unable to even find animals among microbiota (176). Ironically, this means the Survey Team begin

[69] Colin Tudge, *The Secret Life of Trees* (London: Penguin, 2006); Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (London: William Collins, 2015); Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (London: Allen Lane, 2021); David Attenborough's 'Seasonal Worlds', *The Green Planet*, BBC, 23 January 2022 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0013vsm/the-green-planet-series-1-3-seasonal-worlds> [accessed 30 January 2022]. Arguably, popular interest in the subject is a resurgence of a contemporaneous "plant craze", sparked by the publication of Peter Tompkins' and Christopher Bird's pseudoscientific book on plant communication and intelligence, *The Secret Life of Plants* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973).

surveying not so much what is present on World 4470, but what is absent: the ‘silence of a thousand million years’ where ‘no foot had ever walked, no eye had ever looked’ (176). Merry and Pippin are similarly alienated when they first enter Fangorn Forest, remarking how ‘frightfully tree-ish’ their surroundings are, and that ‘You can’t imagine animals living here at all, or staying for long’ (*LotR* 462). Both the Hobbits’ first impressions are proven false: we know from Gandalf that at least one animal, a fictional species of corvid, the *crebain*, lives in the forest (285), while the Hobbits also soon discover that they can sustain themselves – much like the plant-life of the forest – on the nutrient-rich waters of the Entwash (471). While the Hobbits learn to appreciate the Forest through their encounter with Treebeard, the absence of all animal life and specifically a perceiving human(-like) subject in Le Guin’s means that World 4470 remains a ‘sad world’ (‘Vaster’ 176) to the Survey Team. Their mission to extend beyond the reaches of the League of Known Worlds to find intelligent life unknown and unfamiliar to those of Hainish descent, ultimately fails for the same reason why humans have failed historically to consider the intelligence of plants here on Earth. As Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola point out, if we cannot learn to recognise intelligent lifeforms alien to us and yet genetically related to us on our own planet, we cannot hope to recognise potentially intelligent lifeforms on other planets. Instead, ‘rather than searching for alien intelligences, we are in continual search of our own intelligence, lost somewhere in space’.[70]

We can understand the Survey Team’s failure to appreciate the value and intelligence of the alien lifeforms they encounter as a symptom of ‘plant blindness’. The term was introduced in

[70] Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (Washington: Island Press, 2016), p. 147

an article published in 1999 by botanists J. H. Wandersee and E. E. Schlusser, who described the phenomenon as:

> (a) the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere, and in human affairs; (b) the inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the life forms belonging to the Plant Kingdom; and (c) the misguided, anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals, leading to the erroneous conclusion that they are unworthy of human consideration.[71]

Wandersee and Schlusser's claim has been supported by research in visual cognition which suggests there are 'fundamental differences in how the visual system processes plants that may contribute to plant blindness'.[72] There is an ongoing debate over the extent to which plant blindness is biologically determined by adaptive responses in human evolution. Nevertheless, it might be more helpful to think about plant blindness as less to do with *whether* we readily perceive plants, but *how*. Contrary to the position that plant blindness is the default mode of human perception, the philosopher Mathew Hall argues plant blindness is more a 'cultural-philosophical attitude' than an evolutionary predisposition influencing our perception.[73]

Both the Hobbits and the Survey Team begin to alter deeply ingrained cultural-philosophical attitudes when they encounter an alien form of plant-like sentience. The Hobbits' encounter with Treebeard and the alliance they form together safeguards their mutual survival and serves to remind both of their fundamental kinship with living beings very different from themselves. At the same time, Tolkien's 'Man-like' (*LotR* 463) Ents have a distinct humanoid

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[71] J. H. Wandersee, & Schussler, E. E., 'Toward a Theory of Plant Blindness', *Plant Science Bulletin*, 47.1 (2001), 2-9.

[72] B. Balas and J. L. Momsen, 'Attention "Blinks" Differently for Plants and Animals', *CBE Life Sciences Education* 13.3 (2014), 437-43 (p. 437).

[73] Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), p. 6.

physiology, personality, and culture. Le Guin's own conception of plant sentience is neither intelligible nor reassuringly similar. Osden, the prickly and ostracised member of the Survey Team who possesses 'bioempathetic receptivity' ('Vaster' 172), can sense and even experience sentience of other lifeforms. Yet even to him the vegetal sentience of World 4470 remains a source of profound mystery and even terror. Where Treebeard invites the Hobbits to consider their fundamental connections with the wider nonhuman world, Le Guin arguably goes further by reminding us that sentience may exist in forms utterly and ultimately alien to us, but which nevertheless deserve our ethical consideration. In their respective ways, both Tolkien and Le Guin provide an experimental space to think imaginatively about the existence of sentience in alien others. It is emphasised that the Hobbits' ignorance stems at least in part from a lack of imagination rather than any intrinsic perceptual limitations: 'I can't imagine' (*LotR* 461), 'You can't imagine' (462). Despite the different approaches the writers take to imagining nonhuman sentience, we can consider both the Ents and World 4470 as efforts to challenge normative cultural-philosophical attitudes of plant blindness and stimulate us to conceive sentience as something beyond the human.

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In *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (2017), Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira argue that 'in our use of language, plants are still expected to exhibit animal-*like* qualities in order to be acknowledged as sensitive living organisms, rather than being appreciated in their own right and on their own terms'.[74] If we do consider plants on their own

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[74] Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira (eds.), *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 14.

terms, it becomes clear that absence of a centralised neurological system in plant physiology is advantageous to living a rooted existence. For the ambulatory Ents and Huorns, their humanoid or animaloid ability to uproot themselves and stride across vast distances enable them to defend themselves and their ecosystems. However, there are evolutionary benefits to not having to rely on escaping or attacking a potential predator as animals do. Unlike animals, whose biological functions are restricted to specific organs or parts of their physiology, plants can have significant portions of their physiology removed and regenerate them. Mancuso points out that:

> [i]t's no accident that we continually refer to ourselves as individuals: the term comes from the Latin *in* (which here means 'not') and *dividuus* ('divisible'). Our body really is indivisible: if we're cut in half, the two halves can't live separately; they die. But if we cut a plant in half, the two parts can still live independently, for the simple reason that a plant isn't an individual.[75]

One problem with our current understanding of sentience is that it refers to something that only individuals can possess. The definition of sentience from the *Encyclopedia of Animal Behaviour* given above refers explicitly to sentience as a 'subjective phenomenon'.[76] In 'Vaster than Empires', there is a gradual shift in the way the Survey Team refer to the forest sentience of World 4470 from being an individual organism to a kind of *inter*subjective *super*organism. World 4470 reminds one of the biospheric intelligence implied in Lovelock and Margulis's Gaia hypothesis being formulated at the time – except, of course, with Gaia, the line between fact and fiction can be unhelpfully ambiguous. The compelling idea of a vast cybernetic system can sometimes slip unintentionally into a more-than-metaphorical theory of planetary personality.

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[75] Mancuso and Viola, *Brilliant Green*, p. 36.
[76] Marino, *Encylcopedia of Animal Behaviour,* p. 131.

The advantage of Le Guin's imaginative story is that it recognises itself as such; the metaphors it uses are deliberate, its speculation self-conscious.

Porlock refers to '[s]omething – in the forest –' ('Vaster' 176), an animal-like creature 'in the trees' (180) which then becomes 'sentient plants' (183). After Osden wakes up following his attack in the forest, the identity of the sentience becomes ambiguous, being referred to as both '[t]he forest – in the forest' (184). Tomiko tries to clarify, asking whether it is '[s]omething sentient?' to which Osden replies '[a] sentience' (187) and later refers to this sentience as a collective 'they', nonpersonal 'it' (188) or general 'the sentience' (188). This eventually becomes '[o]ne big green thought' (196), calling to mind that enigmatic line in Andrew Marvell's 'The Garden' (c. 1650-52): 'a green thought in a green shade'.[77] Recalling Le Guin's association between human consciousness and forest ecosystems, Victoria Bladen argues that, 'For Marvell, the forest is a space of the mind'.[78] Harfex, the biologist, trained in studying individual organisms, becomes exasperated at the idea: 'Not "it" […] There is no being, no huge creature, no person!' (193) The idea of an individual organism seems relatively straightforward until one considers the 'uncertain relation between growth and reproduction' in the way plants can asexually reproduce, blurring the distinction between 'the growth of one continuing individual or the offspring' or the 'reproduction by a single parent'.[79] There are disadvantages for the Ents

[77] Andrew Marvell, 'The Garden', *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Sixteenth Century and Early Seventeenth Century*, 9th edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), line 48, pp. 1804-806 (p. 1806). Marvell also provides the title of Le Guin's story from 'To His Coy Mistress': 'My vegetable love should grow / Vaster than empires, and more slow;'. Marvell, 'To His Coy Mistress', *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Sixteenth Century and Early Seventeenth Century*, lines 11-12, pp. 1796-797 (p. 1797).
[78] Bladen, *The Tree of Life and Arboreal Aesthetics,* p. 178.
[79] Peter Godfrey-Smith, 'Darwinian Individuals', in *From Groups to Individuals Evolution and Emerging Individuality*, edited by Frédéric Bouchard and Philippe Huneman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), pp. 17-36 (p. 18).

being more animal-like than their arboreal neighbours, in that the Ents rely on sexual reproduction and face extinction due to the loss of the Entwives.[80]

'[A]n individual', Peter Godfrey-Smith speculates, 'might be an organism, a part of an organism, or a larger thing like a colony or ecological system'.[81] We can also consider Ents as embodiments of the forest in which they inhabit, much as Le Guin's alien arboriformes embody her fictional biosphere. And, like the confusion around how these sentient organisms are referred to by the scientists in 'Vaster than Empires', embodiment is expressed in the entangled nomenclature of the Ents and Fangorn Forest. Treebeard states that he is both 'an Ent' and 'The Ent' (*LotR* 464). Treebeard's name in Sindarin is *Fangorn – fang* ('beard') and *orn* ('tree'). Perhaps because he is the oldest surviving Ent, Treebeard has become synecdochical with both his species and the forest itself. Further, Fangorn Forest is known to the Rohirrim as 'Entwood' (549), which may refer to either/both the individual Ent, Treebeard, or more generally the wood of the Ents. A number of Ents beside Treebeard are mentioned, including Leaflock (474), Skinbark (474), Wandlimb (475), Quickbeam (483), and Beechbone (568). Each of these names (except perhaps 'Quickbeam', another name for the European rowan) describes the individual Ent's defining characteristic by combining the species or part of a tree's physiology with a part of human (or animal) anatomy. Just as the part expresses the whole in Treebeard's nomenclature,

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[80] Not all plants are asexual, of course, just as not all animals rely on sexual reproduction. There is a species of dioecious cycad - one of the oldest types of seed-bearing plants, as the Ents are one of the oldest living things in Middle-earth – that is endemic to Ngoye Forest in South Africa named *Encephalartos woodii*. Like the Ents, *Encephalartos woodii* faces extinction if a female is not found. *C-LAB: Bio-art Collective*, 'Living Dead: On the Trail for a Female', <https://www.c-lab.co.uk/projects/living_dead> [accessed 17 November 2022].
[81] Godfrey-Smith, 'Darwinian Individuals', p. 19.

the common names for Ents describe how a part of their anatomy ('limb', 'lock', 'skin', 'bone') embodies and differentiates them as individuals.

We can think of this embodied relationship between the Ents and the forest ecologically and politically in terms of the *body politic.* Indeed, the former is inextricable to the latter aspect of Entish embodiment: the ecological conditions of the interconnection and mutual dependence ultimately determines their social organisation and responsibilities. The anatomy of power in Entish society is not hierarchical in the traditional sense of body politic, however, modelled upon human physiology. Fittingly, it is modelled on a more plant-like physiology or what philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call the 'rhizome', a nonlinear network or organisation of power that connects any point in that network to any other point.[82] Each Ent is an individual and expresses differing perspectives – as evidenced in the discussion at the democratic process of the Entmoot – but ultimately the Ents unite as one entity against Isengard. Yet, just as the Ents are hybridisations of animal and plant physiology, we can also think of their body politic as a hybridisation of hierarchical and non-hierarchical social organisation. Although the rhizomic body politic of the forest includes trees, as sentient mobile constituents of this body politic the Ents still maintain a position akin to a head of state in that they can exercise agency on the part of the forest *in toto*. The difference between Entish embodiment and the form of embodiment in Le Guin's story derives from the fact that Ents are anthropomorphic arboriform creatures, simultaneously connecting and differentiating them from plant communities in the forest. In each case, however, embodiment exemplifies the linguistic and conceptual difficulties one faces when

[82] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

assigning sentience, bound to an anthropocentric model of individualism, to entities like plants that are simultaneously one and many, whole and part.

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The blurring of where one individual ends and another begins in the plant kingdom becomes even harder to follow when one considers the physical extent to which plants and fungi are connected. Each interface constitutes a vast, intricate web of biochemical communication through shared mycorrhizal networks, linking multiple organisms and species together. Suzanne Simard herself draws parallels between shared mycorrhizal networks and neural networks, such as the processes by which new pathways are re-configured in response to new information, and the neurotransmitter-like chemicals that are communicated between plants and fungi like synapses in a brain.[83] In *The Word for World is Forest,* Le Guin likens the Athshean forest to a kind of neurological system in the intersecting mesh of roots and paths, 'as devious as nerves' (*Word* 27). Ian Watson was perhaps first to explore the significance of the neuro-botanical metaphor in these two stories. He argues that the forest in the first of these stories, 'while non-sentient itself […] functions metaphorically as mind'; this finds an outlet in the second, in which the forest-mind is 'primarily verisimilar rather than metaphorical'.[84] Certainly, Le Guin uses the metaphor more overtly in 'Vaster than Empires', in a dialogue involving a fictional biologist and ecologist. Having discovered that plant communities on World 4470 are able to communicate to each other, the biologist, Harfex, points out that the arboriforms of World 4470 cannot be sentient because

[83] Suzanne Simard, 'Mycorrhizal Networks Facilitate Tree communication, Learning, and Memory', in *Memory and Learning in Plants*, edited by Baluška, František, Gagliano, Monica, Witzany, Guenthe (Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 191-213

[84] Ian Watson, 'The Forest as Metaphor for Mind: "The Word for World Is Forest" and "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow"', *Science Fiction Studies* 2.3 (1975), 231-37 (p. 232).

‘[t]hey have no more nervous system than do plants of the Hainish Descent on Earth’ (‘Vaster’ 191). In response, Mannon, the ecologist, counters this by pointing out that if a neuroscientist examined ‘one axon, or one detached glial cell’ of an animal brain as a botanist studied individual plants in isolation, it is unlikely that the scientist would detect whether ‘it was capable of sentience’ (192). Here, the value of Le Guin’s speculative imagination of forest sentience, to those who would dismiss such consideration as fanciful, is demonstrated by Manon’s thought experiment. Manon and, by extension, Le Guin, suspends disbelief to challenge prevailing assumptions within scientific discourse and test the very limits of epistemological frameworks.

It is important to state that neither the Ents nor World 4470, of course, present themselves to us as anything other than fictions. The same cannot always be said of scientists’ own ways of imagining and communicating nonhuman sentience. In a popular TED-Talk, Paul Stamets, a controversial figure in mycology, states that mycorrhizal fungal networks ‘are extended neurological membranes […] The mycelium is sentient’.[85] Stamets falls into the temptation of viewing mycorrhizae as brains in ways that are more-than-metaphorical. Mannon perhaps shows a more measured, sober perspective than Stamets when he suggests that ‘sentience or intelligence isn’t a thing, you can’t find it in, or analyze it out from, the cells of a brain’ and that sentience is ‘a function of the connected cells. It is, in a sense, the connection: the connectedness’ (192). Mannon does not state that the root networks of World 4470 ‘are extended neurological membranes’, but that sentience is ‘in a sense’ an emergent property of ‘connectedness’, which may or may not be neurological. Mannon’s comparison between a brain and a forest does not

[85] Paul Stamets, ‘6 Ways Mushrooms Can Save the World’, online video recording, TED (24 August 2013) <https://www.ted.com/talks/paul_stamets_6_ways_mushrooms can save the world?language=en> [accessed 20 January 2021].

state with any certainty that the forest is literally a brain, but that a forest and a brain share 'connectedness' in an analogous way.

Curiously, in 'Cheek by Jowl', Le Guin identifies anthropomorphism as 'an unwarranted co-option or *colonization* […] by the human'.[86] Le Guin's word choice is significant because it shows that in her mind (at least at the time of writing, in 2004), the linguistic co-option or assimilation of the nonhuman Other can be likened to the cultural and political co-option or assimilation of the human Other. European empires during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries promoted assimilation among colonial subjects by promising citizen rights if they adopted the colonial culture, often failing to fulfil this promise.[87] In both cases, the superficially beneficent gesture of recognising the rights or value of the Other conceals the damaging effects of this gesture in the way it subsumes identities, forcing the Other to transform and conform. Mannon's uncertain, careful, speculative language can be seen as connecting human sentience and the sentience of World 4470 together, while at the same time resisting a linguistic *colonization* of its otherness.

Biologist Merlin Sheldrake flips the issue of anthropomorphic metaphors on its head by asking whether they are 'humanising the plant, or vegetalising a set of human concepts?'[88] While Lynda Schneekloth argues that Le Guin 'does not anthropomorphize vegetation', given the associations pointed out between World 4470 and an animal brain, Mike Cadden is perhaps more

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[86] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Cheek by Jowl: Animals in Children's Literature', *Dreams Must Explain Themselves and Other Essays 1972-2004 (*London: Gollancz, 2018), pp. 339-79.
[87] Saliha Belmessous, *Assimilation and Empire: Uniformity in French and British Colonies, 1541-1954* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[88] Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures* (London: The Bodley Head, 2020), p. 238.

accurate when he describes Le Guin's use of metaphor as an example of a 'useful anthropomorphism', allowing for a more careful approach to the otherness of the nonhuman that goes beyond a simple 'synthesis or separation' of Self and Other.[89] To some extent, Le Guin's 'useful anthropomorphism' is at odds with Tolkien's flagrant anthropomorphism in the Ents, which synthesise human and tree physiology and ontology. Yet it is also important to keep in mind that Ents are explicitly not trees, but are tree-like, and exist alongside naturalistic trees. Thus, the anthropomorphic Ent is an ambiguous extension rather than a displacement of real trees, going beyond a simplistic synthesis or separation of the real and fantastic.

Le Guin and Tolkien exemplify how the experimentalism at the heart of the fantastic imagination is, in the words of anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, author of *How Forests Think* (2014), 'able to unite disparate but analogous, and therefore related, entities. It recognizes a gap as it points to a connection'.[90] We live in a period of history in which the essential connection between humanity and the more-than-human world has become severed as never before, and the desire to re-establish that connection expressed in and through cultural discourse is clearly demonstrated through the popular interest in previously niche areas of scientific fields such as mycology and plant physiology. Tolkien and Le Guin's thought experiments respectively enrich our imaginative skills to conceive of a more-than-human sentience, enabling scientists and the wider public alike to refine the ways we think about and coexist with the complex, beautiful and, perhaps, sentient forests on which the survival of humankind ultimately depends.

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[89] Lynda K. Schneekloth, 'Plants: The Ultimate Alien', *Extrapolation* 42.3 (2001), 246-54 (p. 250); Mike Cadden, *Ursula K. Le Guin Beyond Genre: Fiction for Children and Adults* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 7.

[90] Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 141.

IX
Fangorn
A Useful Fantasy

A forest ecosystem comprised of trees, Ents, and everything in between, Fangorn embodies the wider ecology of Middle-earth in which real and imaginary organisms intricately intertwine and cross-pollinate. Fantastic and naturalistic taxa merge and morph in such creative confusion that it becomes difficult for characters and readers alike to discern which is which. We can liken the experimental taxonomy of Tolkien's Middle-earth to both medieval bestiaries and early natural histories in which mythical beasts and magical plants were often interspersed and hybridised with ordinary or exotic (and therefore dubiously) real flora and fauna.[91] The plants and animals in Tolkien's imagination do not exist in static isolation, however, but coexist and interact in a wider system of interrelationships with each other, the physical environment, and characters in the narratives in agential ways. Many have attempted to transpose Tolkien's taxonomy into the form of scientific field guides or encyclopaedias, such as David Day in his *A Tolkien Bestiary* (1979), Dinah Hazell in *The Plants of Middle-earth: Botany and Sub-creation* (2007), and more recently, botanist Walter S. Judd and illustrator Graham A. Judd in *Flora of Middle-earth: Plants of J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium* (2017). The very existence of such texts relies upon and attests to the extensive detail with which Tolkien described both real and fictional flora and fauna. Ultimately, however, it is only by surveying sites such as Fangorn in the original texts that we can fully

[91] Pamela Gravestock, 'Did Imaginary Animals Exist?', in *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Medieval Art, Life, and Literature*, edited by Debra Hessig (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 119-139, p. 124.

appreciate the role this experimental taxonomy has in building and immersing us within his fictional world. Situating my analysis in Fangorn as a site of experimental taxonomy, I argue that such a technique is fundamental to the process of worldbuilding in the fantastic but also to the scientific imagination. Moreover, examining a fictional taxonomy opens a space to think about the various fictions inherent in Linnean taxonomy.

I will attempt to identify and taxonomise the variety of arboreal beings that inhabit Fangorn Forest, applying various species concepts ordinarily used in biological classification today to determine the precise relationship between trees, trees that have become Ent-ish, Huorns, Ents that have become tree-ish, and Ents. As will soon become clear, my attempt to separate these into distinct organisms immediately runs into the same problems as any taxonomist encounters in classifying species. I will then explore Treebeard's own alternative taxonomical system and nomenclature through which the living creatures of Middle-earth are classified and recorded. Comparing Entish taxonomy to our own enables us to think constructively about the inherent arbitrariness of any system of classification. The language and methodology of taxonomy superimposes a fantasy of fixity over a physical reality perpetually in flux. Far from an objective system, taxonomy can be better understood as an inherently flawed form of representation shaped by subjective impressions and limited perspectives. Embracing the arbitrariness of taxonomy is not to do away with it altogether – rather, I argue that the appreciative humility such an awareness brings serves the scientific imagination better in seeking to understanding the complexity of the natural world.

Taxonomy is a useful fantasy. It is a means of representing biological reality, but it is not biological reality itself. The concept of "species", the basic unit of taxonomy, is still without any

universally accepted or applicable definition.[92] Ironically perhaps, Charles Darwin resisted a definition of what a species is in *On the Origin of Species*, simply stating that ‘No one definition has as yet satisfied all naturalists; yet every naturalist knows vaguely what he means when he speaks of a species’.[93] Similarly, literary critic Damon Knight defines the genre of science fiction (and we can reasonably extend this to fantasy) as ‘what we point to when we say it’.[94] Multiple and ‘mutually incompatible’ definitions of a species exist today, and developments in scientific taxonomy since Darwin’s day have only proliferated the number of species concepts.[95] The same may be said in spite (or because) of developments in literary taxonomy. Farah Mendelsohn caveats her own taxonomy of fantasy literature in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* by saying that it ‘needs to be understood in the modern context [in which] taxonomical practices are increasingly polysemic and multiplex, generated by acknowledged questions and capable of existence alongside other configurations’.[96] The fluid relationship between naturalistic and fantastic organisms in Fangorn expresses a ‘polysemic and multiplex’ taxonomy both in the scientific and literary sense of the word.

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[92] Samir Okasha, *Philosophy of Biology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 66.
[93] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, Or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859), p. 44.
[94] Damon Knight, ‘The Dissecting Table’, in *Science Fiction Adventures,* vol. I.1. (New York: Science Fiction Publications, 1952), quoted in Brian M. Stableford, John Clute, and Peter Nicholls, ‘Definitions of SF’, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* [online], <https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/definitions_of_sf> [20 November 2022].
[95] James Mallet, ‘Species, Concepts of’, *Encyclopedia of Biodiversity*, edited by Simon A. Levin, 2nd edition, (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 2013), pp. 679-691.
[96] Farah Mendelsohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. xv.

Fangorn Forest has a variety of diverse deciduous and evergreen tree communities, including 'chestnut' (*LotR* 441), 'willows' (468), 'birches' (475; 479), 'rowan' (479; 483), 'pinewoods' (479; 487), 'silver-birches' (479; 482; 486), 'fir-trees' (481), and a tree 'the Hobbits had never seen before […] like thornless holly' (479).[97] Each of these tree species are distributed appropriately in different parts of the forest. For example, elevation and altitude determine both the distribution and growth-rate of tree species: at the 'feet of great tumbled slopes' the 'trees were scanty', while 'Above these the Hobbits saw thickets of birch and rowan, and beyond them dark pinewoods' (479). When the Hobbits are then 'plunged into deep groves', the 'trees were larger, taller, thicker than any that that Hobbits had seen before' (479). The density of growth at this lower elevation gives this location a 'stifling' (479) feeling, indicating increased air pressure and temperature. Tolkien demonstrably had a deep understanding of tree species and their ecological distribution, applying this understanding lightly but precisely to paint an immersive and naturalistic imaginary forest.

However, within this verisimilar forest ecosystem are imaginary species – the Ents. But how are the Ents related (if at all) to ordinary trees and Huorns? Treebeard says himself that he does not understand the changing relationship between trees and Ents (468). In between Ents, Huorns, and ordinary trees are what appear to be intermediary organisms developing variously towards one side or the other on a continuous spectrum of realistic and fantastic arboreal beings.

