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**From Sacred Grove to Dark Wood to  
Re-enchanted Forest (Part II): The Evolution of Arborphilia  
as Neo-romantic Environmental Ethics**

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**Abstract**

Many human cultures have venerated forests and trees. The ubiquity of arborphilia across hemispheres, wherever forests have existed, suggests an evolutionary process that allowed adaptation to such arboreal realms throughout the world. Because trees in their constant recycling through the seasons evoke the ambivalence associated with death and renewal, paradoxical perceptions of forests and trees have coexisted throughout history. In Part I, I studied attitudes about forests and groves that have ranged from viewing them as hallowed sanctuaries deserving of protection from desecration, to fearing them as places inhabited by Satan or demonic spirits. In Part II, drawing especially on Jungian theory and depth psychology, I examine more of the ways that tree veneration has been expressed culturally—through music, poetry, folktales, literature, film, and even jokes and advertising—revealing how integral tree imagery is to the formation of neo-romantic environmental ethics.

**Keywords**

Sacred groves, hero quest, mythology, fairytales, Dante, Thoreau, dendrophilia, arborphilia, ecocinema, ecocriticism, environmental ethics.

## Part II

*Solace*

When you are anguished,  
When you see not any light,  
When you need to moan,  
Hug a tree.

When you are angry,  
When you love not anyone,  
When you crave revenge,  
Hug a tree.

When you are fearful,  
When you know not whom to trust,  
When you hear no God,  
Hug a tree.

When you are weary,  
When you have no strength to serve,  
When you want to sleep,  
Hug a tree (Fritz 2011 [1976]).

*Tree Hugging as New Age Nature Spirituality*

From pagan primeval tree worship to Dante's infernal Dark Wood, the history of sylvan symbolism was explored in Part I<sup>1</sup> through an ecocritical study of the HBO series *True Detective* (Fukunaga 2013–14), the play *Tree* (Hébert 2009), and the film *The Tree of Life* (Malick 2011). In Part II, I continue this study with references to folktales about tree climbing for enlightenment, to Toni Morrison's Clearing and 'temple of boxwood' in *Beloved*, and finally to the New Age revival of neo-romantic arborphilia, as seen in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy,<sup>2</sup> the film *Avatar* (Cameron 2009), and in the phenomenon known as 'tree-hugging'.

Tree-hugging—a colloquial expression for arborphilia (reverence for trees)—has been synonymous with environmental activism since the 1970s, demonstrating how prominently trees have figured in people's imaginations (e.g., Hutchings 2005). Trees have become ubiquitous icons in advertising and in brand logos, for which they are often intended to

1. It is strongly recommended to read Part I of this article before Part II.

2. Space limitations prevent including the musical *Into the Woods* (Sondheim 1986) and the film production of the same title (Marshall 2014, online: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2180411/>).

symbolize eco-friendliness.<sup>3</sup> For example, the Sierra Club depicted founder John Muir's favorite, the Giant Sequoia, on its twentieth-anniversary logo, and Muir was honored for his environmental activism when an old growth redwood forest, Muir Woods National Monument, was named for him (fig. 1). Muir's arborphilia exemplifies findings that those who experience tree veneration as a form of nature spirituality are more inclined to want to preserve and care for natural places (e.g., Tarakeshwar et al. 2001).

The association of trees with the religious impulse has been thought by many to result from *theophanies*—experiences of divinity and/or enlightenment (see, e.g., Otto 1958 [1946]; Eliade 1987 [1957])—in natural settings such as forests that have led to transformation in perspective and behavior. In other words, there seems to be a *depth* or *psychic* element to arborphilia that may be explored by studying fairytales.



Figure 1. Pen and ink, Muir Woods National Monument, California, 1980 (Joy H. Greenberg)

3. See, for example, the tree-hugger commercials from Subaru (online: <http://thenewswheel.com/new-subaru-ad-campaign-2015-outback-features-literal-tree-huggers/>) and the Duluth Trading Company (online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSTzSuuH8Xk>). Tree-hugging is also associated with comfort, as espoused in the poem 'Solace' by Ned Fritz (2011 [1976]) and by the National Association of Search and Rescue's Hug-a-Tree program that teaches children: 'If you're lost, stay put and Hug-a-Tree' (online: <http://www.nasar.org/page/69/History-of-Hug-A-Tree>).

*Into the Woods and Up the Tree:  
Motifs of Self-realization in Fairytales*

Why not go into the forest, literally? Sometimes a tree tells you more than can be read in books. (C.G. Jung 2002: 6)

Whereas much ecocritical study has focused on literature, film, and art, relatively little has included folklore. Concomitantly, folklore has received ample mytho-psychological interpretation, most notably from depth psychologists C.G. Jung (1980 [1959]), Erich Neumann (1973 [1954]), Joseph Campbell (1968, 1973 [1949]), and Marie-Louise von Franz (1993 [1972], 1995 [1974], 1996 [1970]), who observed how folktales—as essential elements of oral as well as written traditions—may reveal the cosmology, ontogeny, and epistemology of their cultural milieus. Although these mythologists have been criticized for their essentializing romanticism,<sup>4</sup> an analysis of folktales suggests they may be integral for the psychological development and self-realization of the individual, a process Jung called ‘individuation’, which mirrors a similar life course that Campbell dubbed the ‘hero journey’ (1973 [1949]). While Jung and Campbell focused exclusively on masculine heroes and their exploits in classical and canonical literature, von Franz saw many folktales as illuminative of *feminine* individuation, or the *heroine journey*. Such mythic narratives disclose how nature in general and trees and forests in particular were regarded by people through different eras.

*Into the Woods*

That the Cosmic Tree in folklore may be accessed only by going into the woods underscores the psychological significance of the forest, which is not simply a miscellany of trees; it is *enchanted*. For some depth psychologists, the forest is a paradoxical place where spirit is infused throughout and psyche’s work of transformation becomes possible. This connection to the unconscious was confirmed by mythologist Heinrich Zimmer, who commented that the ‘enchanted forest’ is ‘the dark aspect of the world’ where ‘the elect, who survives its deadly perils, is reborn and leaves it...changed’:

The forest has always been a place of initiation, for there the demonic presences, the ancestral spirits, and the forces of nature reveal themselves. There man meets his greater self, the totem animal. And thither the medicine man conducts the youths of the tribe in order that they may be born again through gruesome initiation rites... The forest...holds the dark forbidden things—secrets, terrors... In its terrifying abyss...it contains the secret of the soul’s adventure (Zimmer 1973: 181-82).

4. For a recent critique of Campbell’s Hero Journey, see Chalquist 2015.

As places of initiation, there were at least two distinct rites of passage that occurred in forests: (1) admission to the collective and (2) initiation into adulthood. In both scenarios, the initiate wandered in the woods undergoing a series of trials that often resulted in getting lost but eventually led to enlightenment.

The mytheme of being lost in the woods is characteristic of folktales that typically began with a prince or king hunting in the woods, which signifies, according to Jungian theorists and those known as depth psychologists, the unconscious realm (von Franz 1996 [1970]: 120). From such perspectives, during this historical period, hunting ‘ritualize[d] and reaffirm[ed] the king’s ancient nature as civilizer and conqueror of the land’ and symbolically reenacted ‘the historical conquest of the wilderness’—that is, *psyche* (R.P. Harrison 1992: 74).<sup>5</sup> Separation from the prince’s companions additionally ‘mean[t] isolation and the loneliness typical of the journey into the unconscious. The center of interest... shifted from the outer world to the inner, but the inner world is still completely unintelligible. At this stage, the unconscious seems senseless and bewildering’ (von Franz 1996 [1970]: 120). Von Franz aptly, if unintentionally, described Dante’s state, as well as that of many folklore heroes—and heroines—who went into the woods and transformed themselves with self-knowledge.

### *Up the Tree*

Adding to the mystique of the Cosmic Tree was its significance to the shamans and, in some cases, shamanesses who, in accessing the sacred, were transformed—events that took place in an ecstatic state and represented mythically a ‘symbolic ascent to the sky followed by a return to earth’ (Eliade 1972 [1964]: 126).<sup>6</sup> Such ascension created an opposition between earth and sky, with the tree as a ‘ladder’ between the two. This arboreal connection may in part explain why ‘learning from the trees’ was considered by the Conibo of the Upper Amazon to be superior to ‘learning from another shaman’ (Harner 1982: xv). In an ecstatic state, novice shamans made connection with the otherworld represented by the sky and returned as initiated and enlightened beings.