[97] The nameless, unfamiliar holly-like tree is also noted to bear 'many stiff upright flower-spikes with large shining olive-coloured buds' (479). In *Flora of Middle-earth* (2017), Judd & Judd suggests that the tree may be a species of *Banksia*, whose distribution is restricted to the Southern Hemisphere, unlike nearly all the trees in Tolkien's legendarium. The authors speculate that 'Perhaps the Ents in their long travels encountered this species far in the South, appreciated its beauty, and brought it to Fangorn Forest' (p. 302). Although there is no evidence to support this reading, it does make sense given that the tree is explicitly exotic to Hobbits. It also makes sense that the trees were planted by the Ents, given that they are confined to this specific and prominent position enclosing the site of the Entmoot.

Some Ents are 'going tree-ish', while some trees are 'half-awake', and a few of those are 'wide-awake' and 'getting Ent*ish*' – a metamorphic process which is 'going on all the time' (468). We can tentatively place Old Man Willow, whom the Hobbits met previously in the Old Forest, in this latter category of trees 'getting Ent*ish*'. Much like the perceptual ambiguity in Old Forest I discussed in Chapter One and the illusionism of the Wood Beyond the World I discussed in Chapter Two, Fangorn is a place where reality and appearance become blended. Partly this is an effect of the ways in which the characters' experiences are narrated. For example, Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas make their camp at the edge of Fangorn under a tree that 'looked like a chestnut, and yet it still bore many broad brown leaves of a former year, like dry hands with long splayed fingers' (441). 'It may have been that the dancing shadows tricked their eyes' (441) we are told, but it 'appeared' that the tree's branches were 'stooping down' over the fire, while 'the brown leaves now stood out stiff, and rubbed together like many cold cracked hands taking comfort in the warmth' (442). Mirroring how the characters are unable to identify the dubious figure of the old man which appears beyond the firelight, we are unable to determine the tree's identity.[98] The firelit conversation about the legends of walking trees may have excited the characters' imagination to view the tree they are sitting under as an Ent. At the same time, however, the scene foreshadows Merry and Pippin's discovery that the tree which at first 'looked almost like the figure of some gnarled old man' (462) is, in fact, an Ent.

[98] Christopher Tolkien believes that in the original drafts this figure was intended to be Gandalf. *The History of The Lord of the Rings*, vol. 7 (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 425. In the finished version, however, Gandalf states that it was not him and that 'you must have seen Saruman' (*LotR* 498). Of course, to muddle things further, Gandalf also says that, in a sense, 'I *am* Saruman' (495).

From the cosmogony in *The Silmarillion*, we know the Ents were created by Yavanna after the Spring of Arda in which trees and other plants or *olvar* first came into existence (*Silm*. 27-28, 40). Indeed, the Ents are described as 'spirits from afar' who are summoned to 'go among […] the *olvar*, and some will dwell therein' (*Silm*. 41). We have sufficient reason to assume, therefore, that Ents are not at all related to ordinary trees, but exist in a separate taxonomic kingdom entirely to *Plantae* or *olvar*. It is curious that Yavanna calls the Ents (or proto-Ents) initially 'spirits from afar', suggesting that they do not originate in the earthly realm of Arda, and only come into physical existence when they 'go among' the *olvar* and 'dwell therein'.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, Tolkien blends Darwinian evolutionary theory into his mythical creation story and reinvents evolution as the unfolding of patterns in ways that are not altogether contra to Darwin's own belief in species formation. Perhaps the most popular species concept used by taxonomists today is the Phylogenetic Species Concept (PSC), which 'defines a species as a group having a shared and unique evolutionary history'.[99] While the precise nature of the Ents' origins remains unclear, we are led to assume that Ents are phylogenetically unrelated to tree species, despite their morphological similarities. However, we simply do not have a complete understanding of the Ents' precise origins, or how they may have coevolved with *olvar* throughout the long ages of Middle-earth, much like taxonomists using PSC especially when classifying extinct species are restricted by the availability of data in the fossil record.[100]

[99] Robert Hine (ed.), 'Phylogenetic Species Concept', *A Dictionary of Biology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 971.
[100] It is important to note that the origin story of the Ents given in *The Silmarillion* is an afterthought. It is also attributed implicitly to the legends of the Elves, rather than the Ents themselves.

The physical appearance of the Ents Merry and Pippin encounter in Fangorn does suggest that individual Ents share a kinship with specific species of tree or 'tree-kind' (480). Tolkien's word choice here is significant in that he displaces what otherwise would be jarring scientific term in a pre-scientific world, 'species', with a vaguer but also more Biblical 'kind'.[101] When the Ents begin to arrive for the Entmoot, the Hobbits note that, while all unmistakably the same 'kindred', 'The Ents were as different from one another as trees from trees: some as different as one tree is from another of the same name but quite different growth and history; and some as different as one tree-kind from another, as birch from beech, oak from fir' (480). While 'one Hobbit is like another', the Ents appear to be a family or genera of multiple species rather than a single species. The morphology of the Ents differentiate dramatically, with 'many shapes, and colours, the differences in girth, and height, and length of leg and arm; and in the number of toes and fingers (anything from three to nine)' (480). Moreover, each Ent bears resemblance to a specific species of tree: 'some recalled the chestnut: brown-skinned Ents with large splay fingered hands, and short thick legs' (perhaps the tree-kind Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas met on the edge of Fangorn), while 'some recalled the ash: tall straight grey Ents with many-fingered hands and long legs; some the fir (the tallest Ents), and others the birch, the rowan, and the linden' (480). Later, when the Hobbits are carried off by Quickbeam, they note how 'whenever he saw a rowan-tree he halted a while with his arms stretched out, and sang, and swayed as he sang' (483), suggesting that each Ent-kind shares a special relationship with its equivalent tree-kind. Alternative common names for rowan are 'quickenbeam', 'quicken tree', indicating there is more in Quickbeam's namesake than his own explanation that it was a nickname given to him as

[101] See for example, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth' (Genesis 1. 11-13).

an Enting when he interrupted an Elder Ent (483). Curiously, after describing how the Entwives preferred trees ‘with whiter blossom and richer fruits’ to the rowans, he tells the Hobbits how ‘there are no trees of all that race, the people of the Rose, that are so beautiful to me’. Rowans, as well as the fruit-trees the Entwives prefer, both belong to the Rose family, *Rosaceae*, which also contain apple, pear, and cherry. In Entish taxonomy, we can therefore substitute ‘race’ for ‘family’. While Quickbeam shares morphological similarities and a sense of familial kinship with a particular species in this family, the rowan, it is clear that he considers himself and, by extension, all Ents, as not part of the same family of organisms.

The Typological Species Concept (TSC), advanced by the father of modern taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus, defined species as a group of individuals with shared morphology or characteristics, and is still used today in combination with other species concepts to classify organisms. Although Linnaeus shifted away from an essentialist concept of a species over the course of his lifetime, the practical assumptions of the TPS nevertheless arose from the Classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, in which living things were created and that there is a fixed, “perfect” type or form of each species.[102] We might think of Treebeard’s aversion to willows with a ‘*bad* heart’ (468), corrupted by darkness, as part of an Entish taxonomy in which species can be degenerate from perfectibility into ‘counterfeits’, sub-created in ‘mockery’ such as the Orcs are of the Elves, or Trolls of the Ents (486).

Applying the TSC to Ents throws up many of the same issues taxonomists have today. Two different species may look identical, while individuals within the same species may look

[102] Richard Richards, *The Species Problem: A Philosophical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 60.

utterly unalike each other. Taxonomists using a traditional TSC will immediately run into difficulties in identification due to the existence of 'morphs', different stages in an individual organism's life cycle.[103] We are unable to say with any certainty that Ents are a single species or multiple related species, despite their morphological diversity. This is complicated further in that here are tree species which morph into Ent-like organisms, and Ents which morph into tree-like organisms, and Huorns – either Ent-like-trees or tree-like-Ents who 'have voices' but 'have become queer and wild' (565). Clearly, we must attempt to taxonomise Fangorn's fluxional arboreal entities using an alternative species concept to one based on mere appearance of morphological characteristics.

One of the most common but most controversial species concepts taxonomists use today is known as the Biological Species Concept (BSC), popularised by the evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr in *Systematics and the Origin of Species* (1942) in answer to the species problem I briefly outline above. The BSC overcomes the limitations of the TSC by defining species instead as 'a group of populations whose members are capable of interbreeding successfully and are reproductively isolated from other groups'.[104] While Ents face extinction because they can no longer sexually reproduce due to the disappearance of the Entwives, asexual reproduction is common in plants, fungi, and bacteria, as is hybridisation and interspecies breeding.[105] This means that the BSC is virtually useless as a way to classify whole kingdoms of life on earth. Nor is it particularly helpful considering the Ents. On the one hand, the inevitable extinction of the Ents suggests that they are distinct enough from trees that they are unable successfully to breed

[103] John Wright, *The Naming of the Shrew* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 240.
[104] Hine, *A Dictionary of Biology*, p. 389.
[105] Hine, *A Dictionary of Biology*, p. 389.

with them, and therefore can be classified as separate taxa. However, the BSC does not help us in understanding whether the metamorphoses that occur in Ents and trees have led to speciation. Huorns, as intermediary organisms between trees and Ents, could very well be the offspring of such biological processes that cannot be explained through sexual reproduction.

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When Treebeard and the Hobbits Merry and Pippin encounter each other for the first time in Fangorn Forest, both are puzzled by what, exactly, the other is. The Ent asks 'what are *you*, I wonder? I cannot place you. You do not seem to be in the old lists that I learned when I was young' (465). Treebeard, 'the oldest of the Ents, the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the Sun upon this Middle-earth' (499), is unaware of the Hobbits' existence as the Hobbits are of his. Like any good biologist, the Ent is naturally 'not hasty' (464). Treebeard first determines that the Hobbits are indeed a new species unknown to him and not 'little Orcs' (464) as they first appear to him. Rather than the *International Code of Zoological Nomenclature*, however, the Entish taxonomical record takes the form of a mnemonic 'list' of living things resembling a nursery rhyme which Treebeard says he 'learned when I was young' (464). Indeed, the list begins like an instructional song: 'Learn now the lore of Living Creatures!' (464) Given that Treebeard is the oldest Ent, the origins of the Entish taxonomical system may be the Elves, who also first taught the Ents and trees to speak (468).

Treebeard states that 'they' have since made 'new lists', showing that the traditional knowledge system or 'lore' is capable of adaptation and evolution, much like oral folklore (464). While 'they' could very well refer to the Elves, we soon see the Ents modifying the old list themselves. The acceptance of the Hobbits as a new entry in the 'old list' is agreed upon through

consensus of the Entish community at the Entmoot, much like how species must be verified by the wider scientific community. Treebeard embodies a kind of Linnean figure in his astute and considered observation of the Hobbits, his eyes 'surveying them, slow and solemn, but very penetrating' (463). Rooted in careful consideration of the deep past, the Ent nevertheless retains an ever-present openness to new information as it appears before him. Again, this is expressed through his eyes, which Pippin remembers as being 'filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present', likened to the 'sun shimmering on the outer leaves of a vast tree' (463). Treebeard's ontology is embodied in a tree's physiology, itself providing the metaphor for an ever-expanding phylogenetic tree of evolutionary history. And, as the oldest living thing, Treebeard's consciousness extends to the epistemological edges of the natural history of Middle-earth – to the very 'root-tip' of the deep past and the 'leaf-tip' of a perpetually unfurling present (463).

Examining the 'old list' more closely, it becomes clear that its poetic structure represents the Ent's system of biological classification, but also the inherent biases in this system. The first stanza groups the 'four free peoples':

> *Eldest of all, the elf-children;*
>
> *Dwarf the delver, dark are his houses;*
>
> *Ent the earthborn, old as mountains;*
>
> *Man the mortal, master of horses.* (464)

It is curious that Ents are included among the Elves, Dwarves, and Men, as it suggests that they share more with humanoid beings than with trees (plants or *olvar* are not mentioned at all in the excerpts from the 'old list', though that is not to say there are not any later verses that do). Dimitra Fimi relates the list to the medieval 'Great Chain of Being', but argues that the traditional

hierarchy is subverted by the superior position of the 'tree-ish' but sentient Ents above Men.[106] Treebeard considers the shared characteristics between Elves, Men, and Ents (Dwarves and Orcs, perhaps tellingly, are excluded). What first appears to be an objective exercise is really a way for Treebeard to emphasise what he believes to be the superior qualities of Ents over both Elves and Men:

> Ents are more like Elves: less interested in themselves as Men are, and better at getting inside other things. And yet again Ents are more like Men, more changeable than Elves are, and quicker at taking the colour of the outside, you might say. Or better than both: for they are steadier and keep their minds on things longer. (468)

Interestingly, 'Man' is known as 'master of horses', which suggests that the 'old list' is of the Ents' own creation, with a limited view of the diversity of human cultures across Middle-earth. It is likely that, given the Ents' previously much wider geographical range, the list has been modified over time, so that Men have become identified with this cultural characteristic of the people local to Fangorn, the Rohirrim. It is worth pointing out that Ents, Elves, Dwarves, and Men are referred to as 'peoples', suggesting that they are not separate species but distinct ethnic groups or 'races' of the same species.[107] However, we know from Quickbeam's conversation with the Hobbits that 'race' can be substituted for what taxonomists arbitrarily call 'family'.

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[106] Dimitra Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 141-42.

[107] Treebeard's apparent "racism", or hierarchical, essentialist worldview of the different 'peoples' which inhabit Middle-earth calls into question the extent to which this reflects Tolkien's own beliefs. Though there have been long-running debates about race and racism in Tolkien, these have become more widespread and heated since the release of the television series, *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, Amazon, 1 September 2022 <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Lord-Rings-Power-Season/dp/B09QH97PTF> [accessed 19 July 2023], in response to its diverse cast. For a nuanced examination of race and racism in Tolkien, see Dimitra Fimi's *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History* (2008) and Robin Ann Reid, 'Race in Tolkien Studies: A Bibliographic Essay', in *Tolkien and Alterity*, edited by Christopher Vaccaro and Yvette Kisor (London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 33-77. See also Robert Stuart, *Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth* (Gewerbestrasse: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Following this logic, not only are Elves, Dwarves, and Men separate species, but they belong in separate families. As Treebeard's biased taxonomy demonstrates, however, the list is not an objective, comprehensive system of biological classification but shaped by the Ents' ideological beliefs, revealing the inherent biases, conjectures, and arbitrary nature of any system of classification.

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Fantasy forests are experimental spaces in which to think creatively and critically about real forest ecosystems. The immersive and intricate detail of these fictional spaces allows us collectively to enter them and think with them *as if* they were real. I have sought to demonstrate that fantasy forests can be approached as a form of 'narrative evidence', not to challenge the validity of scientific knowledge, but to draw attention to the value of fantasy in the processes of imagination and communication involved in scientific epistemology. Morris's *News from Nowhere* can be considered a kind of social experiment, superimposing radical societal and environmental improvements onto real places. His vision of a sustainable urban forest engenders radical hope in manifesting that fantasy into material reality at a time in which such changes, however necessary, seem impossible under the imaginative tyranny of capitalist realism. In ways that could usefully inform scientific debates today, Le Guin's thought experiment in 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow', about a biosphere made sentient through the ecological connectivity of its forests, draws attention to the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric assumptions inscribed in how we think and talk about alien forms of consciousness. Finally, fantasy forests can be used as a tool to refine not only the language used in scientific discourse, but the very epistemological frameworks that are used in the production of knowledge – namely, taxonomy – a system of

representation, I argue, that is itself a useful fantasy. My failure to taxonomise the fictional Ents of Fangorn Forest illustrates the many difficulties biologists encounter when attempting to taxonomise the fantastic complexity and fluidity of the living world. What these three fantasy forests offer is a means to test the parameters of the real and the unreal, the possible and the impossible, that is the very object of scientific thought, enriching how we imagine, communicate, and live sustainably with forests.

CHAPTER FOUR
ENGAGEMENT

X
Ruskin Land

I have now explored three themes which reveal the underlying ways in which Morris, Tolkien, and Le Guin imagine forests in their fictional worlds: Escape, Enchantment, and Experiment. This final chapter will discuss findings from my own experiment testing how fantasy forests can be used as a novel form of environmental engagement in a real forest setting. Throughout, I have aimed to demonstrate that fantasy fiction has a key role to play in stimulating a collective and effective response to ecological crises impacting forest ecosystems. As we spiral deeper into the ecological crises of the twenty-first century, we must recognise the powerful agency of stories and storytelling in bringing about rapid and radical cultural transformations. As novelist and poet Ben Okri recently advocated, we require an 'existential creativity' that is 'beyond hope and realism. This is a time when we ought to dedicate ourselves to bringing about the greatest shift in human consciousness and in the way we live'.[1] Fantasy provides us with alternative way of valuing and living in the reality of a more-than-human world. Forests are re-presented through a blend of naturalistic and fantastic modes, sharpening our perception and expanding our understanding of the forests around us. They provide new ways of thinking about the agency of forests within our lives, as well as deepening our awareness of their existence beyond familiar scales of space and time. Stirring

[1] Ben Okri, 'Artists must confront the climate crisis – we must write as if these are the last days', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/12/artists-climate-crisis-write-creativity-imagination> [13 February 2023].

reflections into the deep past, casting speculations far into the future, fantasy forests are places where we can go to re-imagine our presently unsustainable relationship with forests.

To test this hypothesis, and to enrich my understanding of forest ecologies – both real and imagined, within and beyond the text – I designed a series of interactive workshops and immersive "reading walks". Reading the texts *in situ* to a group of students, I sought to discover what happened when we immersed ourselves simultaneously within a real and fantasy forest – what patterns and interactions and insights might emerge which would shed light on how we both perceive and imagine forests. This also required bringing traditional literary ecocriticism outside and into conversation with social science methodologies in new and exciting ways, developing an approach to the literary text being pioneered in the nascent field of empirical ecocriticism.

Empirical ecocriticism can be understood as emerging from internal pressures within the broader context of literary scholarship in these increasingly turbulent times of ecological crises. When it became established as a field of literary criticism in the 1990s, ecocriticism was defined as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,' conducted in 'a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis' – that is, in relation to literature's 'coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis'.[2] The job of an ecocritic has long been understood as interrogating representations of nature (and even interrogating the concept of nature itself) in order to tease out an environmental practice implicitly or explicitly inscribed within the literary text, often with the assumption that literature can stimulate positive environmental attitudes and behaviours. It has been argued more recently that 'the problem with such convictions […] is that

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[2] Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press), p. xix; Buell, *The Environmental Imagination,* p. 420; Richard Kerridge, *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (London: Zed Books, 1998), p. 5.

they have been based largely on our intuitions, speculations, and anecdotal data'.[3] The exact relationship between literature, the theoretical work of ecocritics, and environmental praxis remains unclear. So too is the unnecessarily abstruse academic language sometimes used by ecocritics, which may exclude a wider audience on which effective environmental practice depends. It is perhaps out of this uncertainty over the relationship between ecocritical theory and practice that Simon Estok declared ecocriticism had 'failed to live up to its initial activist promises'.[4]

Back in 2004, in a chapter titled 'The Future of Ecocriticism', Greg Garrard called for more constructive relations between disciplines so that ecocritics can avoid replicating 'basic presuppositions' within environmental discourse.[5] The empirical ecocriticism employed by my experiment exemplifies an interdisciplinary methodology motivated by a clear commitment to environmental praxis, testing the presupposition ecocritics have made since the early days of the field around the efficacy of literature (and, by extension, the value of ecocriticism itself) in time of socioecological crises. Publications within the field of empirical ecocriticism have so far focused on climate fiction or narrative empathy towards animals.[6] This research will extend empirical ecocriticism's generic and ethical range by focusing on fantasy fiction and the effects texts have on reader's responses to forest ecosystems. However, it is important to keep in mind that the ways in which participants responded to the texts arose from an intricate intersectionality of temporal,

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[3] Schneider-Mayerson, Weik von Mossner, and Małecki, 'Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Texts and Empirical Methods', 328.
[4] Simon C. Estok, 'Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16.2 (2009), 203–225 (p. 206).
[5] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 203.
[6] For a list of key empirical ecocritical publications combining ecocritical textual analysis with empirical research, see https://empiricalecocriticism.com/resources/.

spatial, (inter-)personal, and cultural factors which inevitably shape how different readers respond to each text for any number of different reasons. Thus, while the experiment's empirical ecocritical methodology is committed to environmental praxis, it remains – much like the fantasy texts themselves – experimental and speculative. Like Patrick Murphy, I consider ecocritical theory as 'a form of aesthetic praxis' that is conscious of the numerous, complex, indirect, and often unexpected ways a literary text might stimulate change.[7]

My open-air experiment was conducted over three, day-long workshops over a period of six months in an ancient semi-natural woodland and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) known as Ruskin Land in the Wyre Forest. The largest woodland National Nature Reserve in

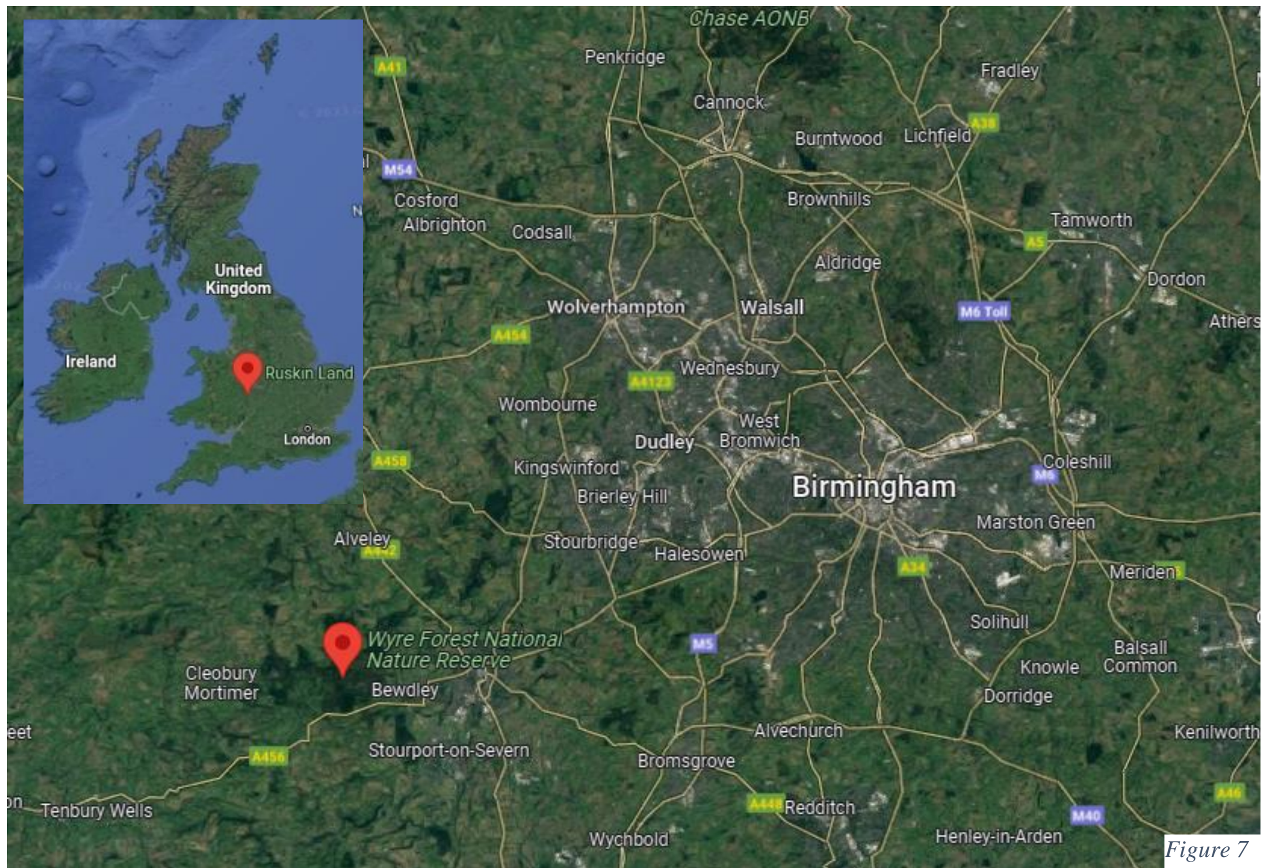

Figure 7

[7] Patrick D. Murphy, *Transversal Ecocritical Praxis: Theoretical Arguments, Literary Analysis, and Cultural Critique* (Lanham: Lexington, 2013), p. 16.

England, the Wyre Forest is conveniently located twenty miles west of the city of Birmingham, the second most populous city in the UK [Fig. 7]. Ruskin Land was an appropriate site for the workshops for two reasons. The first one is practical – the participants in the experiment were undergraduate students at the nearby University of Birmingham, and so it was an ideal location to visit for a day. More than this, however, Ruskin Land has significant historical and cultural connections with Morris and Tolkien. Ruskin Land began in the 1870s when the then Mayor of Birmingham, George Baker, donated a portion of woodland for the use of the Guild of St George, founded by the Victorian polymath and Morris's mentor, John Ruskin. In one of the letters Ruskin wrote to the 'workmen and labourers of Great Britain', published in *Fors Clavigera* (1871), he expressed his desire 'to take some small piece of English ground, beautiful, peaceful, and fruitful'.[8] There he would cultivate an agricultural community embodying the social, environmental, and aesthetic ideals opposed to what he described in *Unto this Last* (1860) as the defining 'illth' of nineteenth century Britain – pollution, poverty, and ill-health proliferated by the supposed "wealth" of industrial capitalism in cities such as Birmingham.[9] Morris knew as well as Ruskin that 'There is no wealth but life' – that the true wealth of society depended upon the wellbeing of its people and the health of the natural environment, that social and ecological exploitation were intimately intertwined, and that it was the role of the artist and writer to express and manifest a love and understanding of nature.[10] Around half a century later, around the time Tolkien began reading

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[8] John Ruskin, 'Letter V' (May 1871), *Fors Clavigera*: *Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain,* 3rd edition, vol. 1 (London: George Allen, 1902), pp. 92-102 (p. 101).
[9] John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, p. 126.
[10] John Ruskin, *Unto This Last,* p. 156. Morris similarly expressed in 'Art, Wealth, and Riches' (1883) that he understood 'wealth as signifying the means of living a decent life, and riches the means for exercising dominion over other people', asking the people of Manchester attending his lecture, 'were not the brown moors and the meadows, the clear streams and the sunny skies, wealth?'. 'Art, Wealth, and Riches', in *The Collected Works of William Morris: With Introductions by his Daughter May Morris*, vol. 23, edited by May Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 143-63 (p. 143, p. 159).