Accounts of shamanic tree-climbing extend from the Americas to Siberia and Africa, demonstrating its wide distribution as a motif and lending new meaning to the old, dismissive colloquialism, ‘go climb a

5. Even today, sacred groves are called ‘crowned’ (*couronnées*) forests in French West Africa (Chérif and Greenberg 2013), which may also be a reference to the upper boughs and leaves or ‘crown’ of a tree.

6. See also Krippner 2002; McClenon 1997; Walsh 1993; Winkelman 2009.

tree', told to someone thought to be in need of getting his or her 'head straight'. Tree climbing, which involves going 'out on a limb', thus seemed to be a way that shamans and shamanesses proved their mettle and affirmed their right to belong to the secret cults. Similarly, the Central California Kuksu practiced pole climbing, an essential element of their shamanic rituals, and the Chumash soul's journey to *Šimilaqša* (heaven) began by crossing on a long pole that alternately rose and fell over a body of water (Blackburn 1975: 88, 30). Such poles were evidently constructed by removing the branches from native species, such as conifers, known for their great height and sturdiness.

Exemplifying the tree-climbing motif on a different continent is a German fairytale, 'The Princess in the Tree', which detailed the story of a young swineherd who came across a large tree in a wood (Jung 1980 [1959]: §422-52). This tree, 'whose branches lose themselves in the clouds', was known by alchemists as the 'Philosophical Tree' (Jung 1980 [1959]: §428 n. 66). Encountering this tree prompted the following from the swineherd:

'How would it be', says he to himself, 'if you were to look at the world from the top of that great tree?' So he climbs up, all day long he climbs, without even reaching the branches. Evening comes, and he has to pass the night in a fork of the tree. Next day he goes on climbing and by noon has reached the foliage. Only towards evening does he come to a village nestling in the branches (Jung 1980 [1959]: §422).<sup>7</sup>

The Philosophical Tree symbolized the development of human life 'and the inner process of becoming conscious... It is the urge toward individuation which unfolds and continues independent of our consciousness' (von Franz 1995 [1974]: 43). Accordingly, the swineherd stood 'for everything a *man* can become if only *he* climbs high enough up the world-tree' (Jung 1980 [1959]: §452, italics added). Notice that for Jung, as it was for many of his contemporaries, the heroic protagonist was always male. Females existed only as male *objectives*; they did not experience individuation. Although myriad tales exist depicting the male hero's quest for enlightenment, precious few concern the uniquely female plights of the heroine. This inequitable situation has resulted in a lack of meaningful images with which modern Western women may 'define their identity', according to von Franz (1993 [1972]: 1).

That said, a careful reading of two Grimms' tales—'The Six Swans' and 'The Twelve Brothers'—disclosed them as heroine journeys that

7. With its 'village in the tree', this tale conjured images of a huge, branching, seemingly endless, magical tree similar to the Na'vi-inhabited Hometree in the film *Avatar* (Cameron 2009).

both *supported* the submissive, feminine ideal of Christian patriarchy and *subverted* it by representing the *female* quest for individuation. Because both stories differed in their depictions of the heroine's initiation into womanhood, I suggest that they signify varying attitudes toward feminine self-realization. By seeking out, climbing, and identifying with trees, the heroines of 'Six Swans' and 'Twelve Brothers' demonstrated their desire for the wholeness that results from the union of opposites (e.g., male/female) that is symbolized by the tree. The *degree* of this arboreal identification is what primarily differentiates the two tales: in 'Six Swans' the heroine, as the daughter of the old woman in the hut, was originally *of* the forest; in 'Twelve Brothers' the heroine only entered the forest because she sought her brothers. She never actually *lived* there. It is an important distinction, I suggest, because as von Franz said, 'Living in the forest [means] sinking into one's innermost nature and finding out what it feels like' (1993 [1972]: 97). Thus it seemed that the heroine of 'Six Swans' was perhaps more introspective and hence further along in her quest than was the female protagonist in 'Twelve Brothers', who, when she did finally enter the woods, found herself 'alone in the wilderness', which no longer was a 'forest' (Manheim 1983: 37). The two terms are not necessarily synonymous; 'wilderness' was not always a place with trees, as we know from Christ's experience there.