Morris's fiction when he lived in and around Birmingham, Tolkien's own love and understanding of the natural world was nurtured in the local Worcestershire countryside into which the city of Birmingham continued its expansion. It was also during this time that the Forestry Commission, established in 1919 in response to decreased timber stocks as a result of the First World War, began acquiring parcels of land such as in the Wyre Forest, where it began grubbing out large areas of biodiverse ancient oak woodland and replacing it with less ecologically valuable but more profitable conifer plantations.[11] Despite these immense changes to the landscape, Tolkien reflected in later life that 'Any corner of that county (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way "home" to me, as no other part of the world is' (*Letters* 54). Today, Ruskin Land is a site in which the Guild of St George and the Wyre Community Land Trust are working together to champion and adapt Ruskin's philosophy towards conservation, social justice, and the value of the arts and education in public life. Partnering with Ruskin Land and situating the workshops on the site was therefore appropriate both in terms of the local history of changing forest management and the sustainable silviculture practiced there today, its cultural connections with Morris and Tolkien, and the intertwined environmental, artistic, and educational philosophy and practice of the organisation which resonates so well with the broad aims of the research project.

I recruited fifteen second- and third-year undergraduate students at the University of Birmingham to come with me to Ruskin Land to respond to fantasy forests in a real forest setting. Given that the participants were all students of a similar demographic, and the relatively small size of the group, the sample is not and could never be representative of a wider population. It would

[11] *Forestry England*, 'Wyre Forest - Our History', <https://www.forestryengland.uk/wyre-forest/our-history> [accessed 12 February 2023].

be impossible and probably irresponsible to make any observations or inferences about how different people, of different demographics, would respond to the texts, or to different texts, or in different locations. Nevertheless, I deemed it important that I selected as diverse a group of people as possible within these parameters to enrich the group discussions with a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, perspectives, and levels of experience with both forest environments and fantasy literature. Thirty-six students applied to participate in the research, and from these I used responses to a questionnaire to select the sample group (Appendix A). The questionnaire asked them whether they live in urban, suburban or rural area both during (Q2) and outside of term-time (Q3), how often they visit forest environments (Q4), how familiar they were with fantasy fiction (Q5), and the extent to which they felt 'connected to nature' (Q6). In the recruitment posters, I offered a £50 incentive for participation. This was for both practical and ethical reasons: as a gesture of appreciation for their time and effort, and to ensure there were enough applicants for the selection process.

Before the workshops, I decided to trial the reading walk format with fellow doctoral researchers and academics at the Birmingham Institute of Forest Research (BIFoR) during a field trip to Ruskin Land. This offered an opportunity to receive feedback from my colleagues. The interdisciplinary and specialist nature of the group also emphasised to me how significant an individual's background and knowledge of forest environments was in how they responded to the texts. For example, after I had read an extract from *The Lord of the Rings* describing the Ent, Treebeard, the scientists within the group reflected upon the value and risks of anthropomorphic language used in scientific discourse within their various fields [Fig. 8]. This was also demonstrated when I read an extract describing the forest of Lothlórien to the current companions of the Guild

of St George at a Companions Day at Ruskin Land in April 2022, where a diverse group of local people, visiting Ruskin scholars, carpenters and crafts people discussed their own distinct vision of the past, present, and future of the forest around them, as Frodo himself had done in the passage [Fig. 9].

Figure 8

Figure 9

I designed the focus of each workshop to loosely circle one of the three main themes that formed the basis of my literary analysis (Escape, Enchantment, and Experiment) through the selection of the extracts on the reading walk and the semi-structured interview questions I asked participants in the focus groups. I aimed to gather data specific to the themes I examined in my literary analysis, but decided beforehand not to disclose the theme until the end of the day to limit the influence I had on how the participants responded. Each participant was also given a journal to sketch or write in, recording their observations, comments, and reflections throughout the day. I felt the journals offered an alternative way of gathering participant responses, particularly as some participants were more comfortable sharing their ideas with the rest of the group than others in the walking interviews and focus groups. Journal entries could be triangulated with data from other

Figure 10

sources, such as walking interviews and focus groups, providing greater detail to the things participants discussed as a group.[12]

At the beginning of each workshop, participants were led along a circular, pre-planned route through the forest lasting around two hours. Five or six short extracts from fantasy texts, most of which were discussed in the corresponding chapter, were read at specific locations along the walk. Each lasted around five minutes, followed by a five-to-ten-minute 'walking interview' in which participants discussed their responses to the extract in relation to their immediate surroundings. I chose to do walking interviews because they have been found in previous studies to generate more place-specific data, encourage physical immersion and mental wandering, and allow for both the researcher and interviewee to be better acquainted with the environment.[13] Through these, I aimed to understand the participants' immediate response to both the specific extract and the specific site of the reading. Each reading walk explored a different area of the surrounding woodland, but returned to the same starting location – the Studio in the Woods – where the focus groups and creative sessions were held. All three of the reading walks also stopped in a location known as the Dragon's Nest, an aptly named structure built from deadwood by architecture students visiting Ruskin Land in 2018, which we used for readings and group discussions [Fig. 10].

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[12] Paula Meth, '"Coughing Everything Out": The Solicited Diary Method', in *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide to Textual, Media and Virtual Techniques,* edited by Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke and Debra Gray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 71-93.

[13] James Evans and Phil Jones, 'The walking interview: Methodology, mobility and place', *Applied Geography* 31.2 (2011), 849-458; Jonathan Lynch and Greg Mannion, 'Enacting a place-responsive research methodology: Walking interviews with educators', *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* 16.4 (2016), 330-345; Joseph Pierce and Mary Lawhon, 'Walking as Method: Toward Methodological Forthrightness and Comparability in Urban Geographical Research', *The Professional Geographer* 67.4 (2015), 655-662.

To add diversity and interest, the routes were designed so that participants encountered a range of topographical features and habitats (hills, streams, reservoirs, orchards, species-rich grassland); a series of structures, like the Dragon's Nest, scattered throughout the woodland; and different forest compositions as a result of the sustainable forest management practiced on site to create a variety of habitats (rides, glades, coppices, sites of new planting, wood pasture, thinned and un-thinned woodland). John Iles, tenant of Ruskin Land and then a director of the Guild of St George, was on-hand during the walks to inform the students about the conservation and management of the forest. The walks also involved interactive elements, such as engaging in silent, stationary observation, using a handheld microscope and thermal imaging scope, and a blindfolded sensory walk.

I aimed to find corresponding features or aspects that connected the textual and actual forest to encourage the participants to reflect on the similarities and differences between them. Tolkien himself was known to have compared the geography of Middle-earth while out walking in the Malvern Hills, Worcestershire with his friend, George Sayer, in August, 1952:

> He and I tramped the Malvern Hills which he had often seen during his boyhood in Birmingham or from his brother's house [Hilary Tolkien] on the other side of the Severn River valley. He lived the book [*The Lord of the Rings*] as we walked, sometimes comparing parts of the hills with, for instance, the White Mountains of Gondor. We drove to the Black Mountains on the borders of Wales, picked bilberries and climbed through the heather there... When he saw signs of industrial pollution he talked of orcs and orcery.[14]

[14] George Sayer, 'Liner notes accompanying the issue of Tolkien's tape recordings by Caedmon Records (1975)', quoted in Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The J. R. R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* (London: HarperCollins, 2017), vol. 1, p. 770.

Not only was Tolkien's vision overlaid with the imaginary landscape of his fictional world, the environmental effects of 'industrial pollution' are reconceived in the moral universe he had created as very real manifestations of 'orcs and orcery'. In my own reading walks, fantasy forests became lenses through which the participants might perceive anew the physical characteristics of the forest around them. They also served, much like in Tolkien's own reading walk, to prompt ethical consideration of environmental degradation and destruction in a broader context of ecological change.

It was essential in the process of planning the reading walks to make repeated visits to Ruskin Land to become familiar with its topography, landscape features, plants, wildlife and management activities, and for photographing potential locations for the readings. After I had become acquainted with the site, I selected extracts from the texts and began annotating them for features and aspects of the textual landscape as I had with the physical landscape on my visits to Ruskin Land. Sometimes matching the extracts to the locations was obvious, based upon clear correspondence between a specific feature, while other times the match was made intuitively on what I felt to be appropriate when practicing the walks. I then returned to the site with the annotated extracts and a detailed hand-drawn map, matching each extract with a location. After practicing walking the route and reading the extracts, I would often alter the order, locations, or number of extracts on the reading walk so that it could be reasonably done within the allotted time. I would annotate the hand-drawn map, placing the extracts on the specific locations, and take this with me on the day of the workshops (Appendices B, C, D). The reading walks emerged from an iterative, reciprocal, and experimental process of repeated tests and adjustments. It was also important to take a flexible approach when delivering the reading walks on the day, as it was often the case that

the participants' discussions took longer than I had expected, requiring us to take short cuts through the forest or omit a reading I had planned. It was vital to give plenty of time for participants to pause occasionally to explore and interact with their surroundings. I used a GIS device, the Garmin handheld unit, to record the route and waymarked locations of the readings to produce digital maps for each reading walk (Appendices E, F, G).

The 45-minute focus group in each workshop allowed participants to share their responses to the reading walk, compare different extracts together, and reflect on broader questions relating to the overall theme of the workshop. I used semi-structured interview questions to get a sense of their general responses to the reading walk as well as keep the discussion flowing loosely around the key research questions I explore in the workshop's corresponding chapter. At the same time, the semi-structured interview allowed for a flexible approach to questions so participants could discuss their ideas and observations in their own words.[15]

Participants engaged in a 60-minute activity during the workshop which enabled them to learn more about the ecology and biodiversity of the site, its historical uses, as well as the conservation practices Ruskin Land employs today to sustainably manage the forest. In the first workshop, participants hand-pressed a local variety of apple from the orchards on site into apple juice which they could take home with them. In the second workshop, they were instructed how to produce artists' charcoal from willow wands which they collected, and after used to draw with in

[15] Robyn Longhurst, 'Semi-structured interviews and focus groups', in *Key Methods in Geography*, edited by Nicholas Clifford and Gill Valentine (London: Sage, 2003), pp. 117-132; Kevin Dunn, 'Interviewing', in *Qualitative Methods in Human Geography*, edited by Iain Hay, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 192–206. All data from the walking interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai software and then coded thematically using NVivo software, which was used to form the cluster of overarching themes I examine in this chapter.

the creative session. In the third workshop, a local naturalist and co-editor of *The Nature of Wyre* (2015), Rosemary Winnall, led a species identification walk through the forest. In addition to the educational value of the activities, and as a way of collaborating with Ruskin Land in the design of the workshops, it also became apparent that the activities led to the group bonding and feeling more at ease with each other, myself, and with their environment. I believe this was an important factor in the group dynamics in how the participants collectively responded to the workshops, as I explore later in this chapter.

Finally, there was a 60-minute session at the end of each workshop which gave the participants an opportunity to creatively respond to the forest and/or the fantasy texts. This presented me with yet another means of understanding the participants' responses to the workshops to be analysed alongside audio transcripts and journal entries. When seen together with the educational activities, I believe the workshops came to embody the spirit of Ruskin's vision for the site at Wyre Forest as a place of learning and appreciation of the natural world. Indeed, at one time Ruskin planned for a museum to be built in the forest itself, much like his earlier plan to build an educational art museum in Walkley, Sheffield, 'to provide training for the eye and the mind'.[16] The artwork produced by the participants ultimately led to a valuable engagement opportunity when they were exhibited in October 2022 at a study day on 'Fantasy and Forests' at an Arts and Crafts heritage site, the Winterbourne House and Garden. During the day, several of the students involved in the research adapted the format of the reading walks to deliver their own for the public in Winterbourne Garden and the surrounding woodland. Arguably, then, the creative element

[16] Neil Sinden, 'Ruskin Land – The Evolving Story', *The Guild of St George*, <https://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/projects-places/ruskin-land-in-the-wyre-forest/ruskin-land-the-evolving-story-by-neil-sinden> [accessed 12 February 2023].

empowered the participants to draw from their experiences at Ruskin Land and to share these with the wider communities within Birmingham, continuing the legacy of Ruskin's educational and artistic vision as well as the vision of the research project itself.

The following discussion will explore five themes which emerged from the data gathered during the workshops. The first three, (i.) Sensory Enrichment, (ii.) Wonder and Nature Connectedness, and (iii.) Wellbeing, are themes which in some way corroborate the research aims and closely align with the topics discussed in the previous three chapters. The first theme I discuss is perhaps the most complex and multifaceted, which is why the discussion here is slightly longer than for the other themes. The subsequent two themes – (iv.) Memory and Experience, and (v.) Creativity – are ones which I had not anticipated or explored in any great depth in previous chapters, but where the participants provided additional insights and ideas which may inform future endeavours to use fiction for environmental engagement.

i.
Sensory Enrichment

A heightened sensory awareness of the physical environment was frequently reported by participants both during and immediately after the reading walks in all three workshops. The various ways in which the participants themselves describe this phenomenon indicate that there were several cognitive and emotional effects of sensory enrichment stimulated by the readings. In the first workshop's focus group, participant A described how the readings 'enhanced' their experience on the walk, enabling them to 'recognise the more intricate details that comprise a

forest' (I.FG.02:11.A) as if they were looking at them 'through a closer lens' or 'looking under a microscope' (III.FG.04:24.A).[17] After listening to a passage (III.G2) from Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*, which describes the Athshean forest through Selver's perspective, participant H commented that they became 'hyper-focused on various little things' on the forest floor around them (III.G2 00:52 H). Extracts such as III.G2 were selected for their descriptive qualities, instead of scenes which featured extensive narrative action or dialogue which may have diverted the participants' attention from their immediate surroundings. I decided early in the planning process that the intention was to use the extracts as a perceptual tool during the reading walks. While participant A described this tool as a 'lens' and 'microscope' to enhance sensory awareness of physical features, participant B described how the texts 'layer around your experience' but also 'frame what you see' (I.FG.00:23.B). The text-as-frame analogy suggests that the imaginary forest was able to direct sensory awareness towards corresponding features in the physical environment. This analogy implies not only *what* one is being directed to pay attention to but *how* it is being presented to us – as geographer Noel Castree argues, representations of nature always involve 'depicting, framing or staging nature' in an inevitably partial way.[18] The text-as-layer analogy, by comparison, indicates that the fantasy forests described in the extracts imaginatively superimpose elements which may or may not have been present or even real onto the physical environment. It is possible to interpret the text-as-lens analogy as describing sensory enhancement by directing the

[17] All data was pseudo-anonymised and is referenced throughout the following discussion using an alphabetical pseudonym. Extracts are provided as an appendix and can be located on the labelled maps also provided in the appendices. Throughout extracts are referenced parenthetically, indicating the following: Workshop number – author (T = Tolkien, M = Morris, G = Le Guin) – extract number. Participant responses are referenced parenthetically indicating the following: Workshop number – either extract author and number they are responding to or focus group (FG) – time stamp on audio recording – participant number. For example, III.G2.00:52.H means that participant H is responding to the second (Le Guin) extract on the reading walk of workshop three, beginning at 00:52 on the audio recording. Journal entries are referenced using the participant number (e.g., Journal C = participant C's journal).

[18] Noel Castree, *Nature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 124.

participants' attention towards visible phenomena. In this case, participant H may have become aware of various invertebrates in the leaf litter during the reading simply through the meditative calm and stillness created by the act of listening to the story. But the participant's awareness may have also been directed by the way the extract described the 'fallen leaves' on the forest floor, 'the product of the collaboration of living things with the long, elaborate death of leaves and trees' (*Word* 27). Participant A described their experience as 'like looking through a microscope', towards imperceptible, imagined, but nevertheless real ecological phenomena such as 'the chemicals released from the trees' or 'the way that nature communicates in tiny, invisible ways' (III.FG.04:24.A). These were topics which featured in extract III.G4 from Le Guin's 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow', in which scientists debate whether the flora of an alien planet may communicate through underground 'root-node linkage' (192). After the reading, we discussed these fictional aspects of Le Guin's story considering the scientific discourse around plant communication through mycorrhizal networks and volatile organic compounds. A handheld microscope was also passed around during the reading, which the participants used to look closely at the exposed roots of an upturned tree. It became clear that the text, much like the actual lens of the microscope, was a perceptual tool which enriched the participants' engagement with their surroundings.

In *Sensuous Geographies* (1994), geographer Paul Rodaway reconceives sensory pathways as geographical tools through which the subject can situate and orient themselves in their environment. Throughout the book, Rodaway considers how external tools such as maps both shape and are shaped by geographical experience received through the internal tools of sensory organs. He also very briefly considers how reading literary fiction may be used in similar ways

when he contemplates how ‘reading a description in a novel’ may stimulate a ‘creative recall of haptic experience’.[19] However, in thinking about the texts as a perceptual tool in terms of the participants’ own analogies of a lens, a layer, and a frame, it becomes clear that texts have dynamic and multiple functions of stimulating an experience of sensory enrichment in ways that go beyond simply recalling prior experiences. We can also understand these analogies as ways of expressing the specific modes through which the participants become aware of the complex relationality between fantasy forests and the real forest in which they were immersed.

The readings prompted the participants to perceive the forest around them through a more diverse range of senses beyond the visual, bringing often overlooked or underappreciated aspects of their environment to their conscious awareness. Immediately following extract I.T3 which we read standing beside a stream in the wood, and which describes the Hobbits’ journey along the Withywindle river through the Old Forest, participant D stated that when they heard ‘the noise of the water trickling’, it helped them ‘identify some sort of thing outside yourself and how you perceive the forest in that moment’ (I.T3.00:51.D). Here, the sound of the stream draws the participant’s conscious attention to that which is ‘outside yourself’ or beyond one’s internal thoughts, to be engaged sensorially in the physical environment. In doing so, this made the participant reflect on the spatial and temporal situatedness of sensory perception itself – ‘how you perceive the forest in that moment’.

There is now a burgeoning field of research investigating how ‘nature soundscapes’ such as those containing birdsong, wind, and water are valued in ecosystem services as aiding

[19] Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, p. 54.

psychological restoration and wellbeing.[20] Arguably, participants became more aware of what Rodaway would call the 'auditory geographies' of the forest because they were already engaged in active listening as I read the extracts.[21] But the participants reported that it was also as a result of the auditory descriptions within the extracts themselves, which often corresponded with what they could simultaneously and directly experience. In the first reading walk, students listened to an extract taken from *The Well at the World's End* (I.M6) in which Ralph pauses on his journey through a woodland to rest and hears 'the faint sounds of a little stream in the dale below mingled with all the lesser noises of the forest' as well as the approaching 'sound of horse-hoofs' (I 45). Afterwards, one participant described an equivalent experience, stating that the reading made them 'more aware of how layered the noise is in the forest' and that, 'when you listen carefully', you can hear 'the birds kind of speaking with each other' and 'appreciate kind of the rustles in the wind' (I.M6.00:01.A). Much as the 'intricate details' of the physical landscape were brought to attention by visual description, through this extract, the participant became more aware of the intricately multi-layered sound ecology of the forest.

Before reading I.M6, I asked participants to sit on the floor and close their eyes before I began reading, after which we sat for three minutes in silence. Participant L records the experience in their journal:

> I focused on the reading, the text, only, I blocked the outside world, try to picture what's going in the book. When the reading stopped, the moment of silence, I noticed all the sound slowly coming back, the birds, the wind, people slowly moving, breathing, then I opened my eyes, found this bright

[20] C. D. Francis, et al., 'Acoustic environments matter: synergistic benefits to humans and ecological communities', *Journal of Environmental Management* 203 (2017), 245–254.
[21] Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies,* pp. 82-108.

> and bright world, my sight was slowly coming back as well. I saw the woods, all the trees. I looked up realised how small we are. (Journal L)

In the subsequent walking interview discussion, participant E said they asked themselves 'what can I feel? What can I smell?' and went on to state that they felt 'the earth underneath me. I can feel it's kind of sapping my – slowly kind of mingling with my heat from my body, and also can feel a breeze. And it just made me think of today as a damp day' (I.M6.03:09.E). While the extract does describe similar sensations, it is worth noting that the extract may have encouraged participants to attend to sensory modalities beyond those invoked in the extract, such as the gradual changes in their body heat in relation to the ground, or the moisture of the soil or air. Also significant was that I encouraged the participants to sit on the floor as Ralph is described as doing in the extract. If there was an opportunity to do so, I attempted not only to match the physical features of the real and imaginary forests, but encouraged the participants in some way to embody the protagonists' bodily position or perspective within it.

In the discussion following I.M6, participant E noted that they became aware of 'the way in which nature exists in the forest exists in layers, but also a lot of different things happen at once' and that 'as a human, you can put yourself at different levels, depending on your level' (I.M6.03:09.E). Participant E seems to be expressing the idea that the physical ecology of the forest is complexly multilayered, resulting in a diverse range of sensory information occurring simultaneously at any given time, but which they could only become consciously aware of partially or discretely. Psychologists Eleanor and James Gibson describe the interdependence of sensory modalities in their appropriately named 'ecological theory of perception'. They note too that the environment itself plays a vital role in structuring how sensory information is received, leading to

what Rodaway describes as 'a geographical theory of perception'.[22] We might say that through the imaginary forests participants became aware of the multidimensional interrelationship between the physical ecology or geography of the actual forest and the ecological nature of sensory perception.

Participants became aware not only of the variety and depth of sensory information around them, but began to consider the fundamental limitations of human perception given the complexity of the ecosystem, despite the way in which Ralph himself is described in the extract as exceptionally 'fine-eared as well as sharp-eyed' (*Well* I 45). As participant G notes down in the journal 'there is more beyond our perception!!!' (Journal G). What participant E also suggests, however, is that we were able to consciously 'put [ourselves] at different levels' – taken to mean either senses, physical scales, or the depth of their awareness of the physical environment. Given that the texts are described as enabling the participants' to 'hone' into their 'different senses' (I.M6.02:59.A), the readings may be said to aid the participants in mediating between these 'layers' or 'levels'. In the focus group after this reading walk, participant E elaborated that 'physically, the forest operates at different levels, like geographically, but also in terms of conscious thought operates at different levels as well' (I.FG.06:16.E). The text-as-layer analogy participant B articulated therefore takes on a new significance considering participant E's comments: we can understand the textual forest as to some extent nested within the 'levels' or 'layers' of the participants' conscious awareness of the actual forest, in which they are both imaginatively and sensorily immersed. In other words, we can extend Gibson's 'ecological theory of perception' and Rodaway's 'sensuous geographies' to in some way include the imaginary forests being described in the texts.

[22] Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, p. xi.

Participant C, responding to extract I.T2 in which the Hobbits first enter the Old Forest, stated that the description of how 'all the stems were green or grey with moss and slimy, shaggy growths' (*LotR* 111) brought their attention to the star moss which grew beside where we were standing during the reading [Fig. 11]. The participant said that the text made them 'pay attention to that more and you kind of question whether the text is like aligning with your own perception of it' (I.FG.00:39.C). This suggests that not only were minute details of the forest environment brought to their attention, but that in doing so the text stimulated a cognitive process in which the participant's perception tested the validity of the text's description – something I discussed in relation to Morris's prose in the Evilshaw section of Chapter One. Here, participant C noted that while many features corresponded between the real and imaginary forest, the description of 'slimy, shaggy growths' did not accord with their perception of the moss in front of them (I.T2 01:57 C).[23]

[23] It is important to note that it is not necessarily the moss itself that is 'slimy', but some epiphytic liverwort, lichen, slime mould, or fungus.

Figure 11

Participant H stated in the walking interview following III.G2 that the extract drew their attention to the various 'levels of detail, these different words – worlds in... the forest and nature', but that 'although they all exist as part of the way the forest is part of one system, […] it's very difficult to inhabit multiple worlds spontaneously within that' (III.G2.00:52.H). The speech error in the participant's response between 'words' and 'worlds' may not be altogether coincidental. Several participants expressed that they encountered a similar challenge when attempting to attend to both the textual and the actual forest simultaneously. Participants stated that what determined whether the extract accorded or discorded with their physical surroundings depended upon the specific spatial and temporal context in which it was read. Sometimes this created what participant E described in their journal as a 'tension between the imaginary and the real' (Journal E). As they reflected in the focus group after the first workshop, participant F stated this was because 'we just

come off [the minibus]' and they were 'not quite used to' the format of the reading walk (I.FG.07:03.F). Participant G said at one point they were 'listening so intently to my favourite bits in the story that I wasn't paying much attention to what was around me anymore' (I.FG.07:38.G). While Participant C stated that

> at the start, I was listening to the reading and then trying to kind of see it in the forest around me. And then by the end, I was paying more attention to […] little things I was seeing, like the mushroom' (I.FG.07:57.C).