In 'Six Swans' the heroine ventured 'out into the middle of the forest' where she 'climbs a tree and spends the night there (Manheim 1983: 173), a motif reiterated in 'Twelve Brothers' by the heroine, who 'alone in the wilderness...picks out a tall tree and climbs up in it' (1983: 37). That both young women not only purposefully entered the forest but climbed trees indicates their respective quests to go inward. It is no mere coincidence that the heroines of 'Six Swans' and 'Twelve Brothers' decided to ascend trees, for this motif embodies a ritual with ties to the shamanic initiation rite, during which the novices connected with 'the other world' and returned 'as initiated and enlightened people' (von Franz 1993 [1972]: 149).

Both heroines may be seen, then, as novices, but rather than into shamanism or Catholicism, they were initiated into womanhood. In so doing, they, like their male counterparts, experienced the stages of Victor Turner's (1997 [1969]) concept regarding the universal rites of passage. Grasped this way, 'Six Swans' and 'Twelve Brothers' may be read as heroine initiation journeys that, following Jung's theory of individuation, represented the ego's search for self and unity. They were journeys that could take place only by going into the woods and up the trees.

*African Arborphilia in Toni Morrison's Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which sacred groves and trees played a significant role, may also be read (as were the two previously discussed fairytales) as women's initiation journeys—in this case, Sethe's and her daughter, Denver's. Once again, trees provided material, referent images for abstract, metaphysical processes. So prominent were trees in *Beloved* that there was even a highly symbolic one carved disturbingly upon Sethe's back by the schoolteacher's whip. Equally noteworthy were the living trees that Sethe and her community time and again sought 'for spiritual support' (Bonnet 1997: 42).

*Beloved's* sacred-grove motif appeared in two places: the Clearing and Sethe's daughter Denver's secret ring of boxwood. Because early humans apparently inhabited jungles and forests, 'The making of a clearing was a cultural step' (von Franz 1996 [1970]: 127-28). In *Beloved*, the Clearing—a wide open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place' (Morrison 1988: 87)—was where the newly freed African-American community gathered for refuge. That these gatherings took place in the woods is not surprising given that this was the only place they felt safe from Euro-Americans. Thus, the Clearing was 'quite obviously one of those sacred groves so central to African worship' (Bonnet 1997: 43).

The Clearing's name suggests a multiplicity of meanings: it is land that has been 'cleared' of natural vegetation, and it is a place where Sethe went to 'ask for some clarifying word' (Morrison 1988: 95) that might help her decide what direction her life should take, and whether Paul D should be a part of it. The Clearing's sanctity was established by Baby Suggs, the 'unchurched preacher' who urged the community with inspirational sermons to heal itself of its collective wounding from slavery (1988: 87). The oxymoronic trope 'unchurched preacher' illumined Baby Suggs's duality that reconciled divine–secular and Christian–indigenous oppositions. Such dyadic mediation itself became, so to speak, a 'place of clearing'.

The other sacred grove in *Beloved* belonged to Denver, Sethe's 18-year-old daughter who was suffocating as well but from her overly protective mother who refused to allow her to grow up or even socialize with others outside her home. Denver's only haven was 'a giant temple of boxwood' that was her 'emerald closet standing seven feet high in the woods' (Morrison 1988: 50, 37). As Denver matured, so did her beloved boxwood transform from 'playroom (where the silence was softer)' to 'refuge (from her brothers' fright)' until 'the place became the point', allowing

her ultimately to gain the courage she needed to seek help from the community for both herself and her seemingly psychotic mother (1988: 28). For both mother and daughter, then, 'the sacred grove [was] the agent of...spiritual rebirth' (Bonnet 1997: 44). As a result, we learned that it was not the trees or groves *per se* that were inherently transformative; it was how they were treated by the imagination that allowed them to become metaphors for such transformation.