It seems that, while the texts enriched the participants' sensory awareness, it was sometimes difficult to attend to the textual and actual forest simultaneously – or, in the participants' own terms, it was challenging to be aware of multiple 'layers' or 'levels' at once. At the same time, the readings may have aided the participants in mediating between these layers, levels, or worlds, and in the process encouraged them to calibrate their perception and understanding of both the textual and actual forest. Alternation rather than synthesis of the world of the text and the world around them may have intensified the participants' sensory awareness. As participant C writes in their journal, reading 'causes you to pay attention to certain differences' as well as 'use your imagination to enhance the experience' (Journal C).

In Chapter Two I discussed the way in which Frodo's own sensory perception of the forest of Lothlórien became heightened through a kind of defamilisation effect. In the second workshop, I selected several successive extracts from this chapter to explore how this defamilisation effect might be invoked through the embodied simulation of Frodo's experiences. One participant commented after II.T3, describing when Frodo first sees Lothlórien after being blindfolded, that: 'When you kind of look closer, you see things that you don't really expect to see that you kind of

take for granted when you're kind of just walking by' (II.T3.00:53.A). The defamiliarisation effect I discussed in Chapter Two in relation to this scene was also evidently felt by the participant. The character's phenomenological experience of heightened sensory awareness and affective, aesthetic appreciation in the extract predisposed the participant to taking on these feelings and impressions as their own. Cognitively, defamiliarisation is associated with the novelty of the experience to the perceiver, which works in opposition to what Rodaway describes in terms of 'thresholds' of sensuous experience or awareness in any given context: 'Novelty may lower a sensuous threshold in some situations, while familiarity may raise the threshold of response'.[24] Nevertheless, imaginatively prefiguring direct experiences through the extract evidently invokes similar emotional effects in the participants rather than merely detracting from them.

The perceptual tool of the text was employed in combination with other perceptual tools, such as a glass sphere and mirror to look at the canopy during the section of second reading walk, and a handheld microscope and thermal imaging scope provided during the reading walk in workshop three. Some of these objects were used in reference to the extracts – for example, participants looked through the glass sphere during the reading of II.T5 in which Frodo and Sam look through the mirror of Galadriel – while others bore no relation to the text, but were used in supplementary activities during the reading walk in a similar way to how the texts were being used to defamiliarise their surroundings. For example, participants engaged in an 'eye to the sky' walk holding a mirror facing up into the canopy [Fig. 12].

The cognitive and affective responses associated with sensory enrichment became more intense when Frodo's experience of being blindfolded was simulated during the reading walk.

[24] Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, p. 37.

Figure 12

Participants first listened to II.T2, in which Frodo is led blind through Lothlórien and experiences a heightened sensory awareness. Then half of the group were blindfolded, and led by the other half for five minutes along the path through the wood [Fig. 13]. Participant C stated afterwards that they thought the extract:

> was pointing out different, like sensory elements, how they were enhanced by being blindfolded. And I think it encouraged you then to notice those things when I was blindfolded, and maybe things that I wouldn't have necessarily paid attention to. (II.T2.04:02.C)

Figure 13

In describing the five characteristics of sensory perception, Rodaway argues that, despite the multisensory nature of our experience – what Gibson and Gibson call the 'ecological theory of perception' – there are both '*hierarchies*' and '*sequences*' of sensory information prioritising the visual.[25] We might understand the blindfold as temporarily disrupting these hierarchies or sequences so that the participants relied upon, and thereby become more aware of, surrogate sources of sensory information. Being blindfolded also aided the participants to pay attention to things that were not necessarily described in the Lothlórien extract, but which they would not ordinarily have noticed, such as 'the notes and the melodies of the birds and the wind' (II.T2.03:35.A) or 'the texture of the ground, and whether it's rocks or leaves, or like mud. And I

[25] Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, p. 36

just felt like I was really paying such close attention to that, like whether it's spongy, or marshy or something like that' (II.T2.00:29.C). Curiously, one participant noted that 'there was a branch that kind of hit my leg at one point when I was blindfolded. And I think in any other circumstance, I'd go, like, Oh, it's just a twig or kick it away. But it felt as if something was grabbing me' (II. FG. 00:30 A). A similar sensation was reported by participant F in the focus group following the reading walk (III. FG 03:51 F). This indicates that the activity not only expanded their awareness to other senses, but influenced how they interpreted sensory information. In this case, the participant seems to be recalling an extract from a previous workshop in which the Hobbits feel as though the trees were sentient and actively grabbing them in the Old Forest (I.T2). The blindfolded walk may have intensified the sensory enrichment and associated affective responses through the active embodiment and interaction with the physical environment in a way that simulated Frodo's experience in the extract. But we might also say that the blindfold activity aided the participants to immerse themselves more readily into the imaginary world of the text.

ii.

Wonder and Nature Connectedness

In Chapter Two I explored how Frodo's experience of heightened sensory awareness in Lothlórien gave rise to a profound sense of wonder and deep appreciation for the forest around him. I aimed to test whether similar affective responses could be triggered in the participants, using the same scenes as I examined in the Lothlórien section. I was inspired by a body of work published by members of the Nature Connectedness Research Group at the University of Derby in partnership

with nature conservation NGOs. The research group defines the concept of 'nature connectedness' as 'a measurable psychological construct that moves beyond contact with nature to an individual's sense of their relationship with the natural world'.[26] The concept of nature connectedness is now firmly established and there is substantial evidence that suggests that nature connectedness benefits mental wellbeing and helps cultivate pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours.[27] In the data I gathered throughout the workshops, it became clear that a sense of wonder, often associated with an enriched sensory perception, was inextricable from participants' reports of feeling a greater connectedness to nature as a result of their experiences.

In the focus group of the second workshop, I asked the participants what emotions they felt during the reading walk. Participant I, in reference to extracts II.T2 and II.T3 describing the moments before and after Frodo is blindfolded in Lothlórien, stated that:

> I think what was really clear through the text was Frodo's love and appreciation for the environment around him and for the wildlife around him. And I think through hearing those texts, you can't help but – it's so contagious, like you can't help but look around and be like, well, this is stunning. This is beautiful. (II.FG.13:39.I)

This suggests the texts played a key role in modelling affective responses which the participants then experienced for themselves. Crucially, even when the participants could not themselves

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[26] 'Nature Connectedness Research Group', *University of Derby* <https://www.derby.ac.uk/research/centres-groups/nature-connectedness-research-group/#:~:text=Nature%20connectedness%20captures%20that%20relationship,relationship%20with%20the%20natural%20world> [accessed 19 January 2023].

[27] Caroline M. Mackay and Michael T. Schmitt, 'Do people who feel connected to nature do more to protect it? A meta-analysis', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 65 (2019), 101323 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2019.101323>; Alison Pritchard, et al., 'The relationship between nature connectedness and eudaimonic well-being: A meta-analysis', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 21 (2020), 1145–1167.

perceive features or aspects of the forest being described in the extracts, the participants were able to experience the affective response of wonder invoked in the character:

> I did find myself looking around and being like, oh my gosh, look at all this wonderful moss just around. […] it's literally under your feet. You don't notice it. But then when someone brings awareness to it, it's like oh my gosh, isn't this just wonderful? (II. FG 14:13 J)

The extract itself describes an abundance of wildflowers carpeting the forest floor, such as the fictional *elanor* and *niphredil*. In contrast, given the time of year (26th February 2021), the location of the reading had relatively sparse ground flora mainly consisting of brambles, dead bracken, and moss. Despite this, the participant reacted to the moss with a similar affective response to the one Frodo felt looking at what are rare and especially beautiful flowers in Middle-earth, an emotion the participant described as 'awe' (II.FG.14:13.J). Psychologist Miles Richardson and his colleagues at the Nature Connectedness Research Group found that states of amazement, awe, or wonder may be stimulated by observations of 'mundane' natural phenomena.[28] Such affective states are argued to be conducive to enhancing nature connectedness.[29] Interestingly, while the physical location and the time of year in which the reading walks took place was undoubtedly an important factor, to a certain extent, these responses indicate that affective responses were not wholly dependent on their being direct correspondences between the actual and imaginary forest. In this case, the difference between the unseasonal wildflowers in the seemingly timeless forest of Lothlórien described in the reading prompted one participant to reflect that, while they 'really liked like the flowers and the

[28] Miles Richardson, Jenny Hallam, and Ryan Lumber, 'One thousand good things in nature: The aspects of nature that lead to increased nature connectedness', *Environmental Values* 24 (2015), 603–619 (p. 604).
[29] Miles Richardson and Jenny Hallam, 'Exploring the psychological rewards of a familiar semirural landscape: Connecting to local nature through a mindful approach', *The Humanistic Psychologist* 41 (2013), 35–53; P. White, 'Enhancing the experience of connection with nature: Participants' responses to the MAPIN strategy', *Ecopsychology* 4 (2012), 345–354.

grass and how that's eternal', they thought that the Elvish aesthetic philosophy overlooked the beauty of seasonal change:

> I think that keeping it in sort of not quite spring, not quite summer, sort of, I don't know like lessens the beauty that is around in all the other seasons too especially like right now we're noticing all the colours that we have around us. It's not like pretty wildflowers and grass, but I still think it's really beautiful. (II. T3 03:07 G)

Here the extract invites the participant to feel a sense of wonder and experience a more expansive aesthetic appreciation beyond the one represented in the extract itself.

It is important to recognise that the sense of wonder the participants reported as feeling came also from the moments during the reading walks when they were not directly responding to the texts but were interacting with their environments as we were walking. This was something I actively encouraged in each of the three workshops, taking advantage of opportunities for the participants to learn or notice something about what we encountered on the walks. For example, when we came across a puddle full of frogspawn, I encouraged the participants to feel the texture of the protective jelly surrounding the developing tadpole eggs [Fig. 14], an experience one participant described as 'exciting' and invoking a 'childlike wonder', having been 'opened up to different things' (II.FG.18:10.A).

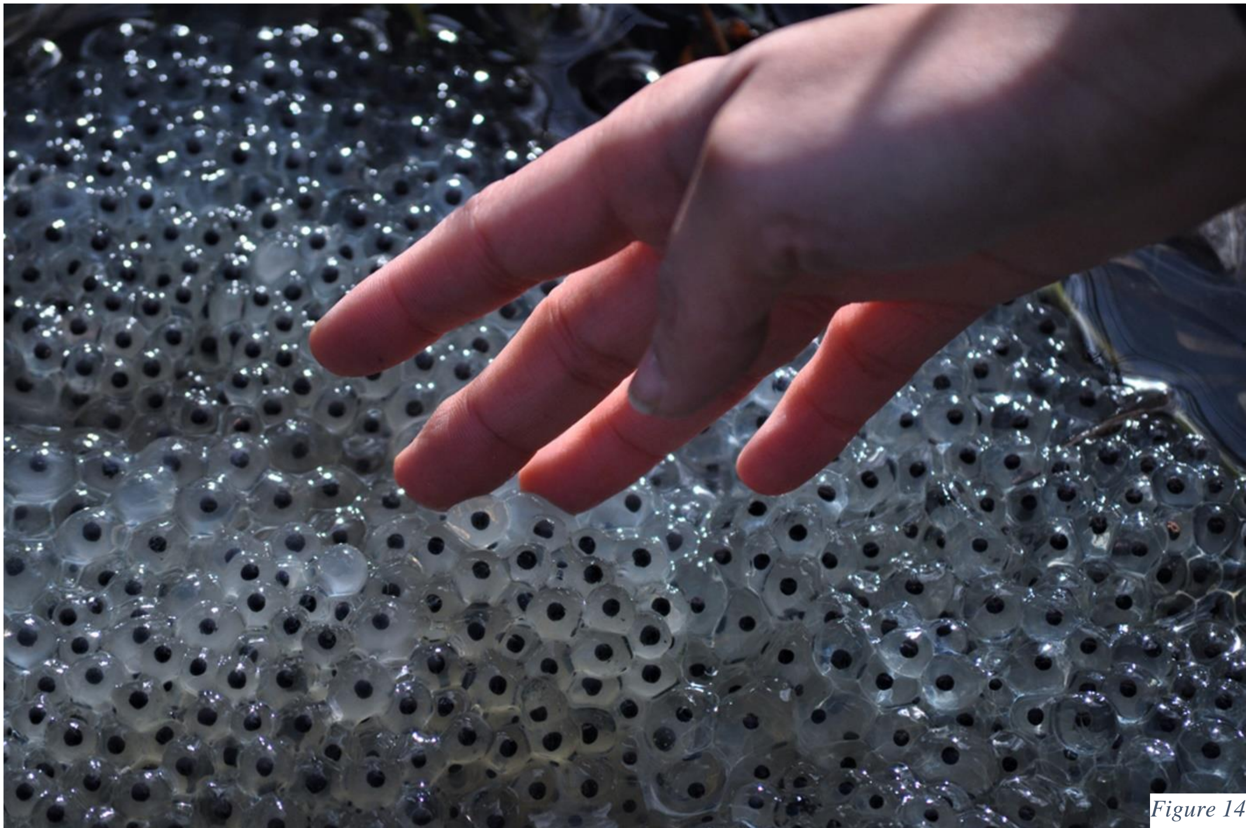

Figure 14

Participants reflected on the extent to which wonder is contingent upon the novelty of their experiences in the forest. According to the preliminary questionnaire, participant A lives in an urban environment. They stated that they were inexperienced and as a result 'overwhelmed and excited and almost kind of a bit sad that this was my first proper experience of going on a hike and walking around nature and soaking it all in' (II.FG.18:10.A). Meanwhile, participant G, who lives mainly in rural environment according to their response in the questionnaire, stated that their parents are 'ecologists' and that they are 'quite familiar with forests […] but it doesn't mean that I find them any less wonderous. I think it just, sometimes I need to focus a little bit in order to remember that they're wonderous' (II.FG.29:45.G). Promisingly, nature connectedness was felt by participants from a variety of cultural and geographical backgrounds. Participant E lives in a rural area when not studying at university and was familiar with forest environments. They stated that

the workshops have ‘definitely increased my appreciation of nature, which I didn’t think was possible. But yeah. And it’s also made me realize how much how much of an effect being in nature has and can help people’ (III.FG.30:04.E). This suggests that the participant not only felt a renewed nature connectedness, but that they became aware of how other individuals within the group also experienced this despite their different cultural and geographical backgrounds. One participant, a student from China, stated that, despite the fact that forests in the UK and in their home country are very different, they felt ‘a bit more closer to home compared to in the city, because the culture is really different but like compared to the nature and stuff I feel like really connected, like even though these different countries are really far away’ (III.FG38:48.L). This suggests that the workshops may have the potential to engage wider audiences particularly from different cultural backgrounds and varying degrees of prior experiences in forest environments.

In the final workshop, participant K stated that ‘biologists’ or ‘conservationists’ in would ‘appreciate the kind of the sort of message that I think the texts send, which is that we should respect nature, and we should be compassionate to nature’ (III.FG.11:29.K). It was clear over the course of the discussion in both the second and third focus groups that many participants felt that, irrespective of the differences between them, the experience of wonder is shared by scientists and non-scientists alike. Moreover, this suggested that a sense of wonder invoked by the text was valuable as a form of environmental education or ethical engagement in a forest.

When I asked to the participants to summarise their overall experience in the focus group of the final workshop, they associated a sense of wonder to a feeling of nature connectedness. Participant A stated that ‘overall, it has changed my relationship with the natural world. […] I didn’t realise how connected everything was. And I think that’s really made me kind of have a

different outlook on everything' (III.FG.28:00.A). We can interpret this in terms of an awareness of ecological processes – 'how connected everything was' – but also, related to this, of the participant's sense of 'relationship with the natural world'. Feeling 'a part of nature' is listed as one of the core and overarching concepts in measures for nature connectedness, relating to 'a person's understanding of their interconnectedness with nature and their sense of inclusion within nature'.[30]

The relationship between wonder and environmental awareness and ethics was highlighted throughout the workshops in response to the readings. After reading extract I.T5, in which the Hobbits learn from Tom Bombadil that Old Man Willow's spite is because of the long history of deforestation, discussed in Chapter One, participant C stated that the line 'the lives of the forest apart from themselves' struck them as significant. Their journal entry includes the quote, under which appears the following notes: 'in earlier passages the forest was described with words like "fingers", felt it was impacting them. Now they see it as something distinct, its own entity' (Journal C). They elaborate in the walking interview after this extract that 'they began to understand the forest not as it affected them. But as it was, as its own sort of being as its own sort of living thing, rather than just the emotional effect the forest had on them. And their emotional response to it, understanding it as its own thing as its own entity' (I.T5.01:02.C). In the same interview, participant M reflected that 'we need to learn our place within the ecosystem and like where we stand, and what we need to do in regards to like valuing the trees' (I.T5.05:05.M). In the third workshop, having read extract III.G2, as we were crouching or sitting close to the forest floor, the participants

[30] Miles Richardson, et al., 'A Measure of Nature Connectedness for Children and Adults: Validation, Performance, and Insights', *Sustainability* 11 (2019), 3250 <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11123250>.

were able to emotionally connect with the plants and fungi around them. For example, participant H expresses that when 'Le Guin talks about the ninety-foot tree and the little mushrooms sits around it... I became one of the mushrooms' (III.G2.00:52.H). Arguably, the way in which we were positioned (participant H during the reading was lying on the forest floor), was just as significant in cultivating this experience. As participant I commented, 'when you're sat down, it just makes you feel a little bit insignificant, almost as well. Like, everything looks so much bigger, so much more like as she was saying so much more mystical, like ninety-foot trees' (III.G2.02:45.I).

Curiously, in the focus group of the second workshop, participant A reflected that the readings:

> made me realise that, you know, what we perceive as just a bunch of trees has a story behind it. And if you look closely, there's lives and, and different things that can be experienced within. And it really emphasised to me how small we are in the world, how there's so many things going on around us. And we're just a part of it. (II.FG.15:42.A)

The participant expresses the feeling of nature connectedness in terms of being made aware of the 'story' of the landscape which includes them as 'a part of it'. Previously, during the reading walk, participant J similarly expressed that they enjoyed thinking about how 'other people have walked here before you and that they always will continue to walk here after you', giving them a sense of 'the connectiveness, I guess, in a forest. Like connected with your past' – 'people's past' but also 'the past of the forest' (II.T3.00:03.J). Participant J appears to be internalising Frodo's own expanded sense of time in Lothlórien when they reflect on the long history of human and nonhuman life in the forest.

The sensory enrichment, sense of wonder and connectedness both with the forest and the human and nonhuman lives across its long history and imagined future, articulated as a ‘story’ in which we ourselves were a part, is encapsulated in a reflection of one participant during the reading walk of the second workshop. We read a passage in which Frodo places a hand on a *mallorn* tree in Lothlórien and identifies it as having an intrinsic value as a living being separate from himself.

Standing inside a wooden sculpture built around a trunk of an oak [Fig. 15], participant A, feeling the texture of the tree bark, described how ‘I was kind of struck by all of the ridges in the tree’ (II.T6.05:11.A) and ‘how strong it is’ and reflected that ‘this tree has kind of grown for probably hundreds of years’ (II.T6.05:31.A).

Figure 15

We looked closer at the minute lichen growing in the surface of the bark. Then the participant reflected how the tree is composed of:

> loads of different stories that are kind of like hidden, it was interesting, because when we were standing outside, and the light was kind of hitting on the tree, it felt like the light was uncovering parts that we hadn't noticed before. And it kind of told a different story. And obviously, like, underneath these ridges, there's... a history of the tree that, like underneath these ridges, there would have been another like layer of tree that would have experienced their surroundings. […] It's kind of not eternal, but it keeps carrying on like the cycle keeps carrying on, and there's still new stories to come. And as kind of the layers grow or like fall apart, there'll be a new part of the tree that... people will experience. But it's still the same tree. (II.T6.06:35.A)

Here, the participant considers the oak as a physical embodiment of 'stories' or 'history', and how these stories, which the participant describes also as 'layers', can be 'hidden' or 'uncover[ed]'. The literal layers of growth rings in a tree takes on a more symbolic significance to the participant, which we may compare with how earlier references to the forest existing in 'layers' was also used to describe the textual forest as a 'layer' superimposed upon the actual forest. Much like the way Frodo considers the *mallorn* as a living entity, the participant reflects upon the tree's own 'experience' across an expanse of time larger than the human scale, yet which is, like Lothlórien (despite Frodo's first impression), not 'eternal'. Suggestions that the tree might be said to 'experience' its 'surroundings' related to group discussions about how we ourselves experience our surroundings. The participant also extends this to reflect on how, in the future, 'people will experience' new 'layers' or 'stories' of the tree. Demonstrably, the wonder the participants felt during the reading walks was one in which a sensory engagement with their surroundings,

intimately connected with an imaginative engagement with the fantasy forests, led to a profoundly ethical contemplation of their relationship with the natural world.

iii.
Wellbeing

In Chapter One I argued that Evilshaw, the forest at the beginning of Morris's *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, is a place of peaceful refuge and psychological escape. Through the temporary escape Evilshaw offers her, Birdalone gains emotional resilience, courage, and wisdom necessary for her true liberation and journey of self-development in the narrative. When I read extract I.M6 during the first reading walk, describing Birdalone's joy and sense of freedom, I wanted to explore whether Birdalone's feelings resonated with the participants' own in that specific location or in natural environments such as Ruskin Land more broadly. It became clear from the participants' journal entries, walking interviews, and focus groups over the course of the three workshops that the visits to Ruskin Land were having a positive effect on the participants' sense of well-being. Further, when discussing the mental health benefits of visiting natural environments, the participants spatialised the notion of escape, the theme of the first workshop, to describe their own "escape" from the urban environment of Birmingham. It also became apparent that their sense of wellbeing was inextricable from the social aspect of the workshops. I became increasingly aware over the course of the workshops that I was recording not simply a collection of individual responses but a collective experience in which group activities and the sharing of ideas and perspectives resulted in social bonding.

We read extract I.M4 in the first reading walk, describing Birdalone's feelings of solace and temporary escape when she swims to a flowery eyeot and 'communed with herself'. Birdalone's sense of temporary freedom from her enslavement, and the desire this escape cultivated within her to be wholly 'free', clearly resonated with the participants on the reading walk. We were standing beside a large pond, dragonflies flitting around our heads which the participants watched as I read the extract. Participant C stated afterwards that 'Sometimes I think coming to a space like this can be so freeing, and just, there's no kind of expectation on you to do anything. It's just like, an escape from your life where, like, you can just be yourself' (I.M4.01:39.C). Participant M also stated recognised that 'it's very freeing to be like swimming in the water' and goes on to associate the 'quiet', 'peaceful and serene' landscape around them with a 'meditative and peaceful' state of mind (I.M4.00:48.M). Much like Birdalone, who gains a sense of independence away from the witch, participant M stated that in such environments 'we're able to be independent' (I.M4.00:48.M).

Both of these responses in the walking interview connected the idea of freedom with the notion of escape – 'escaping from our normal, everyday lives' (I.M4.00:48.M) or 'escaping from your life' (I.M4.01:39.C). Participant C stated that everyday life 'can be so overwhelming, like, you know, like university or work and the whole, like, nine-to-five thing. And there's so much expected of you' (I.M4.01:39.C). This was reinforced later in the focus group when a participant referred to the city of Birmingham, in air quotes, as 'in the real world, in the "real world", funny that I said that' (I.FG.28:04.B), which other participants highlighted, stating that it is 'really interesting how you said like, not in the "real world"' (I.FG.28:49.C), 'everyone around the table has been like kind of using quotation marks and referring to the real world' (I.FG.31:40.E). Over

the course of the discussion, responses to fantasy texts as escapist became intertwined, sometimes ambiguously, with responses to the idea of forests as places of psychological escape. According to the participants, the 'overwhelming' stresses and expectations the participant associates with their studies and work become ameliorated when visiting natural environments like Ruskin Land.

The participants thought about the notion of escape in ways that recall my rebuttal against those who dismiss fantasy literature as escapist. For example, Participant H reflected that:

> when you choose to retreat from your problems by entering into nature, […] you don't necessarily run away from them, but you recontextualise them as problems that are part of a space that is not, that is not universal, […] to the trees, and, and the beetles, and birds (I.M4.00:14.H)

In the focus group after the reading walk, participant H said that escape into a forest, or into a fantasy fiction, does not simply mean 'sitting back and letting things wash over you. It's also gaining tremendous insights about the world' (I.FG.29:56.H). Birdalone's early experiences in Evilshaw engages her in a wider, more-than-human world away from the cruelty of the witch, which she discovers are neither universal nor unsurmountable. Indeed, Birdalone does not simply 'run away' from the witch at the beginning of the novel, but chooses to return to Evilshaw at her journey's end, seeking closure and justice. Similarly, participant H views escape as the means by which we gain a new perspective on our problems by going beyond the 'space' of the 'urban modern world'. Participant L articulated this experience in their journal when they wrote that:

> Stepping into the woods made me have the sense of living again. The thing about getting used to the urban life is you forget, somehow, how the world is constructed, how it is spinning forward. Noticing one leaf falling down the tree, how the whole movement actually happens, and you realise, wow, this world really is existing, really going on. You realise how everything, all the creatures, has its own "world" going on. (Journal L)

The participants' experiences at Ruskin Land, paying greater attention to the more-than-human world, provided them with a fresh perspective on what previously were 'overwhelming' issues or stresses of their studies or work in Birmingham.