The elevated role of trees and sacred groves in the novel had partly to do with the crucial role they played in indigenous African traditions, in which certain trees were 'considered as intermediaries between God and man [and] even worshiped by some tribes as God himself in his immanent aspect' (Bonnet 1997: 42; see also Mbiti 1993: 112-64). The indigenous Akan Ghanaians, for example, viewed certain trees and animals as sacred because they were believed to embody *sasa* (spiritual power) (Awuah-Nyamekye 2009, 2014). For the Yoruba—an African tribe considered to be a main source for Middle Passage slave traders—the *iroko* tree was revered as the Great Mother Goddess, *Iyania*, and was deemed the 'abode of supernatural forces allied with' her (Hackett 1996: 40). As with the Akan belief in *sasa*, the Yoruba additionally believed that 'trees possess vital force or *aṣẹ* of their own' (1996: 40).<sup>8</sup> In other words, they were *ensouled*. Morrison similarly ensouled the Clearing, which rang with laughter and song, as well as the emerald closet, whose walls were 'fifty inches of murmuring leaves' (Morrison 1988: 28). As a result of this personification, the Clearing came alive as a *character* rather than merely being a *setting*.

### *Romantic Pastoralism*

Perhaps nowhere was the transformative power of sacred groves and forests more evident than in the ancient lyric poetry of Theocritus and Virgil, who through their imagining and re-imagining of the pastoral tradition articulated how humans have ceaselessly nurtured a longing for unity with their primordial past. Theocritus created a revisioned, imaginary Arcadian landscape that was depicted in the seventh of his *Idylls* as a personified, divine countryside where trees bowed and rustled, sacred groves sanctified its inhabitants, and the shepherd Lycidas took

8. For a study of African-influenced arborphilia in Haitian Vodou, see Tarter 2015. For more on sacred groves in Africa, see Awuah-Nyamekye 2014; Chérif and Greenberg 2013; Colding and Folke 2001; Cormier-Salem and Bassett 2007; Fomin 2008; Ntiamoa-Baidu 2008; Nyamweru and Sheridan 2008; Juhé-Beaulaton 2008; Sheridan 2009.

the poet/narrator, Simichidas (Theocritus' 'voice') into a forest where they lay on 'deep green beds of fragrant reeds and fresh-cut vine-strippings' (7.161-63). This Arcadia was also a musical landscape filled not only with the 'sweet melody' of the shepherds' pipes, but with the 'sweet...whispers of [a] yonder pine' that sang (Theocritus 1.1-3). Thus, the formerly threatening setting for Pan and his pals metamorphosed into a paradisiacal place of song and sanctuary.

Although the Greek Theocritus of the third century BCE was credited with inventing pastoral poetry through his *Idylls*, it was the Roman Virgil who revisioned—or *romanized*—Theocritus's pastoral pieces into a mythopoeic collection called the *Eclogues*. As did Theocritus, Virgil personified the flora and fauna of Arcadia with human feelings, spirituality, and musicality. Virgil's Arcadia was a 'home of clear-voiced groves and chattering pines' (8.22). In part because of this personification of nature, when poets and artists began reviving pastoralism during the Renaissance, they were called 'Romantics', and the term 'romanticism' now refers, often pejoratively, to those artists, writers, and poets who employ, like Turner in his *Golden Bough* painting, classical motifs in their work.

A revisioning of the romantic pastoral tradition in seventeenth-century Europe resulted in a syncretism of the 'sinister woods' inherited from Christianity and the 'peculiarly hallowed places' inherited from Greek and Roman pastoralism (Williamson 1983: 466).<sup>9</sup> In the New World, Thoreau—by all accounts the prototypical environmentalist—was considered a confirmed romantic and by Buell's account, a deep-rooted dendrophiliac<sup>10</sup> who famously 'went to the woods because [he] wanted to live deliberately' (Thoreau 1999 [1854]: 72). Perhaps the most memorable passage of *Walden* in which Thoreau demonstrated his dendrophilia begins the tenth chapter, 'Baker Farm':

Sometimes I rambled to *pine* groves, standing like *temples*, or like fleets at sea, full-rigged, with wavy boughs, and rippling with light, so soft and green and shady that the Druids<sup>11</sup> would have forsaken their *oaks* to worship in them; or to the *cedar* wood beyond Flint's Pond, where the trees, covered with hoary blue berries, soaring higher and higher, are fit to stand before Valhalla, and the creeping *juniper* covers the ground with