Escape became a relative and nuanced term in which the forest at Ruskin Land became spatialized, as one participant wrote in their journal, as 'detached from the world but also the heart of it' (Journal M), much like the forest of Lothlórien is described as isolated from Middle-earth like an 'island' (*LotR* 348), yet also 'the heart of Elvendom on earth' (352). At the beginning of the reading walk in the first workshop, participant C said that they were 'listening and thinking about how peaceful it is, just the difference' between the sounds of the forest and the city of Birmingham. (I.T2.01:16.C). Towards the end of the reading walk this topic was brought up again by participant H and E. Participant H also used the sounds of the forest as a point of contrast between urban and natural environments, but stated that despite their immersion in their surroundings they still felt that they were viewing it from an urban perspective: 'I kind of carry a bit of modernity with me' (I.M6.01:00.H). Participant E similarly recognised that, 'coming from the urbanisation of like Birmingham City, this, to us, the real world is what we left behind. But if you work here, I feel like this is the real world' (I.FG.31:40.E). The participants went on to question the extent to which viewing the forest as providing mental health benefits to humans – that 'nature has healing qualities' (Journal E) was itself a distinctly urban idea – 'How much of that is urban, though? How much of that is an urban approach?' (I.M6.05:32.E). Even those participants who did express a sense of familiarity with rural environments felt this to be the case, however. For example, participant C wrote in their journal that 'I grew up near nature […] so being here feels like "myself".

[…] It feels like I didn't really appreciate being in nature growing up, and now I'm realising how much it means to me' (Journal C).

The extracts stimulated participant C to 'consider how other people see the same world' (Journal C), while participant E stated that they began to 'realise how much how much of an effect being in nature has and can help people' (III.FG.30:34.E). The way in which the group shared their different perspectives and prior experiences appeared to have resulted in a shared understanding and sense of relatedness among the group. Considering the workshops as a shared experience instead of a collection of individual responses recognises the social dimension to the positive mental health benefits the participants reported as feeling. In the focus group of the final workshop, the participants informed me that they had 'created a group chat' (III.FG.30:27.G) on social media in which they discussed the workshops with each other and would 'get excited' about the upcoming workshop or what they called their 'forest day' (III.FG.29:50.A). It became apparent over the course of the workshops as the participants became more familiar with each other and with myself that the activities they were participating in created a collective identity and group bonding. Participant G's journal entry after the final workshop expressed the profound effect the experiences has had on their individual and collective well-being:

> You have no idea how much this has impacted our mental health and the difference this has made to our lives. The thought of coming to the forest has been a solace and source of great excitement for us. We talk about it all the time and feel very impacted by the forest when we return to bham [Birmingham] and feel closer to each other and to nature. It's made us pay closer attention to the nature around us when we return, whether it's plants or animals, and we seek out green space and walks more frequently. (Journal G)

Figure 16

Significantly, the positive effects of the workshops continued long after the participants returned to Birmingham. It is clear from the journal entry that these effects were at least in part sustained by the lasting relationships the participants had cultivated on the workshops.

The psychological benefits the participants derived from the workshops may have come from simply visiting a natural environment, and not specifically from the workshop activities themselves. There is now substantial evidence that highlights the mental health benefits of greenspaces, as I explored in both Chapter One and Chapter Three. At the same time, what the participants responses suggest is that the fictional texts may have played a key role in stimulating this response by modelling and expressing the mental state of the character, such as Birdalone's in the first workshop. The format of the reading walks, irrespective of the texts themselves, may have also contributed to this. That the participants were encouraged to listen intently and attend to their surroundings may have created what participant H described as a 'structured approach', inviting them into relaxed states of contemplation or imagination. While the participants conceived psychological escape in terms of the contrast between urban and rural environments, participant G's journal entry suggests that the workshops had far-reaching impact in the way the participants engaged with urban greenspaces when they returned to Birmingham.

iv.

Memory and Experience

I anticipated that the participants' prior experiences would shape how they were to respond to the fantasy texts and to their surroundings in the reading walks. The questionnaire enabled me to form a picture of each participant before the first workshop based on how familiar they were with fantasy

fiction and how frequently they visited forest environments. What I did not expect was that the participants would come to critically reflect on this between themselves. In group discussions, participants shared stories and memories of their childhood and considered how these early experiences influenced their understanding of the forest around them. It became apparent that the reading walks reminded participants of how they interacted with forests as children in similarly imaginative ways. Participants recalled imagining real forests as the ones they encountered in fiction, and fictional forests as the ones they visited as children. Examining the participants' early experiences of forests in and through the fiction they read, and sometimes even performed in those environments as children, reveals the complex ways in which fictional and real environments become intertwined within the cultural imagination. It is vital to recognise the role this must play when thinking about the broader implications of this research for how people of different cultural backgrounds, upbringings, and degrees of experience or knowledge with forest environments respond to the reading walks.

In the focus group in the first workshop, participant B said that the readings made them 'remember that part of me' when they 'used to go into like nature and forests as a child and I used to kind of wish that they were like fantastical creatures there' (I.FG.04:13.B). Later in the discussion the participant brought the conversation back to this idea, stating that 'in a forest, it's so much easier to believe that something is some other thing, because you see what you believe […] that's what I used to do as a kid' (I.FG.13:00.B). The participant explicitly associates forest environments with a readiness 'to believe that something is some other thing' (I.FG.13:00.B) such as 'fantastical creatures' (I.FG.04:13.B). When I asked them if they remember any stories they were told as a child which featured forests, participant M replied that they would visit forests as a

family and their parents would hide chocolates in an old tree, which became known as 'the Magic Tree' which they described as 'a place of joy and, like, escapism' (I.FG.14:57.M). It is significant that the participant describes the real forest environment, and not merely the fantasy of the 'Magic Tree', as 'a place of […] escapism'. Another participant mentioned Julia Donaldson's picture book set in a forest, *The Gruffalo* (1999), and said that when walking through a forest their parents would ask them if the Gruffalo lived there, giving the forest a sense of 'mystery' (I.FG.17:05.C). Participant J similarly recounted when they visited a forest with a parent and would 'pretend to be Robin Hood and Little John or like Frodo and Sam' (II.T4.08:28.J). They reflected that, because of this:

> when I picture a forest, like in a fantasy book, it's always based on somewhere I've been, but then obviously it will change and stuff but the basis is always somewhere I've been with my dad and obviously when you have that, like mental image of I'm in *Lord of the Rings* right now or something. Yeah, it does change how you see things. (II.T4.08:28.J)

What connects participant B, C, J, and M's responses is that they describe how forest environments had become associated with both the literature they read as children and, in a broader sense, with a sense of 'joy', 'magic', and 'mystery' they felt as children in those environments. Further, participant J explains that these stories 'change how you see things' when experiencing forests directly, but also that direct experience of forest shaped how they imagined the forests in the stories.

While the association between forests and fantasy is clearly reinforced through the fictional forests the participants read and sometimes imaginatively inhabited within real forests, the differences in the participants' prior experience with forest environments shaped how this association influenced their perception of both real and imaginary forests. In the second workshop, participants listened to the passage in which Frodo is standing on a hill in Lothlórien looking at the

distant treeline of Mirkwood. We were likewise stood on a hill, looking towards the darker canopy of conifer plantation in Wyre Forest managed by the Forestry Commission beyond the area of woodland managed by Ruskin Land. The group discussed the aesthetic and ecological differences between the semi-natural ancient oak woodland and the conifer plantation forest, then reflected on what I had told them about the changing context of forest management in Britain over the course of Tolkien's lifetime. During the discussion, participant A reported that

> I remember when I read *The Hobbit* for the first time and how the landscape was described, I kind of immersed myself and saw it as a fantasy land forgetting that actually, a lot of what had been written about was based off of real experiences, real wildlife, real things that are like present in this world. (II.T4.04:01.A)

Unlike participant J, whose regular visits to forests with a parent shaped how they imagined Tolkien's forests, participant A explains that their lack of prior experience with forest environments meant that they could not recognise the realistic elements of the imaginary world in the same way, mistaking 'real things […] present in this world' as part of 'a fantasy land'. It evidently struck them how 'our upbringings can kind of change our perspective on how we perceive nature' (II.T4.04:01.A). Participant G, meanwhile, whom participant A had been having this conversation with during the walk, was able to draw upon their experience and knowledge of their local countryside in their response to the extract:

> it's interesting that the Elves have such a much longer sense of the woodland over time. […] my understanding of what I think the landscape looked like when I was little compared to now is so much shorter than the timespan that the Elves have had to look at it. (II.T4.02:03.G)

Participant G is describing the psychological and sociological concept known as the shifting baseline syndrome, which describes 'a gradual change in the accepted norms for the condition of

the natural environment due to lack of past information or lack of experience of past condition'.[31] Thinking about this response in terms of how our relative experiences and expertise influence how we perceive the environment, participant G indicates that there may be a temporal as well as spatial estrangement. Even participant G, who is familiar and knowledgeable about their local countryside, acknowledges that their understanding is contingent and situated within a specific context. Clearly, the extract prompted participant G to view the environment they knew as a child from a new perspective – the temporal scale of the Elves – while for participant A, gaining a new experience and understanding of a real forest environment, and placing the fantasy world within a real social and environmental context, enabled them to view the text from a new perspective. Thus, in their respective ways, the responses demonstrate the value of the reading walks as a means of deepening our understanding of both the real forest and the imaginary forests described in the text.

The reading walks reminded the participants of the ways in which they experienced and interacted with forest environments as children – as participant B stated, 'that's what I used to do as a kid'. In the focus group of the final workshop, participant J likewise stated that 'Every time I've been here, I feel like a kid again. […] it's like feeling like you're at home' (III.FG.34:02.J). Feeling 'at home' was also a sentiment felt by participant E:

> I have very fond memories of growing up, going on trails and climbing trees. When I moved to Birmingham, it was so different going to the big city. It was only when I came on the first workshop here, my second year, because COVID messed up last year a bit, that I realised how much I miss nature. And the first word I wrote in the journal was a sense of that I was home. (III.FG.30:34.E)

[31] Masashi Soga and Kevin J Gaston, 'Shifting baseline syndrome: causes, consequences, and implications', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 16. 4 (2018), 193-252.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the series of lockdowns that followed in the UK in 2020 and early 2021 had impacted university students in a number of ways, causing increased social isolation and restricting opportunities to travel and spend time outside – a unique circumstance which must be taken into account when considering the participants' responses to the workshops.

Arguably it was not merely spending time in a forest environment which invoked memories of childhood, but the ways in which the reading walks encouraged an imaginative way of thinking about and interacting with the forest around them. Participant B stated the workshops invoked a sense of nostalgia and created an 'interesting tension' because they 'felt like there was so many selves in me, because my younger self would have looked at that place and heard that you can go through it to some other place. And I was a bit sad, because this is real, this is real. And then when you were reading that extracts, it was almost like putting us back into the story, which I personally tried very hard to escape' (II.FG.09:06.B). Curiously, the term 'escape' here becomes subverted, describing the participant's inability to step outside 'the story' and the imaginative state they associate with their childhood, rather than an escape *into* a fantasy world. While participant B sees the relationship between imagination and reality as a 'tension' between their present and past selves, participant H thought that children themselves were able to navigate between these two worlds as we had been doing on the reading walks: 'children are capable of seeing all these different levels of reality simultaneously' (I.FG.17:31.H). Rather than naively believing that the fantasy world exists, this participant argued children can distinguish fantasy and reality, but may be able to participate more readily in fantasy than adults.

The group became aware throughout the focus group of the differences between them in the varying levels of experiences with forest environments. Participant H stated that 'that's the

really important thing to remember […] if I were somebody who wasn't exposed to this, how would I view the world differently?' and stated that such an awareness of how prior experiences shaped their individual responses on the walks is 'why I think this is going to be such a lasting experience for me' (III.FG.35:52.H). Cultivating such an awareness was an unintended consequence of the diversity within the group, which may be an important factor to consider when replicating the reading walks for different audiences. In ways that recall Robert M. Pyle's theory of the 'extinction of experience' which I discussed in Chapter Three, participants were encouraged not only to reflect on the significance of fictional forests in shaping how they perceived and interacted with forests, but the value of directly experiencing forest environments.

v.
Creativity

The workshops can be seen as a creative approach to environmental engagement by using the literary imagination to enrich the participants' experience and understanding of the forest at Ruskin Land. Integrated within each workshop was an hour specifically designated for creative activities such as painting, drawing, writing, or photography. However, what I did not anticipate was that the visits to Ruskin Land were having long-term impact on the participants' creative motivation and inspiration. Participant J said that the workshops made them 'incredibly creative', curing them of a 'writer's block' (III.FG.34:02.J), a statement which resonated with participant E, who said they 'had the exact same experience' (III.FG.35:19.E).

Why the workshops had this effect on the participants is unclear. Studies have demonstrated that viewing natural environments cultivates aesthetic and affective responses conducive to creative thinking.[32] These studies draw upon and extend the work of Rachel and Stephen Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (ART) I discussed in Chapter Three, which posits that what psychologist William James described as 'soft fascination' in natural environments restores a range of cognitive capacities.[33] As science writer, Annie Murphy Paul, explains in *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain* (2021):

> Scientists theorize that the 'soft fascination' evoked by natural scenes engages what's known as the brain's 'default mode network.' When this network is activated, we enter a loose associative state in which we're not focused on any one particular task but are receptive to unexpected connections and insights. In nature, […] currently active thoughts can mingle with the deep stores of memories, emotions, and ideas already present in the brain, generating inspired collisions.[34]

The cognitive processes induced by experiencing natural environments described above offer a way of understanding why participants might have felt an increased sense of creativity because of the workshops. As I explored above, the participants' memories of visiting forests as children and their affective responses to these memories became intimately associated with their affective responses to both their immediate surroundings at Ruskin Land and the imaginary forests in the readings. The workshops encouraged the exchange of ideas and alternative viewpoints not only

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[32] Trine Plambech and Cecil C. Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 'The impact of nature on creativity – A study among Danish creative professionals', *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* 14.2 (2015), 55-263; Chin-Wen Yeh, Shih-Han Hung, and Chun-Yen Chang, 'The influence of natural environments on creativity', *Front Psychiatry* 13.895213 (2022) <doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2022.895213>.

[33] Kaplan, 'The Restorative Benefits of Nature', 169-182; Avik Basu, Jason Duvall, and Rachel Kaplan, 'Attention Restoration Theory: Exploring the Role of Soft Fascination and Mental Bandwidth', *Environment and Behavior* 51.9-10 (2018), 1055-1081.

[34] Annie Murphy Paul, *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), p. 97.

through the readings themselves but through group discussions during walking interviews and focus groups. We can begin to understand how the participants' 'deep stores of memories, emotions, and ideas' may have become activated and enriched by the new ideas and experiences they encountered in the workshops to stimulate an increase in creative thinking and inspiration. For participant A, the reading walks inspired them to take a new approach to their academic work. They stated that 'You have actually inspired me' and stated that since participating in the workshops they have decided to take classical literature to read at archaeological sites in Greece while they write a novel based on Greek mythology, because 'It's made me realise that actually reading an extract and then looking at the surroundings […] it is really inspirational, and it does influence your way of thinking' (III.FG.32:36.A).

Discussion between the participants in the second workshop flowed into a topic that I had not anticipated but which proved to be extremely fertile for thinking about the broad aims of the research project and of the role of the arts and humanities to understand and confront contemporary social, political, and ecological issues. The second workshop, themed on the idea of enchantment, took place two days after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022. When I asked them what the use of enchantment is today, one of the participants expressed their sadness and feeling of helplessness at what they had seen in the news that morning (II.FG.39:50.A), after which participant C stated that they felt their English degree 'doesn't feel like it's going to be useful, I guess […] when you see all these things in the news, you feel like you have to be doing something that can urgently help people' and that the 'sense of wonder' which motivated them to study English was 'constantly fighting the sense that it feels useless, I guess that it feels like I'm not going to be able to do anything to help people' (II.FG.40:43.C). Enchantment and wonder,

which the participant felt the creative arts and humanities cultivated, is here contrasted with the notion of wider utility in society, associated instead with subjects such as 'medicine, or like a science subject or something' (II.FG.40:43.C). In response, a number of participants advocated for the role of arts and humanities in stimulating social, political, or cultural change to 'improve the way people think about the environment' or 'changing people's viewpoints towards nature' (II.FG.42:09.N). Participant F also shared this point of view, stating that 'we need to change our thinking about things. And so, if that can be done through art and other ways I think that's very necessary' (II.FG.44:02.F). For other participants, the value of art and literature was in their ability to stimulate a sense of enchantment or wonder. Indeed, participant F stated that 'climate change is a result of this disenchantment of being "what we can we use the world for"? We can use it – the economic use of everything, but no real sense of wonder for what it is, and then in war it's just human life, it's just expendable' (II.FG.44:02.F). Participant A went on to say that 'I know I sometimes feel like what I'm doing in the bigger picture doesn't really make a difference. But actually, we kind of need to be enchanted. […] The only reason kind of why we feel so deeply affected by the news is because we know what it's like to live and to love things and to experience things' (II.FG.44:50.A). The participant stated that the way art and literature move people emotionally creates a 'ripple effect of trying to create some sort of change,' and that 'even if it feels very miniscule, everything that we do, and everything that we create it, it somehow trickles into a bigger picture' (II.FG.44:50.A). Curiously, the participant expressed this in terms of a tree's growth from something 'miniscule' but which 'through kind of nurturing and embracing different elements and allowing ourselves to grow and coming together and sharing ideas, that's how we can become stronger, and kind of create more beautiful work […] trying to kind of create through our individual love and appreciation […] we kind of come together and kind of create something together'

(II.FG.46:04.A). Discussion around the value and use of enchantment emerged from a wider consideration of the value and use of art and creativity in society, particularly in light of the recent outbreak of war in Ukraine, but also in collective efforts to both cope with and combat ecological crises. In doing so, the participants came to express the aims and objectives of the research project in their own words. The participants saw the value of using literature as a form of environmental engagement, while the creative and social aspects of the workshops themselves are expressed in what the participant describes as 'coming together and sharing ideas' to both 'create something' (II.FG.46:04.A) and to 'create some sort of change' (II.FG.44:50.A).

Participants were given the opportunity to respond creatively to the workshops at the end of each day, whether to the forest at Ruskin Land itself, to the imaginary forests described in the reading walk, or a combination of the two. They were given the freedom to choose whether to use photography, art, or creative writing – though most participants chose to respond visually and conceptually using painting or sketching [Fig. 16]. Examining a selection of the participants' artworks in relation to the specific context of the reading walk that day is to approach them as an alternative form of "data" about the participants' feelings, ideas, and perspectives. Rather than considering on the artistic merit or technique used by the

Figure 16

participants, I instead use them as a record of what elements or aspects of the workshops the participants found to be significant or interesting to them. Considering artworks as "data", of course, comes with its own unique difficulties given the more ambiguous nature of visual rather than verbal expression, and therefore demands a more speculative approach when analysing the participants' underlying intentions or meanings. However, by triangulating the artworks with other sources of data, such as journal entries, walking interviews, and focus group discussions, they can be used as supplementary sources of evidence to provide deeper insight into the participants' overall experience and response to the workshops. Some of the artworks were clearly inspired by the physical environment and the wildlife of the forest at Ruskin Land. For example, Participant G chose to paint a blue tit, which we had encountered on the reading walk and was visible on the bird feeder outside the Studio [Fig. 17]. The participant used the left-hand side of the page to test and

Figure 17

mix the water colour paints for the specific colours of the bird's feathers. The colours and form clearly show the participant had thought carefully about how to render the bird realistically. In comparison, Participant A's painting of a woodland scene is more stylistic, but contains specific elements of Ruskin Land, such as the building in the background which may be a representation of the Studio in which they were painting [Fig. 18].

The participant had also glued flowers they had collected and pressed in their journal to the foreground of the painting, creating an impression of depth. Other participants decided to paint a more symbolic representation of their ideas or experiences. Participant C's painting depicts a

Figure 18

human face with feminine features, surrounded by foliage, branches, fruit, and flowers which appear to emanate from the face like hair, reminding one of the foliate face of the Green Man in Medieval carvings and sculptures [Fig. 19]. The skin is of a similar colour to the faded background, giving the impression the face is emerging into view. Some elements draw inspiration from our immediate surroundings, such as the oak leaves, ferns, and apples – Ruskin Land is predominately oak woodland where bracken thrives, while apple orchards were located directly outside the Studio. Other elements are more abstract, using the same natural colours of reds, browns, and greens they used to paint the leaves, fruit, and branches, to surround the face with repeated motifs in amongst the foliage.

Figure 19

Figure 20

The charcoal drawings [Fig. 20; 21] contain a combination of realistic and fantastic elements. In Fig. 20 a woodland scene is depicted, containing trees of many different forms, sizes, and species. The intricate detail and diversity of the woodland is contrasted to the strip of five windows across the top of the page, each containing a blurred cityscape of dark skyscrapers. The windows of the skyscrapers echo in the framing of the cityscape, as well as the windows in the Studio in which they were drawing. The overall impression creates the illusion that the woodland scene is inside, and the city is distantly seen outside through the windows. The distance between the woodland and the city can be associated with the participants' discussions about the contrast between the urban landscape of Birmingham and the forest at Ruskin Land. The interesting subversion of inside and outside may express the sense of returning 'home' which many

Figure 21

participants described as feeling when coming to Ruskin Land, in contrast to the alienating and sometimes overwhelming environment of the city.

Another charcoal drawing is split into a diptych. While the right-hand side depicts a naturalistic woodland scene, the left-hand side combines observed features with more fantastic elements drawn from the readings. The two figures standing in the foreground suggest a participant being interviewed by myself (holding the boom microphone I carried in the reading walks). In the background the participant has drawn the humanoid, tree-like figure of an Ent, emerging out of the trees and leaning slightly towards the two figures as if to listen in on the conversation. The naturalistic drawing on the left demonstrates an attentive awareness of the forest, while the drawing on the right appears to express the imaginative confusion between real and fantastic elements in the reading walk [Fig. 21].

The charcoal used to create these artworks were made by the participants themselves in the second workshop's craft and conservation activity [Fig. 22]. Having been told about the history of charcoal-making in the forest during the nineteenth century, participants were shown how to create artist charcoal from willow wands they collected on site. The willow wands were then placed inside tins and put on a campfire, after which the participants were able to use them to sketch with. We can therefore see this activity as

Figure 22

an extension of the creative process which connected the artworks and their production within their immediate environment and its history.

The journals were used by the participants to sketch observations, draw conceptual diagrams, and write poetry. Some participants used the journals to press leaves and flowers they had collected during the day [Fig. 23]. Many of the artworks had been created using the materials they had gathered and observations they had recorded in their journals. As such, it is important to consider the journals alongside the artworks as part of the creative process. Two participants had evidently used the sketch they had done in their journal for the basis or outline of their painting in the creative session [Figs. 24; 25]. Many of the sketches in the journals of individual grasses, flowers, trees, and landscapes suggest they were drawn either during the reading walks or from memory during the creative session [Figs. 26; 27; 28; 29]. Others suggest the participant attempted to capture ideas or concepts in the discussion using diagrams or abstract shapes [Fig. 30].

The artworks the participants created, and the creative use of the journals, were a means of expressing, sharing, and exploring ideas they discussed in the workshops. I have approached these as a form of "data", but what is clear is that the function of the creative elements in the workshop went beyond merely recording their responses. Indeed, they were an integral part of the participants' experience, and can be seen as manifesting Ruskin's own belief in the power of drawing and painting 'to set down clearly, and usefully, records of such things as cannot be described in words', but also as means 'to love Nature'.[35] Interviews with the participants demonstrate that the reading walks themselves may provide creative inspiration and cultivate

[35] John Ruskin, 'Elements of Drawing', in *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 15, edited by Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1-228 (p. 13, p. 25).

creative thinking, which the students came to see as vital in our collective effort to imagine a more sustainable society.

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My hypothesis going into the workshops was that the interaction between the fantasy forests and the real forest in which they were read would have a variety of intellectual, emotional, and ethical effects on readers, opening a new space for a creative form of environmental engagement in a time of ecological crises. Though the sample is small and demographically limited, the results are extremely promising. At the very least, they generate questions and opportunities for others to pursue, examining different environmental and social contexts, using different texts, in different settings, on different readers. The process of writing the thesis simultaneous to planning and running the workshops, and the thematic links between them, resulted in an iterative and reciprocal process of exchange in which the participants' experiences and observations, in dialogue with my own, enriched the research in ways that simply could not have come from working in isolation. The collaborative, mutually-beneficial methodology I have experimented with in Ruskin Land may itself derive from an understanding of a forest as an ecosystem which thrives in diversity and complexity, interrelationships and interchanges.