9. See, for example, Greenberg (2008) for a study of classical pastoralism and environmental ethics.

10. Buell (1995: 500 n. 92) was apparently the first to use the term 'dendrophilia' when he applied it to Thoreau.

11. The origin of the word 'druid' is thought to come from Pliny, who derived it from *drus* (oak) (Davidson 1988: 156). For more about contemporary Druidry, see Kirner's article in this issue, 'Pursuing the Salmon of Wisdom: The Sacred in Folk Botanical Knowledge Revival among Modern Druids'.

wreaths full of fruit; or to swamps where the usnea lichen hangs in festoons from the white *spruce* trees, ...where the swamp-pink and *dogwood* grow, the red *alder* berry glows like eyes of imps... Instead of calling on some scholar, I paid many a visit to particular trees, of kinds which are rare in this neighborhood, standing far away in the middle of some pasture, or in the depths of a wood or swamp, or on a hilltop; such as the *black birch*, of which we have some handsome specimens two feet in diameter; its cousin, the *yellow birch*, with its loose golden vest, perfumed like the first; the *beech*,...of which, excepting scattered specimens, I know but one small grove of sizable trees left in the township...; it is worth the while to see the silver grain sparkle when you split this wood; the *bass*; the *hornbeam*; the *Celtis occidentalis*, or false *elm*, of which we have but one well-grown; some taller mast of a *pine*, a *shingle* tree, or a more perfect *hemlock* than usual, standing like a pagoda in the midst of the woods; and many others I could mention. These were the *shrines* I visited both summer and winter (1999 [1854]: 160-61, italics added).

Thoreau's virtual cataloguing of the trees around him reflected an aesthetic appreciation of trees that was apparently enhanced by his scientific knowledge of them. His arborphilia was easily detected by his choice of words such as 'temples', 'Druids', 'Valhalla', 'gods', and 'shrines', all of which connote the sense of religiosity with which he viewed trees. Indeed, he often used the word 'sacred' when discussing trees and mourned the loss to 'woodchoppers' of 'thick and lofty pine and oak woods' that once 'completely surrounded' Walden Pond (1999 [1854]: 153, 154):

I would that our farmers when they cut down a forest felt some of that awe which the old Romans did when they came to thin, or let in the light to, a consecrated grove (*lucum conlucare*), that is, would believe that it is sacred to some god. The Roman made an expiatory offering, and prayed, Whatever god or goddess thou art to whom this grove is sacred, be propitious to me, my family and children (Thoreau 1999 [1854]: 199).

For Thoreau, the forest was clearly a place where he believed he could touch primordial elements raw, pure, and sacred. For him and many who followed in his footsteps, such as environmental philosopher (and Christian) Holmes Rolston, 'The forest is a kind of church':

Trees pierce the sky, like cathedral spires... The forest canopy is lofty, far above our heads. There is something about being deep in the woods, with the ground under one's feet and no roof over one's head, that generates religious experience... In common with churches, forests, like sea and sky, invite transcending the human world and experiencing a comprehensive, embracing realm. Forests can serve as a more provocative, perennial sign of this than many of the traditional, often outworn, symbols devised by the churches (Rolston 1998: 164).

*Neo-romantic Arborphilia:  
The Tree of Souls and 'Frightfully Tree-ish' Fangorn Forest*

*'Avatar' Arborphilia*

As professed in the mid-nineteenth century by Thoreau, propounded by Euro-American romanticism, and more recently revisioned by New Age neo-romantics, arborphilia continues to be alive and well in Europe and the Americas. Nor is the worship of trees and forests restricted to religious traditions: the arts, including film, have proven to be bountiful founts of arborphilia. Bron Taylor is among those who have called notice to the wildly successful *Avatar* (Cameron 2009), which provided an example of 'the human affection for trees in two critical ways': first, it demonized 'the desecrating invaders while evoking in audiences emotional horror at the obliteration of the ultimate old growth, "Home-tree"; second, it depicted 'a Tree of Souls as the most holy of all places where the final stand for all that is good would be made' (2013a: 240-41). Perhaps even more notably, the Tree of Souls was 'a powerful metaphor for a Gaian spirituality in which the interconnection and mutual dependence of all life provides spiritual and ethical guidance for a live-and-let-live biosphere ethics' that in some circumstances motivates people as environmental activists (Taylor 2013a: 241). Taylor was quick to point out that arborphilia 'was hardly innovative in *Avatar*, but [it] has been a common refrain both in the mainstreams of the world's predominant religions and at their mystical and countercultural margins' (2013a: 241).

*Tolkien's Arborphilia*

Medieval historian J.R.R. Tolkien's work, including the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (novels that also became popular motion pictures) and particularly Part 2: *The Two Towers*, was also exemplary of arborphilia, which is not surprising given his avowed tree veneration. Indeed, Tolkien once referenced *LOTR* as 'my own internal Tree' (in Curry 2000: 282). 'I have among my "papers"', he once wrote, 'more than one version of a mythical "tree", which crops up regularly at those times when I feel driven to pattern-designing... The tree bears besides various shapes of leaves many flowers small and large signifying poems and major legends' (Tolkien 1981: 321, 342). According to ecocritic Patrick Curry, Tolkien's personal 'totem' was a birch tree, which was sacred to indigenous people throughout North America, Europe, and Asia—essentially, wherever it grew (2000: 282).

The arborphilia exemplified by *LOTR* may also be based on Tolkien's extensive knowledge of mythology and fairytales, particularly Old European and Celtic, which, as postulated herein, prominently featured tree,

forest, and sacred-grove motifs. Celtic tree veneration was demonstrated by their assigning divine status to certain trees (MacCulloch 2003 [1911]). Druids, or Celtic priest-shamans, were thought to use oak boughs in their rituals, and 'the Irish *bile* or sacred tree, connected with the kings, [could] not be touched by any impious hand, and it was sacrilege to cut it down' (MacCulloch 2003 [1911]: 162). The proscription against breaking branches or tree-felling was a recurring motif in *The Two Towers*, as when Aragorn (or Legolas in the film) exhorted his comrades to 'cut no living wood' (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 37). Moreover, whereas Christian author Tolkien's love of nature would be surprising to some, there existed precedence for it in the Irish Patron Saint Columcille (521–597), who was so enamored of his oak grove, 'he would not allow it to be cleared even to build a church' (Heaney 1994: 237). For this reason, the first church Columcille built 'was not facing due east as was the custom, because that would have entailed the felling of trees' (Heaney 1994: 237). Could Columcille have been an early Christian conservationist?

No doubt because of their hardness, durability, and provision of acorns as a food source, oak woods were particularly favored for sacred groves: Maximus of Tyre (second century CE) spoke of the Celtic or possibly German image of Zeus as 'a lofty oak', and an early Irish name for God was *daur*, or 'oak' (MacCulloch 2003 [1911]: 198). The Celts also worshipped other tree species, including the yew, cypress, alder, ash, hazel, and rowan (2003 [1911]: 198). In the mythic 'Finn Cycle', the rowan was a magic tree whose berries fell into a pool and were eaten by a salmon that, when consumed by someone, provided the person with an 'understanding of everything in the world, past, present, and future' (Heaney 1994: 163). In one part of the story (Heaney 1994: 190–91), the hero Diarmuid found a rowan grove and cut a straight rod from one of the trees to make a fishing pole with which he caught salmon that had eaten the rowan berries. Finn, Diarmuid's enemy, then demanded his underlings to bring him a 'fistful of berries from the rowan tree of Dubhros', a magic tree that

grew out of a berry from a tree in the Land of Promise that the Tuatha De Danaan [the mythic original people of Ireland] dropped as they passed by the place... A person who eats three of them will be free from sickness and injury. He will feel as satisfied and exhilarated as if he had been drinking wine or ale, and even if he's a hundred years of age he'll feel like a thirty-year-old again (Heaney 1994: 198).

The dilemma was that the magic rowan tree of Dubhros was guarded by a fierce giant who lived—where else?—but at the top of the tree. But Diarmuid prevailed over the giant, ate the berries, and rose 'like a bird',

sailing 'out over the heads of the men below' (Heaney 1994: 204). The magic rowan thus functioned for the Irish as a mythopoeic tree-of-life cognate.

Folklore study also revealed a cult of the sacred ash known as *Fir Bile*, 'men of the tree', which connected the lives of kings and trees (MacCulloch 2003 [1911]: 201). This identification between men and trees was clearly illustrated in a poem praising a lost love that the captive Derdriu, a character from the Irish epic *The Táin*, repeated whenever musicians were sent to cheer her up: 'His cropped gold fleece I loved, and fine form—a tall tree' (Kinsella 1969: 17). For the Celts, the hero, the king, and the tree were thus linked spiritually in a manner similar to that described in the Osiris myth and fairytale mythologem.