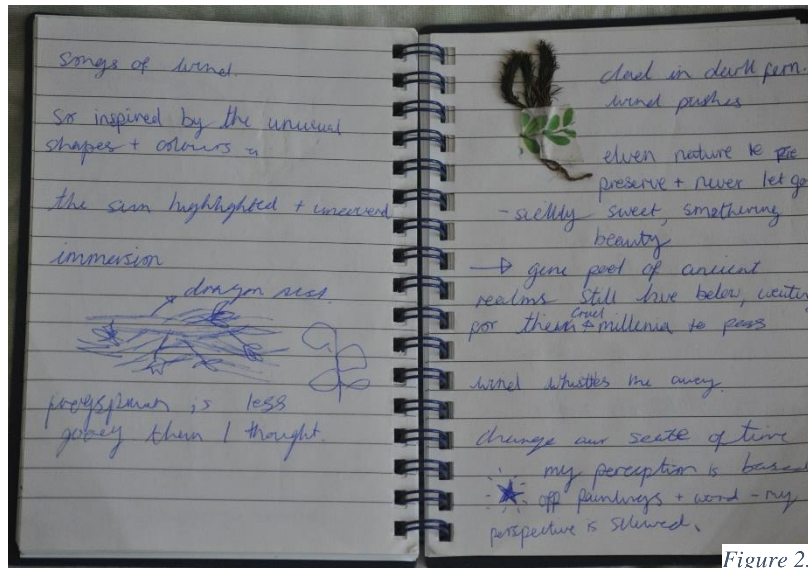

Figure 23

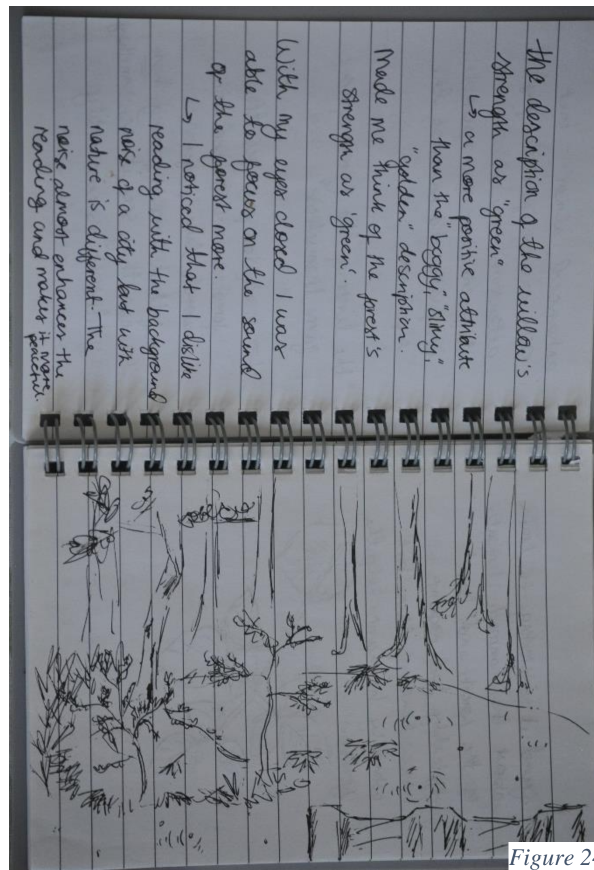

Figure 24

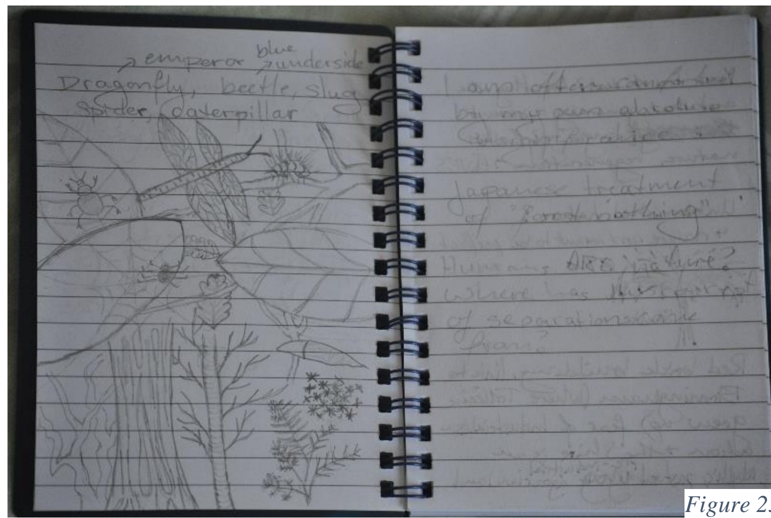

Figure 25

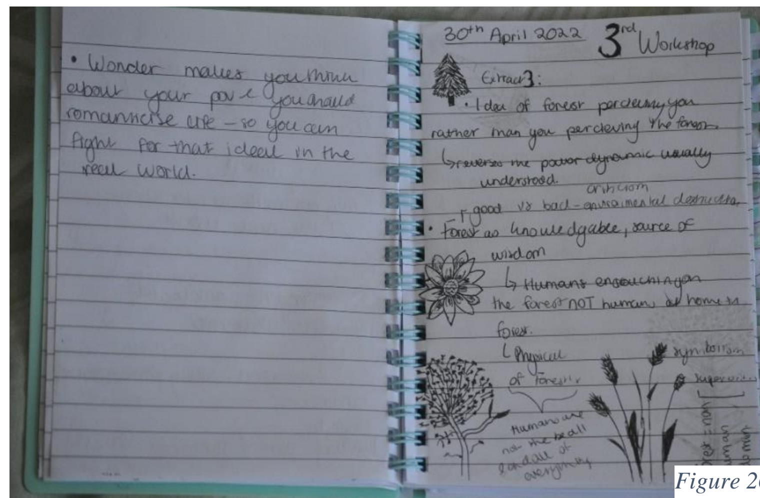

Figure 26

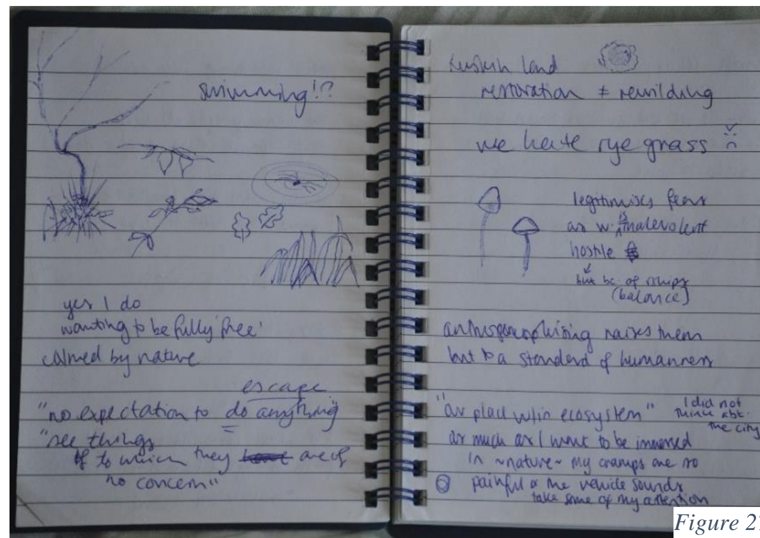

Figure 27

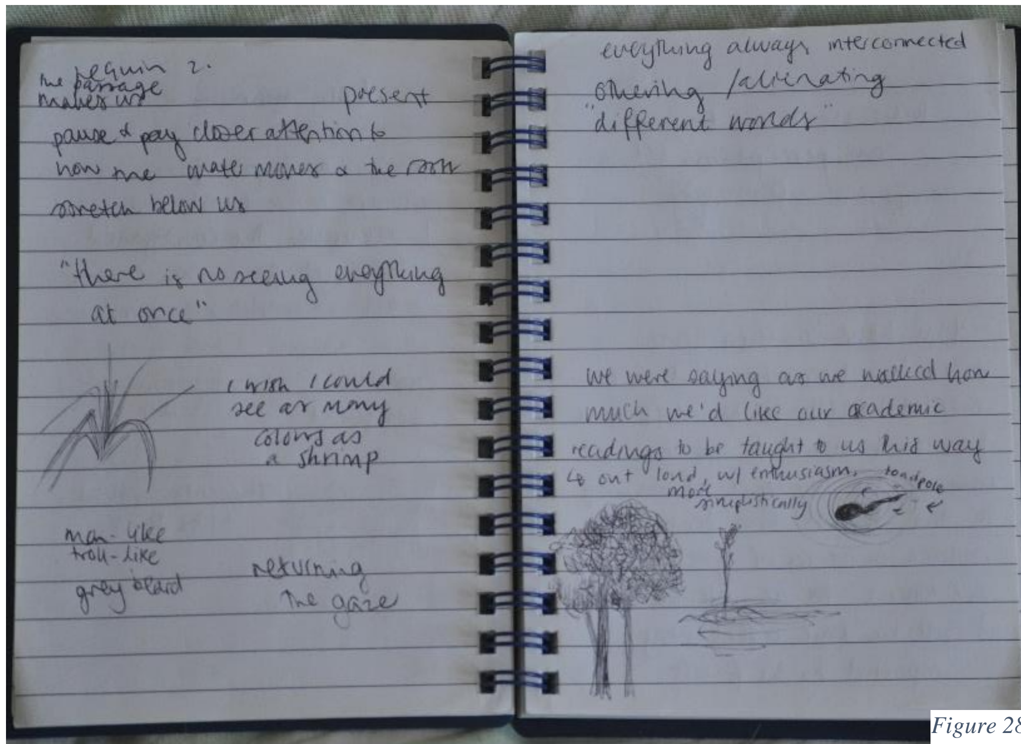

Figure 28

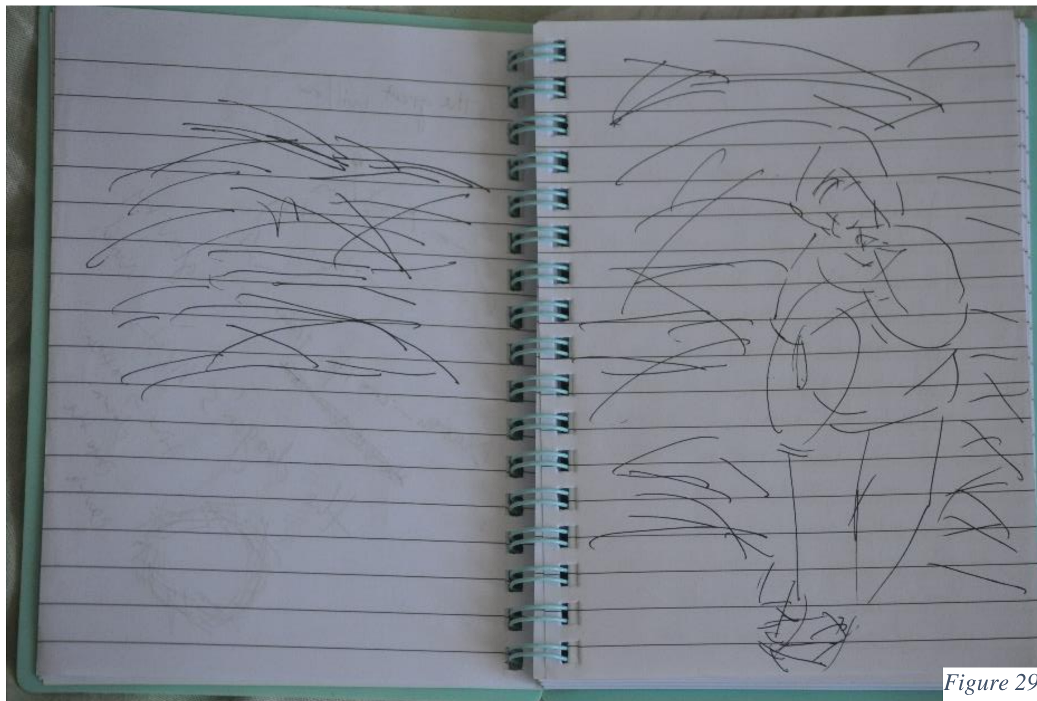

Figure 29

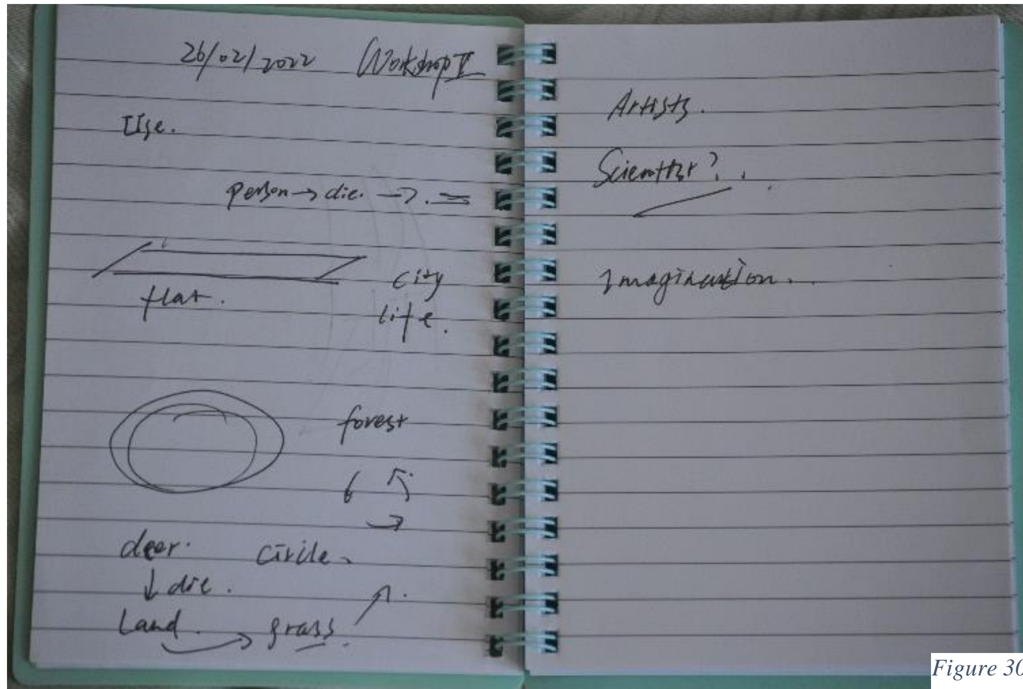

Figure 30

CONCLUSION

In the summer of 2014, one thousand Norwegian spruce trees were planted in the Nordmarka forest, just north of Oslo. Eventually, after a century of growth, these trees will be felled to provide paper for anthologies comprised of a hundred manuscripts. Year upon year, ring upon ring, a specially selected author writes a single manuscript, which is then entombed in glass drawers inside the walls of a wooden cave known as the Silent Room. In 2114, the glass drawers will be opened, and the voices of a hundred writers – many of whom will be dead, many are as yet unborn – will be heard for the first time. Named the Future Library, the project is ingrained with a wisdom uniquely far-sighted for our age, sustained by a hope rooted in every past and future present.[36] It is perhaps no coincidence that several among the first contributing writers are known for their fantastic or speculative imaginations: Margaret Atwood (2014), David Mitchell (2015), and Sjón (2016). Even though we do not know what stories or messages twenty-second century readers will discover in the Silent Room, its very existence is a provocation, whispering to us of time's expanse and the brevity of human life.

Like the concentric circles expanding the trunk of an ancient tree, the Future Library 'enlarges the circumference of the imagination', as Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821).[37] It was Shelley's view that:

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[36] *Future Library,* <https://www.futurelibrary.no/> [accessed 20 July 2023].

[37] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, edited by Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 674-701 (p. 701).

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.[38]

Two centuries after Shelley, Le Guin called upon us to listen to 'the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now […] – poets, visionaries – realists of a larger reality'.[39] The shadows of our present grow so long and so dark in this time of existential ecological crises. Projections of our future appear most often in the form of factual arguments and graphs, plotting points along a seemingly inevitable path towards ever more frequent environmental catastrophes and ever more likely social collapse: mass starvation, displacement, suffering, and death. As I type these words, the earth is experiencing the highest average temperatures for 120,000 years.[40] It is predicted that by the end of this century, much of the world's population will be pushed outside what scientists call the 'human climate niche', the habitable zone for human survival.[41] The increased risk of wildfires due to the climate crisis means that the Future Library may have already gone up in smoke by this time next year – never mind 2114.

And yet. This very moment… trees are growing, people are telling stories.

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[38] Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', p. 701.

[39] Le Guin, 'National Book Award Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Acceptance Speech', p. 318.

[40] Robin McKie, 'World experiences hottest week ever recorded and more is forecast to come', *The Observer*, 16 July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/16/red-alert-the-worlds-hottest-week-ever-and-more-is-to-forecast-to-come> [accessed 20 July 2023].

[41] Timothy M. Lenton, et al., 'Quantifying the Human Cost of Global Warming', *Nature Sustainability* (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-023-01132-6>.

William Morris, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Ursula K. Le Guin speak to us – *now* – in a way that engages us imaginatively with the forests of our world. In this work, I have sought to demonstrate this by immersing myself in nine forests, three from each writer, examined in each of the first three chapters: Escape, Enchantment, and Experiment. My final chapter, Engagement, discusses my own experiment bringing these fantasies out into a real forest in order to test the imaginative potential of fantasy in a time of ecological crises. The Future Library is an intriguing time capsule which invites us to think beyond our moment. But its books are unreadable, its vision enclosed. It is clear we also need books open and at hand, with the ability to mobilise the collective changes the ecological crises demand of our culture now. It is only with such stories can we hope those manuscripts of the Future Library will be read in 2114.

And it is clear that we have them. Morris, Tolkien, and Le Guin responded meaningfully to the social and environmental contexts in which they lived, and the forests imagined in their work reflect the matrix of ideas and fascinations, dreams and anxieties, of their time. These three writers also sought to reimagine the present through the fantastic imagination – to 'open a door on Other Time' ('OFS' 32) and glimpse alternative ways of living, perceiving, and valuing forests and the wider, more-than-human world. Morris's medievalist imagination conjured richly wooded worlds, emphasising true wealth beyond the illth of industrial capitalism. Tolkien's epic narratives of resistance against the ever-looming threat of socioecological calamity are embedded with a profound sense of loss and love for the forests dwindling in his lifetime. Le Guin's mind-expanding forests of earthly magic and extraterrestrial ecologies, of other ways of being in the world, express the value of diversity and kinship both within and beyond the human.

These are some of the most influential writers in the modern fantasy tradition, whose fiction also happens to be some of the most forested. The overlapping social, cultural, and environmental contexts in which each author lived, and the thread of literary influence running through their fiction, combined with Ruskin's influence on Morris's ideas and the geographical connections both Morris and Tolkien shared with areas surrounding Ruskin Land, formed a clearly defined scope through which to study the fantasy forest. But, many will be wondering, what about the sentient trees in George MacDonald's formative fantasy novel *Phantastes* (1858)? Or D. O. Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1938), among the first novels to be published in one of Africa's indigenous languages, whose forest is inhabited with spirits summoned from Yoruba folklore? How could I neglect Ryhope Wood, a place where mythical figures emerge from the undergrowth of the mind in Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* series (1984-2009)? Or the corruptive, malevolent Wood, inspired by Polish fairy-tales, in Naomi Novik's *Uprooted* (2015), or the reforested, postapocalyptic London in Ben Okri's 'After the End' (2023)? Much as '[t]here was no seeing everything at once' in the forests of Athshe (*Word* 27), to enter the vast, complex literary ecosystem that is the fantasy forest, one must choose a path through, and inevitably leave so much unexplored.

The panoply of forests in the fantastic imagination creates opportunities to think through and across different cultural perspectives on forest environments in radically transformative ways. An exciting diversification of voices is expanding the horizons of contemporary fantasy and science fiction beyond the sympathetic but nonetheless privileged perspectives held by Morris, Tolkien and Le Guin. Among these are writers whose fiction grapples with ecological crises in ways that are critically attuned to the pernicious injustices of our world: Octavia E.

Butler's *Parable* series (1993-98), N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* (2015-17) and the visionary fiction collected in Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown's anthology *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2015). Given the emerging discourse of environmental justice across the world (and the socio-economic and cultural barriers resulting in unequal access to greenspaces in places like the UK), these voices will be essential for engaging all parts of our society in forests.

Progressively, scholars are attending to the visionary insights the fantastic imagination affords us in the unfolding socioecological crises of our age. In *The Value of Ecocriticism* (2019), Timothy Clark argues the strange reality of the Anthropocene 'may find its analogue in modes of the fantastic'.[42] In *Imagining Extinction* (2016), Ursula K. Heise suggests that the very concept of the Anthropocene and, indeed, the rhetoric and narrative strategies frequently employed by environmental nonfiction, are profoundly shaped by 'the planetary storytelling mode of speculative fiction' which provide 'new narratives of biodiversity, conservation, survival, and multispecies justice'.[43] In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Donna Haraway demonstrates how scholarship itself may become transformed when she embodies a creative-critical practice, inspired by Le Guin's stories, which she calls 'speculative fabulation', a 'mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding'.[44] Ultimately, though, it is in the world beyond the academy where the potential of the fantastic imagination must be realised.

[42] Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 99.
[43] Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 204.
[44] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 213.

My experiments in the Wyre Forest used fantasy forests as a creative and collaborative form of environmental engagement. I was inspired by the interdisciplinary methodology and committed aims of empirical ecocriticism. As the editors of the recently published *Empirical Ecocriticism* (2023) argue:

> In a world that is experiencing regular, unprecedented, and escalating socioecological catastrophes, with the possibility of ecological and sociopolitical collapse on the horizon, the development of an empirical form of ecocriticism, synergistically combining the methods of and knowledge from the humanities and social sciences, is not just potentially fruitful. It is necessary.[45]

The hermeneutical range of empirical ecocriticism has been extended by focusing on the so-far overlooked potential of the fantastic imagination. More importantly, through the technique of immersive reading walks and the innovative social science methodology of walking interviews, this research has drawn attention to the agency of the environment itself in mediating the relationship between texts and readers. Indeed, over the course of the workshops, I began to think of the forest as a kind of participant, enriching not only the students' engagement with the fantasy texts, but the aims and direction of the research project itself. Learning together about the ecology and history of the forest with the participants grounded both my and the students' reading of the texts in a real context of societal and ecological changes. This collaborative, reciprocal, iterative process was materially embodied in the forest around us, germinating an innovative form of scholarship for a time of ecological crises.

[45] Schneider-Mayerson, et al., *Empirical Ecocriticism*, p. 2.

Those who hold most power today – corporations, politicians, media proprietors – do so by authoring the narratives which make up so much of what we call "reality". These self-perpetuating stories shape the extent of our intellectual engagement with and kinds of emotional response to the ecological crises imperilling our world – often, in ways which actively discourage the critical thinking and creative imagination these crises require of us. The fantasy forest is a place where we can escape those restrictive narratives, be enchanted by the realities of forest ecosystems, experiment with alternative ways of living with them and, in doing so, engage collectively in creating a world in which people and forests not only survive, but thrive.

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Appendices

Appendix A

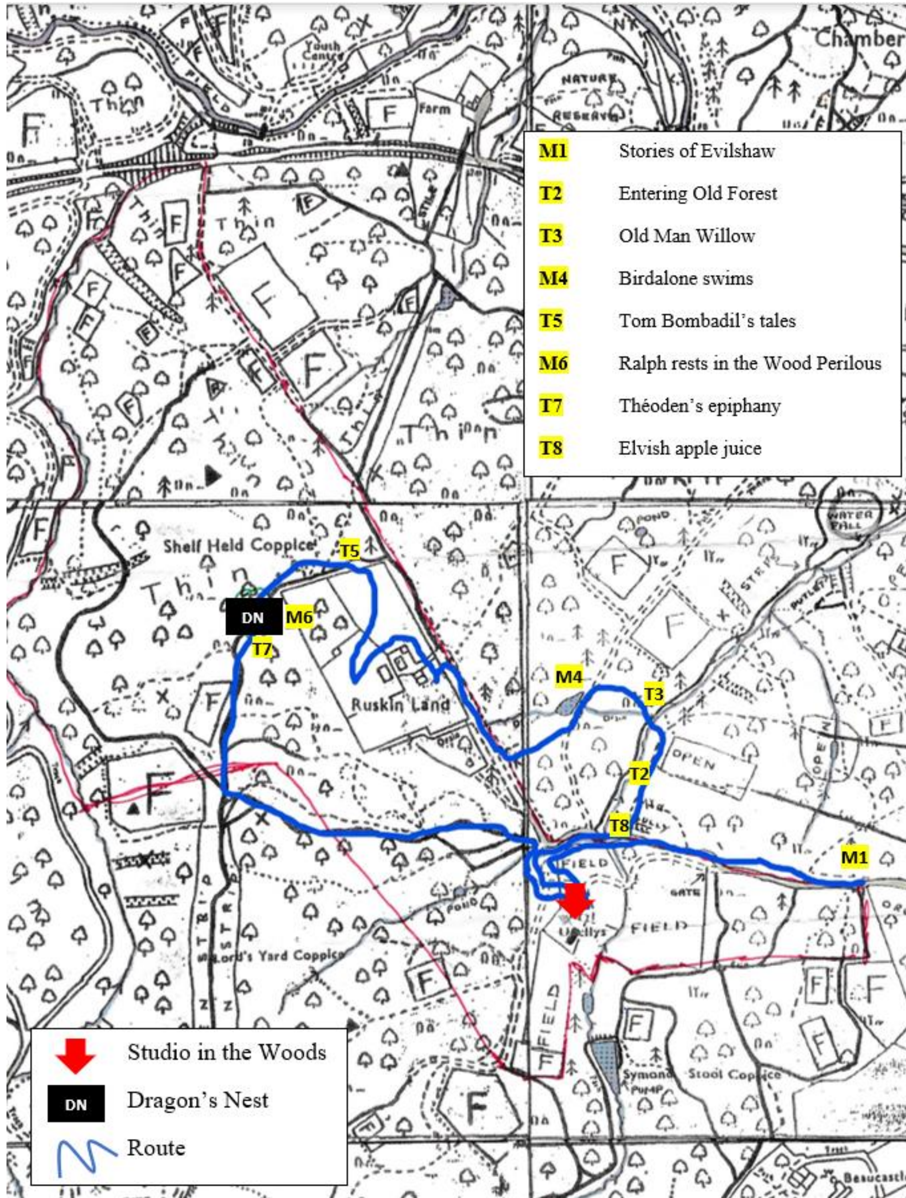
Participant pre-workshop questionnaire results

Participant	Subject	Which type of location best describes where you live during term time?	Which type of location best describes where you live outside of term time?	How often, on average, do you visit a woodland or forest?	How far do you agree with the following statement: 'I feel connected to nature'?	How familiar are you with fantasy fiction?
A	English & Classical Literature	Urban	Urban	Less frequently	Agree	Very familiar
B	English & Creative Writing	Urban	Urban	Never	Neither agree nor disagree	Extremely familiar
C	Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences	Suburban	Suburban	Once or twice a month	Strongly agree	Somewhat familiar
D	English	Suburban	Suburban	Never	Agree	Very familiar
E	English and Classical Literature	Urban	Urban	Once or twice a week	Strongly agree	Extremely familiar
F	Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences	Urban	Urban	Once or twice a month	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat familiar
G	English	Suburban	Rural	Once or twice a week	Agree	Somewhat familiar
H	Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences	Urban	Rural	Every two to three months	Agree	Not so familiar
I	Child Nursing	Urban	Suburban	More than twice a week	Agree	Very familiar
J	Modern Languages & History of Art	Urban	Rural	Every two to three months	Agree	Extremely familiar

K	Mathematics & Philosophy	Urban	Suburban	Once or twice a month	Agree	Somewhat familiar
L	History of Art	Urban	Urban	Once or twice a month	Strongly agree	Somewhat familiar
M	English & Philosophy	Urban	Suburban	Once or twice a month	Agree	Extremely familiar
N	English	Urban	Rural	Once or twice a month	Strongly agree	Extremely familiar
O	Music	Urban	Rural	Once or twice a week	Strongly agree	Not so familiar

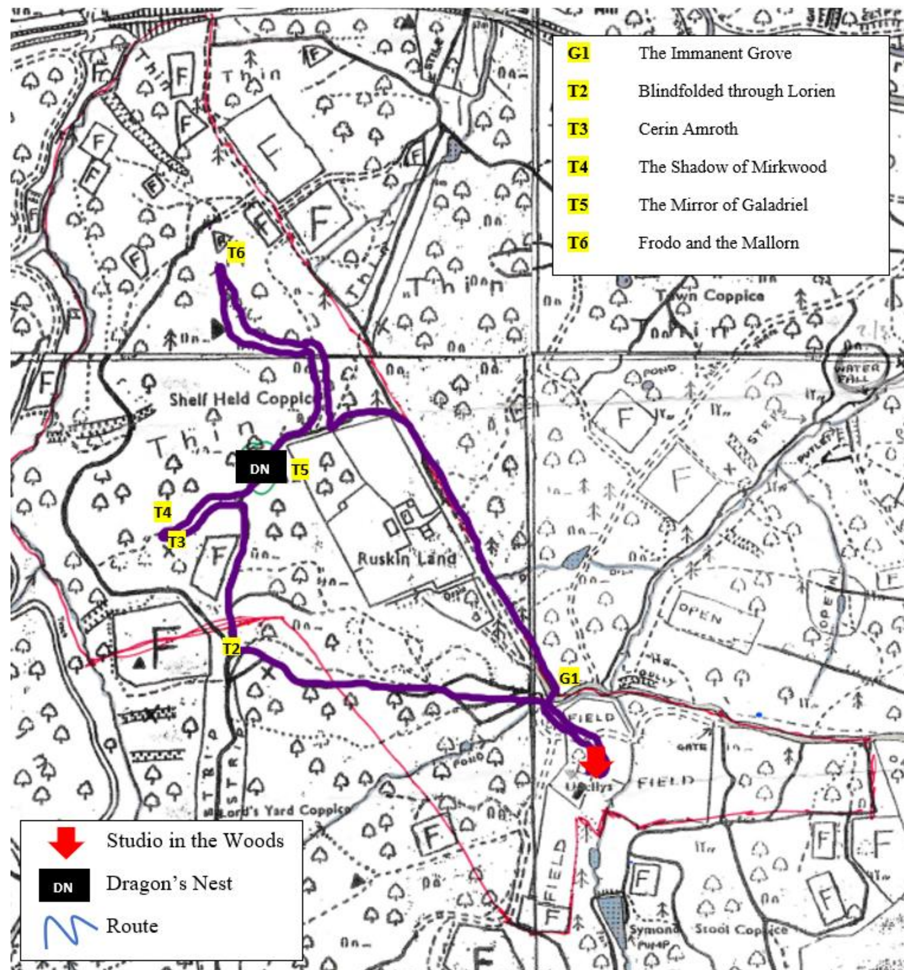
Appendix B

Hand drawn map - Workshop 1



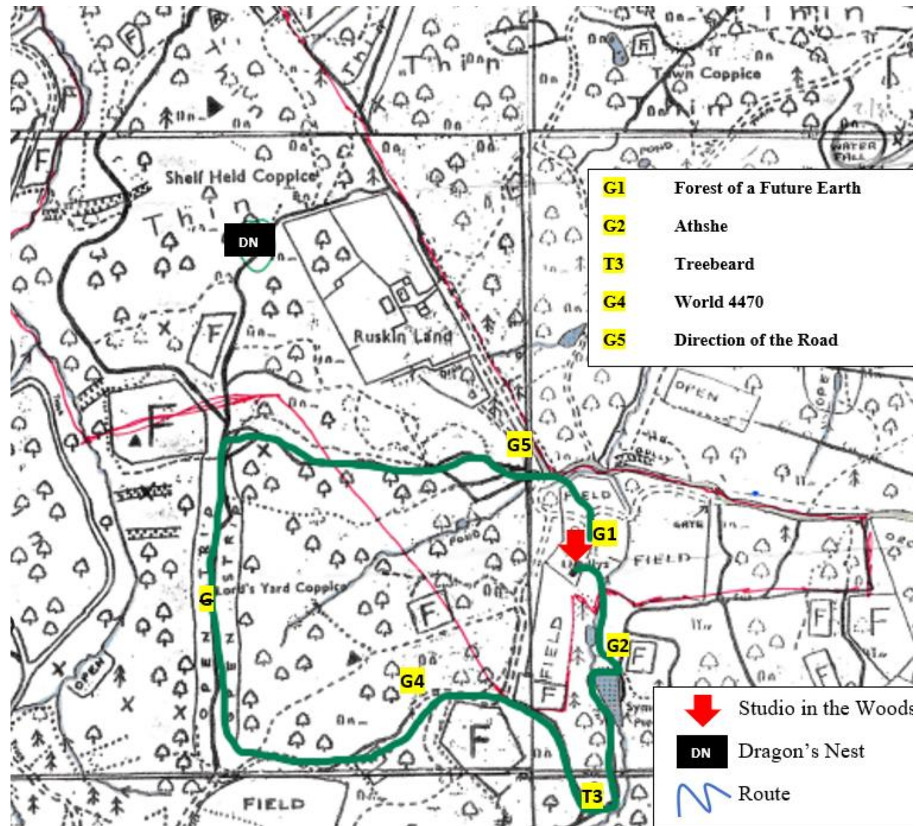
Appendix C

Hand drawn map - Workshop 2



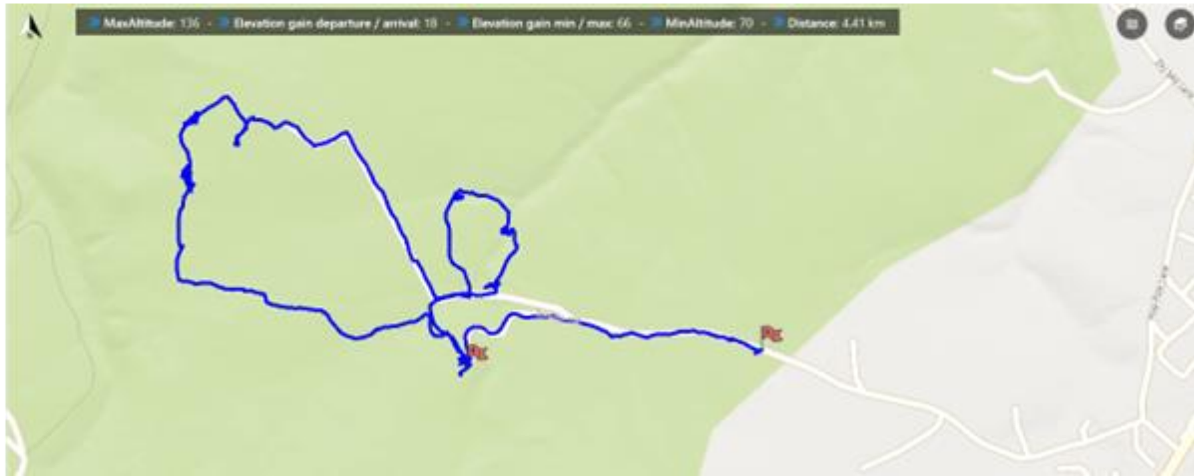
Appendix D

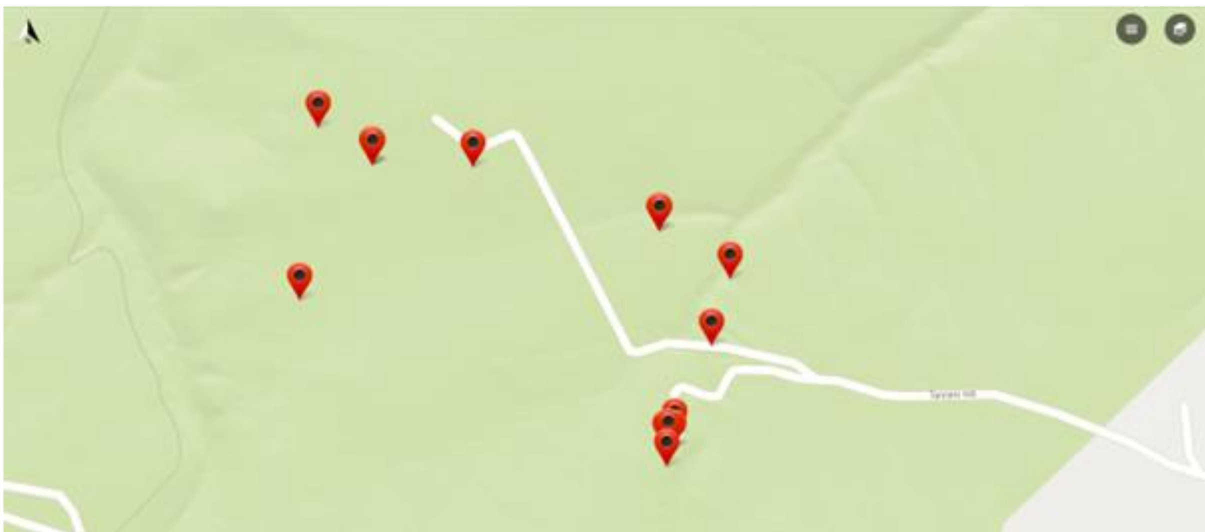
Hand drawn map - Workshop 3



Appendix E

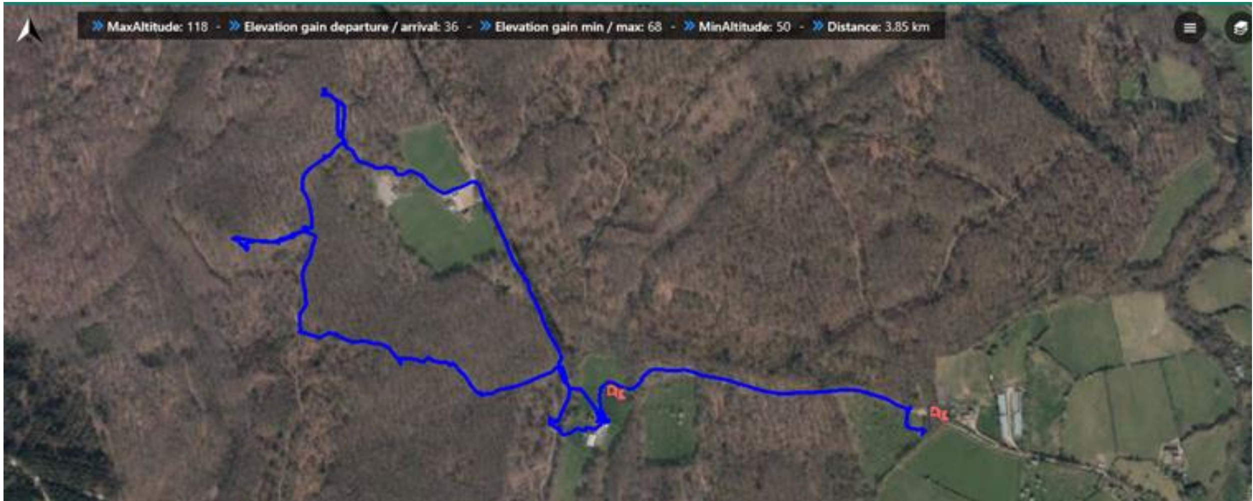
Digital map of route and waymarks – Workshop 1

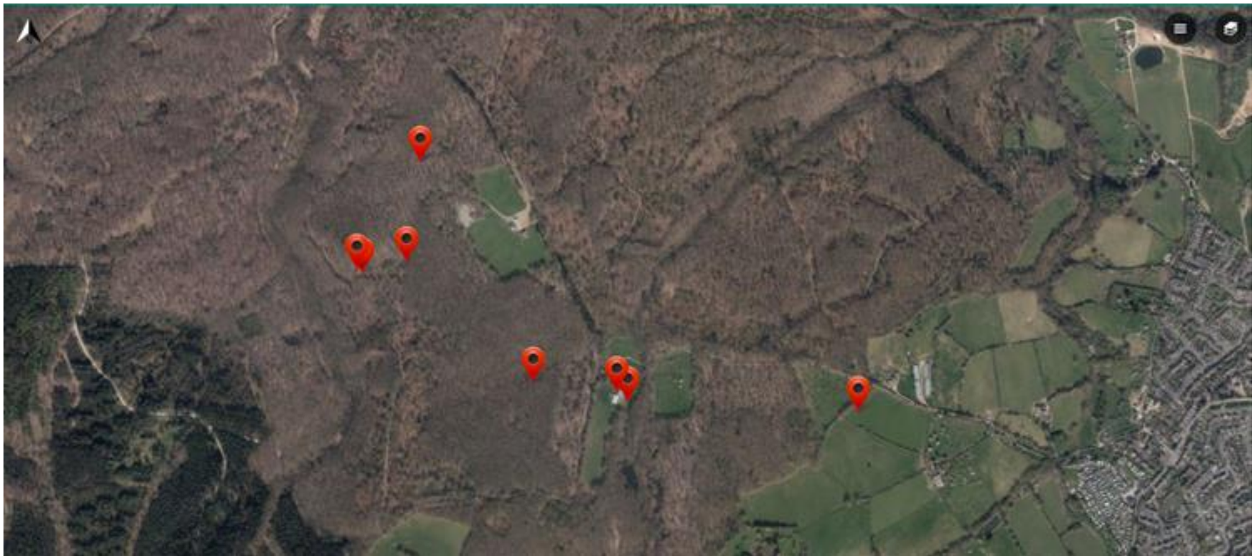




Appendix F

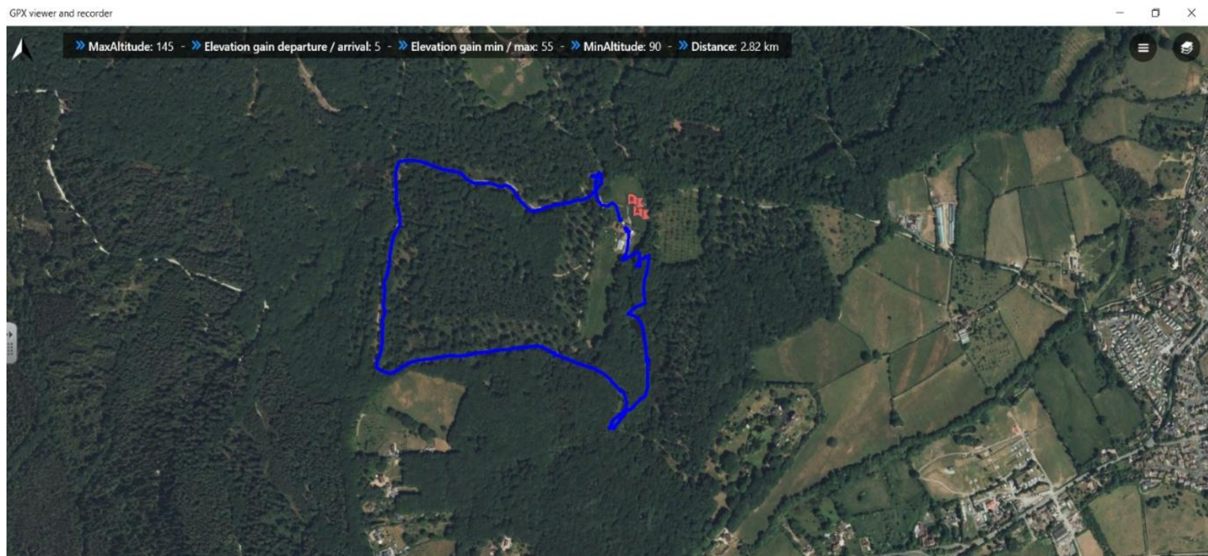
Digital map of route and waymarks – Workshop 2

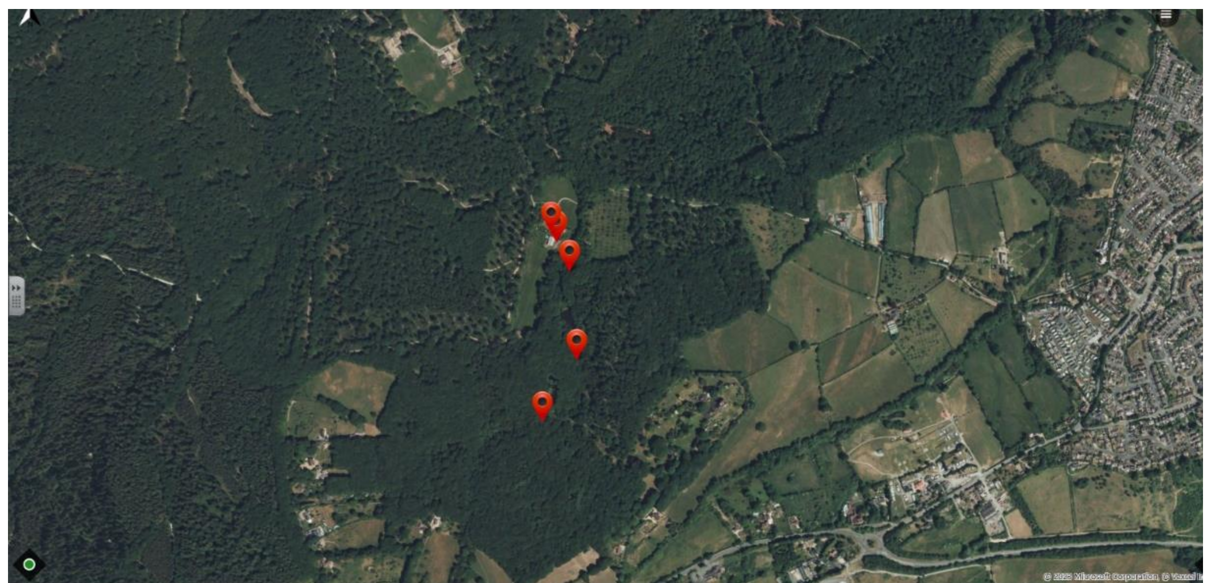




Appendix G

Digital map of route and waymarks – Workshop 3





Appendix H

Extracts used in the workshops

I.M1 Stories of Evilshaw

Whilom, as tells the tale, was a walled cheaping-town high Utterhay, which was builded in a bight of the land a little off the great highway which went from over the mountains to the sea.

The said town was hard on the borders of a wood, which men held to be mighty great, or maybe measureless; though few indeed had entered it, and they that had, brought back tales wild and confused thereof.

Therein was neither highway nor byway, nor wood-reeve nor way-warden; never came chapman thence into Utterhay; no man of Utterhay was so poor or so bold that he durst raise the hunt therein; no outlaw durst flee thereto; no man of God had such trust in the saints that he durst build him a cell in that wood.

For all men deemed it more than perilous; and some said that there walked the worst of the dead; othersome that the Goddesses of the Gentiles haunted there; others again that it was the faery rather, but they full of malice and guile. But most commonly it was deemed that the devils swarmed amidst of its thickets, and that wheresoever a man sought to, who was once environed by it, ever it was the Gate of Hell whereto he came. And the said wood was called Evilshaw.

Nevertheless the cheaping-town throve not ill; for whatso evil things haunted Evilshaw, never came they into Utterhay in such guise that men knew them, neither wotted they of any hurt that they had of the Devils of Evilshaw.

I.T2 Entering Old Forest

'There!' said Merry. 'You have left the Shire, and are now outside, and on the edge of the Old Forest.'

'Are the stories about it true?' asked Pippin.

'I don't know what stories you mean,' Merry answered. 'If you mean the old bogey-stories Fatty's nurses used to tell him, about goblins and wolves and things of that sort, I should say no. At any rate I don't believe them. But the Forest *is* queer. Everything in it is very much more alive, more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers. They watch you. They are usually content merely to watch you, as long as daylight lasts, and don't do much. Occasionally the most unfriendly ones may drop a branch, or stick a root out, or grasp at you with a long trailer. But at night things can be most alarming, or so I am told. I have only once or twice been in here after dark, and then only near the hedge. I thought all the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language; and the branches swayed and groped without any wind. They do say the trees do actually move, and can surround strangers and hem them in. In fact long ago they attacked the Hedge: they came and planted themselves right by it, and leaned over it. But the Hobbits came and cut down hundreds of trees, and made a great bonfire in the Forest, and burned all the ground in a long strip east of the Hedge. After that

the trees gave up the attack, but they became very unfriendly. There is still a wide bare space not far inside where the bonfire was made.'

'Is it only the trees that are dangerous?' asked Pippin.

'There are various queer things living deep in the Forest, and on the far side,' said Merry, 'or at least I have heard so; but I have never seen any of them. But something makes paths. Whenever one comes inside one finds open tracks; but they seem to shift and change from time to time in a queer fashion. Not far from this tunnel there is, or was for a long time, the beginning of quite a broad path leading to the Bonfire Glade, and then on more or less in our direction, east and a little north. That is the path I am going to try and find.'

[…]

The Hobbits now left the tunnel-gate and rode across the wide hollow. On the far side was a faint path leading up on to the floor of the Forest, a hundred yards and more beyond the Hedge; but it vanished as soon as it brought them under the trees. Looking back they could see the dark line of the Hedge through the stems of trees that were already thick about them. Looking ahead they could see only tree-trunks of innumerable sizes and shapes: straight or bent, twisted, leaning, squat or slender, smooth or gnarled and branched; and all the stems were green or grey with moss and slimy, shaggy growths.

Merry alone seemed fairly cheerful. 'You had better lead on and find that path, Frodo said to him. 'Don't let us lose one another, or forget which way the Hedge lies!'

They picked a way among the trees, and their ponies plodded along, carefully avoiding the many writing and interlacing roots. There was no undergrowth. The ground was rising steadily, and as they went forward it seemed that the trees became taller, darker, and thicker. There was no sound, except an occasional drip of moisture falling through the still leaves. For the moment there was no whispering or movement among the branches; but they all got an uncomfortable feeling that they were being watched with disapproval, deepening to dislike and even enmity. The feeling steadily grew, until they found themselves looking up quickly, or glancing back over their shoulders, as if they expected a sudden blow.

I.T3 Old Man Willow

After stumbling along for some way along the stream, they came quite suddenly out of the gloom. As if through a gate they saw the sunlight before them. Coming to the opening they found that they had made their way down through a cleft in a high steep bank, almost a cliff. At its feet was a wide space of grass and reeds; and in the distance could be glimpsed another bank almost as steep. A golden afternoon of late sunshine lay warm and drowsy upon the hidden land between. In the midst of it there wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, and flecked with thousands of faded willow-leaves. The air was thick with them, fluttering yellow from the branches; for there was a warm and gentle breeze blowing softly in the valley, and the reeds were rustling, and the willow-boughs were creaking.

'Well, now I have at least some notion of where we are!' said Merry. 'We have come almost in the opposite direction to which we intended. This is the River Withywindle! I will go on and explore.'

He passed out into the sunshine and disappeared into the long grasses. After a while he reappeared, and reported that there was fairly solid ground between the cliff-foot and the river; in some places firm turf went down to the water's edge. 'What's more,' he said, 'there seems to be something like a footpath winding

along on this side of the river. If we turn left and follow it, we shall be bound to come out on the east side of the Forest eventually.'

'I dare say!' said Pippin. 'That is, if the track goes on so far, and does not simply lead us into a bog and leave us there. Who made the track, do you suppose, and why? I am sure it was not for our benefit. I am getting very suspicious of this Forest and everything in it, and I begin to believe all the stories about it. And have you any idea how far eastward we should have to go?'

'No,' said Merry, 'I haven't. I don't know the least how far down the Withywindle we are, or who could possibly come here often enough to make a path along it. But there is no other way out that I can see or think of.'

There being nothing else for it, they filed out, and Merry led them to the path he had discovered. Everywhere the reeds and grasses to the path were lush and tall, in places, far above their heads; but once found, the path was easy to follow, as it turned and twisted, picking out the sounder ground among the bogs and pools. Here and there it passed over other rills, running down gullies into the Withywindle out of the higher forest-lands, and at these points there were tree-trunks or bundles of brushwood laid carefully across.

[…]

The Hobbits began to feel very hot. There were armies of flies of all kinds buzzing round their ears, and the afternoon sun was burning on their backs. At last they came suddenly into a thin shad; great grey branches reached across the path. Each step forward became more reluctant than the last. Sleepiness seemed to be creeping out of the ground and up their legs, and falling softly out of the air upon their heads and eyes.

Frodo felt his chin go down and his head nod. Just in front of him Pippin fell forward on to his knees. Frodo halted. 'It's no good,' he heard Merry saying. 'Can't go another step without rest. Must have a nap. It's cool under the willows. Less flies!'

Frodo did not like the sound of this. 'Come on!' he cried. 'We can't have a nap yet. We must get clear of the Forest first.' But the others were too far gone to care. Beside them Sam stood yawning and blinking stupidly.

Suddenly Frodo himself felt sleep overwhelming him. His head swam. There now seemed hardly a sound in the air. The flies had stopped buzzing. Only a gentles noise on the edge of hearing, a soft fluttering as of a song half whispered, seemed to stir in the boughs above. He 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. The leaves fluttering against the bright sky dazzled him, and he toppled over, lying where he fell upon the grass.

Merry and Pippin dragged themselves forward and lay down with their backs to the willow-trunk. Behind them the great cracks gaped wide to receive them as the tree swayed and creaked. They looked up at the grey and yellow leaves, moving softly against the light, and singing. They shut their eyes, and then it seemed that they could almost hear words, cool words, saying something about water and sleep. They gave themselves up to the spell and fell fast asleep at the foot of the great grey willow.

I.M4 Birdalone swims

So she went down to the water-side, and when she was standing knee-deep in the little sandy bight aforesaid, she looked over to the Green Eyot, and was minded to swim over thiher, as oft she did. And it was a windless dawn after a hot night, and a light mist lay upon the surface of the water, and above it rose the greenery of the eyot.

She pushed off into the deep and swam strongly through the still water, and the sun rose whiles was on the way, and by then she had laid a hand on the willow-twigs of the eyot, was sending a long beam across the waters; and her wet shoulders rose up into the path of it and were turned into a ruddy gold. She hoister herself up, and climbing the low bank, was standing amongst the meadow-sweet, and dropping on to its fragrance. Then she turned about to the green plain and the house and the hedge of woodland beyond, and sighed, and said softly, and said softly: A pity of it, to leave it! If it were no better otherwhere, and not so fair?

Then she turned inward to the eyot, which had done her nought but good, and which she loved; and she unbound her hair, and let it fall till the ends of the tresses mingled with the heads of the meadowsweet, and thereafter walked quietly up into the grassy middle of the isle.

She was wont to go to a knoll there where the grass was fine, and flowery at this time with white clover and dog violet, and lie down under the shadow of a big thorn with a much twisted bole: but to-day some thought came across her, and she turned before she came to the thorn, and went straight over the eyot (which was but a furlong over at that place) and down to the southward-looking shore thereof. There she let herself softly down into the water and thrust off without more ado, and swam on and on till she had gone a long way. Then she communed with herself, and found that she was thinking: If I might only swim all the water and be free.

I.T5 Tom Bombadil's tales

'It's a good day for long tales, for questions and for answers, so Tom will start the talking.'

He then told them many remarkable stories, sometimes half as if speaking to himself, sometimes looking at them suddenly with a bright blue eye under his deep brows. Often his voice would turn to song, and he would get out of his chair and dance about. He told them tales of bees and flowers, the ways of the trees, and the strange creatures of the Forest, about the vile things and good things, things friendly and things unfriendly, cruel things and kind things, and secrets hidden under brambles.

As they listened, they began to understand the lives of the Forest, apart from themselves, indeed to feel themselves as the strangers where all other things were at home. Moving constantly in and out of his talk was Old Man Willow, and Frodo learned now enough to content him, indeed more than enough, for it was not comfortable lore. Tom's words laid bare the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroyers and usurpers. It was not called Old Forest without good reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods; and it in it there lived yet, ageing no quicker than the hills, the fathers of the fathers of trees, remembering times when they were lords. The countless years had filled them with pride and rooted wisdom, and with malice. But none were more dangerous than the Great Willow: his heart was rotten, but his strength was green; and he was cunning and a master of winds, and his song and though

ran through the woods on both sides of the river. His grey thirsty spirit drew power out of the earth and spread like fine root-threads in the ground, and invisible twig-fingers in the air, till it had under its dominion nearly all the trees of the Forest from the Hedge to the Downs.

I.M6 Ralph rests in the Wood Perilous

[…] it was now about five hours after noon, and the sun's rays fell aslant through the boughs of the noble oaks, and the scent of the grass and bracken trodden by the horse-hoofs of that company went up into the warm summer air. A while he sat musing but awake, though the faint sound of a little stream in the dale below mingled with all the lesser noises of the forest did its best to soothe him to sleep again: and presently had its way with him; for he leaned his head back on the bracken, and in a minute or two was sleeping once more and dreaming some dream made up of masterless memories of past days.

When he awoke again he lay still a little while, wondering where in the world he was, but as the drowsiness left him, he arose and looked about, and saw that the sun was sinking low and gilding the oakboles red. He stood awhile and watched the gambols of three hares, who had drawn nigh him while he slept, and now noted him not; and a little way he saw through the trees a hart and two hinds going slowly from grass to grass, feeding in the cool eventide; but presently he saw them raise their heads and amble off down the slope of the little dale, and therewith he himself turned his face sharply toward the north-west, for he was fine-eared as well as sharp-eyed, and on a little wind which had just arisen came down to him the sound of horse-hoofs once more.

I.T7 Théoden's epiphany

There came forward out of the trees three strange shapes. As tall as trolls they were, twelve feet or more in height; their strong bodies, stout as young trees, seemed to be clad with raiment or with hide of close-fitting grey and brown. Their limbs were long, and their hide of close-fitting grey and brown. Their limbs were long, and their hands had many fingers; their hair was stiff, and their beards grey-green as moss. They gazed out with solemn eyes, but they were not looking at the riders: their eyes were bent northwards. Suddenly they lifted their long hands to their mouths, and sent forth ringing calls, clear as notes of a horn, but more musical and various. The calls were answered; and turning again, the riders saw other creatures of the same kind approaching, striding through the grass. They came swiftly from the North, walking like wading herons in their gait, but not in their speed; for their legs in their long paces beat quicker than the heron's wings. The riders cried aloud in wonder, and some set their hands upon their sword-hilts.

'You need no weapons,' said Gandalf. 'These are but herdsmen. They are not enemies, indeed they are not concerned with us at all.'

So it seemed to be; for as he spoke the tall creatures, without a glance at the riders, strode into the wood and vanished.

'Herdsmen!' said Théoden. 'Where are their flocks? What are they, Gandalf? For it is plain that to you, at any rate, they are not strange.'

'They are the shepherds of the trees,' answered Gandalf. 'Is it so long since you listened to tales by the fireside? There are children in your land who, out of the twisted threads of story, could pick the answer to

your question. You have seen Ents, O King, Ents out of Fangorn Forest, which in your tongue you call the Entwood. Did you think that the name was given only in idle fancy? Nay, Théoden, it is otherwise: to them you are but the passing tale; all the years from Eorl the Young to Théoden the Old are of little count to them; and all the deeds of your house but a small matter.'

The king was silent. 'Ents!' he said at length. 'Out of the shadows of legend I begin a little to understand the marvel of the trees, I think. I have lived to see strange days. Long have we tended our beasts and our fields, built our houses, wrought our tools, or ridden away to help in the wars of Minas Tirith. And that we called the life of Men, the way of the world. We cared little for what lay beyond the borders of our land. Songs we have that tell of these things, but we are forgetting them, teaching them only to children, as a careless custom. And now the songs have come down among us out of strange places, and walk visible under the Sun.'

'You should be glad, Théoden King,' said Gandalf. 'For not only the little life of Men is now endangered, but the life also of those things which you have deemed the matter of legend.'

II.G1 The Immanent Grove

Somewhere to the west of the Great House of Roke, and often somewhat south of it, the Immanent Grove is usually to be seen. There is no place for it on maps, and there is no way to it except for those who know the way to it. But even novices and townsfolk and farmers can see it, always at a certain distance, a wood of high trees whose leaves have a hint of gold in their greenness even in the spring. And they consider – the novices, the townsfolk, the farmers – that the Grove moves about in a mystifying manner. But in this they are mistaken, for the Grove does not move. Its roots are the roots of being. It is all the rest that moves.

[…] He came to the path that led to the Immanent Grove, a path that led always straight and direct no matter how time and the world bent awry about it, and following it came soon into the shadow of the trees.

The trunks of some of these were vast. Seeing them one could believe at last that the Grove never moved: they were like immemorial towers grey with years; their roots were like the roots of mountains. Yet these, the most ancient, were some of them thin of leaf, with branches that had died. They were not immortal. Among the giants grew sapling trees, tall and vigorous with bright crowns of foliage, and seedlings, slight leafy wands no taller than a girl.

The ground beneath the trees was soft, rich with the rotten leaves of all the years. Ferns and small woodland plants grew in it, but there was no kind of tree but the one, which had no name in the Hardic tongue of Earthsea. Under the branches the air smelled earthy and fresh, and had a taste in the mouth like live spring water.

[…] What is learned in the Immanent Grove is not much talked about elsewhere. It is said that no spells are worked there, and yet the place itself is an enchantment.

II.T2 Blindfolded through Lórien

[…] the Company filed slowly along the paths in the wood, led by Haldir, while the other Elf walked behind. They felt the ground beneath their feet smooth and soft, and after a while they walked more freely, without

fear of hurt or fall. Being deprived of sight, Frodo found his hearing and other senses sharpened. He could smell the trees and the trodden grass. He could hear many different notes in the rustle of the leaves overhead, the river murmuring away on his right, and the thin clear voices of birds high in the sky. He felt the sun upon his face and hands when they passed through an open glade.

II.T3 Cerin Amroth

When his eyes were in turn uncovered, Frodo looked up and caught his breath. They were standing in an open space. To the left stood a great mound, covered with a sward of grass as green as Springtime in the Elder Days. Upon it, as a double crown, grew two circles of trees: the outer had bark of snowy white, and were leafless but beautiful in their shapely nakedness; the inner were mallorn-trees of great height, still arrayed in pale gold. High amid the branches of a towering tree that stood in the centre of all there gleamed a white flet. At the feet of the trees, and all about the green hillsides the grass was studded with small golden flowers shaped like stars. Among them, nodding on slender stalks, were other flowers, white and palest green: they glimmered as a mist amid the rich hue of the grass. Over all the sky was blue, and the sun of afternoon glowed upon the hill and cast long green shadows beneath the trees.

'Behold! You are come to Cerin Amroth,' said Haldir. 'For this is the heart of the ancient realm as it was long ago, and here is the mound of Amroth, where in happier days his high house was built. Here ever bloom the winter flowers in the unfading grass: the yellow *elanor*, and the pale *niphredil*. Here we will stay awhile, and come to the city of the Galadhrim at dusk.'

The others cast themselves down upon the fragrant grass, but Frodo stood awhile still lost in wonder. It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured for ever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. In winter here no heart could mourn for summer or for spring. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lórien there was no stain.

He turned and saw that Sam was now standing beside him, looking round with a puzzled expression, and rubbing his eyes as if he was not sure that he was awake. 'It's sunlight and bright day, right enough,' he said. 'I thought that Elves were all for moon and stars: but this is more Elvish than anything I ever heard tell of. I feel as if I was inside a song, if you take my meaning.'

Haldir looked at them, and he seemed indeed to take the meaning of both thought and word. He smiled. 'You feel the power of the Lady of the Galadhrim,' he said. 'Would it please you to climb with me up Cerin Amroth?' They followed him as he stepped lightly up the grass-clad slopes. Though he walked and breathed, and about him living leaves and flowers were stirred by the same cool wind as fanned his face, Frodo felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness. When he had gone and passed again into the outer world, still Frodo the wanderer from the Shire would walk there, upon the grass among *elanor* and *niphredil* in fair Lothlórien

II.T4 The Shadow of Mirkwood

Frodo looked and saw, still at some distance, a hill of many mighty trees, or a city of green towers: which it was he could not tell. Out of it, it seemed to him that the power and light came that held all the land in sway. He longed suddenly to fly like a bird to rest in the green city. Then he looked eastward and saw all the land of Lórien running down to the pale gleam of Anduin, the Great River. He lifted his eyes across the river and all the light went out, and he was back again in the world he knew. Beyond the river the land appeared flat and empty, formless and vague, until far away it rose again like a wall, dark and drear. The sun that lay on Lothlórien had no power to enlighten the shadow of that distant height. 'There lies the fastness of Southern Mirkwood,' said Haldir. 'It is clad in a forest of dark fir, where the trees strive one against another and their branches rot and wither. In the midst upon a stony height stands Dol Guldur, where long the hidden Enemy had his dwelling. We fear that now it is inhabited again, and with power sevenfold. A black cloud lies often over it of late.

II.T5 The Mirror of Galadriel

No trees grew there, and it lay open to the sky. The evening star had risen and was shining with white fire above the western woods. Down a long flight of steps the Lady went into the deep green hollow, through which ran murmuring the silver stream that issued from the fountain on the hill. At the bottom, upon a low pedestal carved like a branching tree, stood a basin of silver, wide and shallow, and beside it stood a silver ewer.

With water from the stream Galadriel filled the basin to the brim, and breathed on it, and when the water was still again she spoke. 'Here is the Mirror of Galadriel,' she said. 'I have brought you here so that you may look in it, if you will.'

The air was very still, and the dell was dark, and the Elflady beside him was tall and pale. 'What shall we look for, and what shall we see?' asked Frodo, filled with awe.

'Many things I can command the Mirror to reveal,' she answered, 'and to some I can show what they desire to see. But the Mirror will also show things unbidden, and those are often stranger and more profitable than things which we wish to behold. What you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot always tell. Do you wish to look?'

[…]

Sam climbed up on the foot of the pedestal and leaned over the basin. The water looked hard and dark. Stars were reflected in it. 'There's only stars, as I thought,' he said. Then he gave a low gasp, for the stars went out. As if a dark veil had been withdrawn, the Mirror grew grey, and then clear. There was sun shining, and the branches of trees were waving and tossing in the wind.

[…]

Like a dream the vision shifted and went back, and he saw the trees again. But this time they were not so close, and he could see what was going on: they were not waving in the wind, they were falling, crashing to the ground.

'Hi!' cried Sam in an outraged voice. 'There's that Ted Sandyman a-cutting down trees as he shouldn't. They didn't ought to be felled: it's that avenue beyond the Mill that shades the road to Bywater.

I wish I could get at Ted, and I'd fell him!' But now Sam noticed that the Old Mill had vanished, and a large red-brick building was being put up where it had stood. Lots of folk were busily at work. There was a tall red chimney nearby. Black smoke seemed to cloud the surface of the Mirror.

'There's some devilry at work in the Shire,' he said. 'Elrond knew what he was about when he wanted to send Mr. Merry back.' Then suddenly Sam gave a cry and sprang away. 'I can't stay here,' he said wildly. 'I must go home. They've dug up Bagshot Row, and there's the poor old Gaffer going down the Hill with his bits of things on a barrow. I must go home!' 'You cannot go home alone,' said the Lady. 'You did not wish to go home without your master before you looked in the Mirror, and yet you knew that evil things might well be happening in the Shire. Remember that the Mirror shows many things, and not all have yet come to pass. Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them […]'

II.T6 Frodo and the *Mallorn*

They entered the circle of white trees. As they did so the South Wind blew upon Cerin Amroth and sighed among the branches. Frodo stood still, hearing far off great seas upon beaches that had long ago been washed away, and sea-birds crying whose race had perished from the earth. Haldir had gone on and was now climbing to the high flet. As Frodo prepared to follow him, he laid his hand upon the tree beside the ladder: never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within it. He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself.

III.G1 Athshe

All the colours of rust and sunset, brown-reds and pale greens, changed ceaselessly in the long leaves as the wind blew. The roots of the copper willows, thick and ridged, were moss-green down by the running water, which like the wind moved slowly with many soft eddies and seeming pauses, held back by rocks, roots, hanging and fallen leaves. No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex. Little paths ran under the branches, around the boles, over the roots; they did not go straight, but yielded to every obstacle, devious as nerves. The ground was not dry and solid but damp and rather springy, product of the collaboration of living things with the long, elaborate death of leaves and trees; and from that rich graveyard grew ninety-foot trees, and tiny mushrooms that sprouted in circles half an inch across. The smell of the air was subtle, various, and sweet. The view was never long, unless looking up through the branches you caught sight of the stars. Nothing was pure, dry, arid, plain. Revelation was lacking. There was no seeing everything at once: no certainty. The colours of rust and sunset kept changing in the hanging leaves of the copper willows, and you could not say even whether the leaves of the willows were brownish-red, or reddish-green, or green.

III.T2 Treebeard

They found that they were looking at a most extraordinary face. It belonged to a large Man-like, almost Troll-like, figure, at least fourteen foot high, very sturdy, with a tall head, and hardly any neck. Whether it was clad in stuff like green and grey bark, or whether that was its hide, was difficult to say. At any rate the arms, at a short distance from the trunk, were not wrinkled, but covered with a brown smooth skin. The large feet had seven toes each. The lower part of the long face was covered with a sweeping grey beard, bushy, almost twiggy at the roots, thin and mossy at the ends. But at the moment the Hobbits noted little but the eyes. These deep eyes were now surveying them, slow and solemn, but very penetrating. They were brown, shot with a green light. Often afterwards Pippin tried to describe his first impression of them.

'One felt as if there was an enormous well behind them, filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present; like sun shimmering on the outer leaves of a vast tree, or on the ripples of a very deep lake. I don't know, but it felt as if something that grew in the ground – asleep, you might say, or just feeling itself as something between root-tip and leaf-tip, between deep earth and sky had suddenly waked up, and was considering you with the same slow care that it had given to its own inside affairs for endless years.'

'*Hrum*, *Hoom*,' murmured the voice, a deep voice like a very deep woodwind instrument. 'Very odd indeed! Do not be hasty, that is my motto. But if I had seen you, before I heard your voices – I liked them: nice little voices; they reminded me of something I cannot remember – if I had seen you before I heard you, I should have just trodden on you, taking you for little Orcs, and found out my mistake afterwards. Very odd you are, indeed. Root and twig, very odd!'

Pippin, though still amazed, no longer felt afraid. Under those eyes he felt a curious suspense, but not fear. 'Please,' he said, 'who are you? And what are you?'

A queer look came into the old eyes, a kind of wariness; the deep wells were covered over. '*Hrum*, now,' answered the voice; 'well, I am an Ent, or that's what they call me. Yes, Ent is the word. *The* Ent, I am, you might say, in your manner of speaking. *Fangorn* is my name according to some, *Treebeard* others make it. *Treebeard* will do.'

[…]

'He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment.' […] Treebeard rumbled for a moment, as if he were pronouncing some deep, subterranean Entish malediction. 'Some time ago I began to wonder how Orcs dared to pass through my woods so freely,' he went on. 'Only lately did I guess that Saruman was to blame, and that long ago he had been spying out all the ways, and discovering my secrets. He and his foul folk are making havoc now. Down on the borders they are felling trees – good trees. Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot – orc-mischief that; but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc. There is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days.

'Curse him! Root and branch! Many of those trees were my friends, creatures I had known from nut and acorn; many had voices of their own that are lost for ever now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves. I have been idle. I have let things slip. It must stop!'

III.G3 World 4470

When they began field analyses they found no animals even among the microbiota. Nobody here ate anybody else. All life-forms were photosynthesizing or saprophagous, living off light or death, not off life. Plants: infinite plants, not one species known to the visitors from the house of Man. Infinite shades and intensities of green, violet, purple, brown, red. Infinite silences. Only the wind moved, swaying leaves and fronds, a warm soughing wind laden with spores and pollens, blowing the sweet pale-green dust over prairies of great grasses, heaths that bore no heather, flowerless forests where no foot had ever walked, no eye had ever looked. A warm, sad world, sad and serene. The Surveyors, wandering like picnickers over sunny plains of violet filicaliformes, spoke softly to each other. They knew their voices broke a silence of a thousand million years, the silence of wind and leaves, leaves and wind, blowing and ceasing and blowing again. They talked softly; but being human, they talked.

[…]

'It's not the trees,' Harfex said. 'They have no more nervous system than do plants of the Hainish Descent on Earth. None.'

'You're not seeing the forest for the trees, as they say on Earth,' Mannon put in, smiling elfinly; Harfex stared at him. 'What about those root-nodes we've been puzzling about for twenty days – eh?'

'What about them?'

'They are, indubitably, connections. Connections among the trees. Right? Noe let's just suppose, most improbably, that you knew nothing of animal brain-structure. And you were given one axon, or one detached glial cell, to examine. Would you be likely to discover what it was? Would you see that the cell was capable of sentience?'

'No. Because it isn't. A single cell is capable of mechanical responses to stimulus. No more. Are you hypothesizing that individual arboriformes are "cells" in a kind of brain, Mannon?'

'Not exactly. I'm merely pointing out that they are all interconnected, both by the root-node linkage and by your green epiphytes in the branches. A linkage of incredible complexity and physical extent. Why, even the prairie grass-forms have those root-connectors, don't they? I know that sentience or intelligence isn't a thing, you can't find it in, or analyze it out from, the cells of a brain. It's a function of the connected cells. It is, in a sense, the connection: the connectedness.

III.G4 Cadast

The birch grove was more or less in the centre of the town of Cadast. Eight paths led away from it, winding narrowly off among trees. There was a whiff of woodsmoke in the air; where the branches were thin at the south edge of the grove you could see smoke rise from a house-chimney, like a bit of blue yarn unravelling among the leaves. If you looked closely among the live-oaks and other trees you would find houseroofs sticking up a couple of feet above ground, between a hundred and two hundred of them, it was very hard to count. The timber houses were three-quarters sunk, fitted in among tree-roots like badgers' setts. The beam roofs were mounded over with a thatch of small branches, pinestraw, reeds, earthmound. They were insulating, waterproof, almost invisible. The forest and the community of eight hundred people went about their business all around the birch grove where Ebor Dendep sat making a basket of fern. A bird among the

branches over her head said, ‘Te-whet,’ sweetly. There was more people-noise than usual […] Yet the voices calling here and there and the babble of women bathing or children playing down by the stream, were not so loud as the morning bird-song and insect-drone and under-noise of the living forest of which the town was one element.

III.G5 Direction of the Road

I remember the first motorcar I saw. Like most of us, I took it for a mortal, some kind of loose creature new to me. I was a bit startled, for after a hundred and thirty-two years I thought I knew all the local fauna. But a new thing is always interesting, in its trivial fashion, so I observed this one with attention. I approached it at a fair speed, about the rate of a canter, but in a new gait, suitable to the ungainly looks of the thing: an uncomfortable, bouncing, rolling, choking, jerking gait. Within two minutes, before I ‘d grown a foot tall, I knew it was no mortal creature, bound or loose or free. It was a making, like the carts the horses got hitched to. I thought it was so very ill-made that I didn’t expect it to return, once it gasped over the West Hill, and I heartily hoped it never would, for I disliked that jerky bounce.

[…]

I am of a family of rigid principle and considerable self-respect. The Quercian motto is ‘Break but bend not,’ and I have always tried to uphold it. It was not only personal vanity, but family pride, you see, that was offended when was forced to jounce and bounce in this fashion by a mere making.

The apple trees in the orchard at the foot of the hill did not seem to mind; but then, apples are tame. Their genes have been tampered with for centuries. Besides, they are herd creatures; no orchard tree can really form an opinion of its own. I kept my own opinion to myself.

[…]

Yearly then, weekly, daily, they became commoner. They became a major feature of the local Order of Things. The road was dug up and re-metalled, widened, finished off very smooth and nasty, like a slug’s trail, with no ruts, pools, rocks, flowers, or shadows on it. There used to be a lot of little loose creatures on the road, grasshoppers, ants, toads, mice, foxes, and so on, most of them too small to move for, since they couldn’t really see one. Now the wise creatures took to avoiding the road, and the unwise ones got squashed. I have seen all too many rabbits die in that fashion, right at my feet. I am thankful that I am an oak, and that though I may be wind-broken or uprooted, hewn or sawn, at least I cannot, under any circumstances, be squashed.

[…]

Very few of the drivers bothered to look at me, not even a seeing glance. They seemed, indeed, not to see any more. They merely stared ahead. They seemed to believe that they were ‘going somewhere.’ Little mirrors were affixed to the front of their cars, at which they glanced o see where they had been; then they stared ahead again. I had thought that only beetles had this delusion of Progress. Beetles are always rushing about, and never looking up. I had always had a pretty low opinion of beetles. But at least they let me be.’

III.G6 Morning in the forest of a future Earth

Fresh, still, sweet, the morning was as it had been when the first people on this land had waked in their frail, pointed houses and stepped outside to see the sun rise free of the dark forest. Mornings are all one, and autumn always autumn, but the years men count are many. There had been a first race on this land… and a second, the conquerors; both were lost, conquered and conquerors, millions of lives, all drawn together to a vague point on the horizon of past time. The stars had been gained, and lost again. Still the years went on, so many years that the forest of archaic times, destroyed utterly during the era when men had made and kept their history, had grown up again. Even in the obscure vast history of a planet the time it takes to make a forest counts. It takes a while. And not every planet can do it; it is no common effect, that tangling of the sun's first cool light in the shadow and complexity of innumerable wind-stirred branches…

[…]

Around the Clearing, mile after mile uncleared, unexplored, indifferent, the forest went on. The wild forest, and over it the sky. There was no shutting out the inhuman here, no narrowing man's life, as in the cities of earlier ages, to within man's scope.