In the chapter 'Cúchulainn's Courtship of Emer and his Training in Arms' from *The Táin* (Kinsella 1969: 25-39), the heroic Irish warrior ventured to Alba<sup>12</sup> to 'study the warrior's art' with 'Scáthach, the Shadowy One', which would enable him to 'beat any hero in Europe' (1969: 28). In other words, Scáthach was a Druid 'prophetess' or shamaness, and Cúchulainn wanted to learn her trade (1969: 30). Cúchulainn learned from Scáthach's daughter that if he really desired to 'learn heroic deeds', he had to find Scáthach's teaching tree, 'give his hero's "salmon-leap"<sup>13</sup> up to the big yew-tree' where she was relaxing, and demand thorough training (1969: 30). As this story indicates, tree climbing—or in this case, tree *leaping*—was practiced by mythical Celtic heroes and Druids in much the same way that it was by the shamans and fairytale hero/ines described above, and for the same reasons: self-transformation.

Because of Tolkien's apparent affinity with Celtic and Saxon mythology, it is unsurprising that part of the success of his work has been attributed to his 'involvement with trees [that] combined the mythically resonant with the personally poignant in a way which led to an extraordinarily vivid depiction in art' (Curry 2000: 282). Tolkien's trees, however, were 'never just symbols'; their uniqueness conveyed the individuality and 'vulnerability of "real" trees' (Curry 2000: 283). In their ambivalence, they are archetypal, harking back to the medieval legendary forests of Tolkien's ancestors—arguably his 'family tree'. One particular favorite specimen of Tolkien's was a 'great-limbed poplar tree' outside his house in the late 1930s, which inspired his short story, 'Leaf by Niggle' (Tolkien 1988: 6). Tolkien reported ironically that the poplar

12. Alba is identified by some as Scotland and by others to include parts of Ireland (e.g., Heaney 1994; Kinsella 1969).

13. The 'salmon-leap' was a feat that enabled the hero to travel superhuman distances in any direction.

was ‘suddenly lopped and mutilated by its owner, I do not know why. It is cut down now, a less barbarous punishment for any crimes it may have been accused of, such as being large and alive’ (1988: 6). For Tolkien, trees obviously had profound historical, mythological, and psychological roots. Middle-earth’s Old Forest was not so-named ‘without reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods’—forests that by the Third Age were already gone (Tolkien 1991 [1954]: 179).

As *LOTR* begins, one of the few remaining Middle-earth forests, Fangorn—named after the leader there of the tree beings known as Ents—is under threat. Fangorn, who was also known as Treebeard, claimed about the evil Wizard Saruman that he

and his henchmen are down on the borders...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 [*sic*] now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 76).

In depicting this devastated forest, Tolkien apparently envisioned a revolt by environmental activists—in this case the Ents of Fangorn Forest—who at one point became so enraged by the desolation of their arboreal homeland that they fought back (e.g., Taylor 2010, 2013a). At the same time, Tolkien made clear just how atavistic and sacred Fangorn Forest was, even as he conjured images not unlike Dante’s anthropomorphic, infernal wood:

North-westward stalked the dark forest of Fangorn... A little way beyond the battle-field they [Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli] made their camp under a spreading tree: it looked like a chestnut, and yet it still bore many broad brown leaves of a former year, like dry hands with long splayed fingers; they rattled mournfully in the night-breeze... To each of the companions the [chestnut’s] boughs appeared to be bending this way and that... There was a silence, for suddenly the dark and unknown forest, so near at hand, made itself felt as a great brooding presence, full of secret purpose (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 23, 37, 38).

By personifying the chestnut tree and emphasizing the lack of light and forebodingness of Fangorn Forest, Tolkien presented a Dantesque treescape. At the same time, in recognition of its sacredness, Aragorn advised the others, ‘Remember, it is perilous to cut bough or twig from a living tree in Fangorn’ (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 38). Tolkien thus contrasted a *resanctified* nature with the one desecrated by Saruman.

Meanwhile, the hobbits seemed to have gone ‘astray in the woods’ as well (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 37). With Merry leading the way, they began noticing the

huge branches of the trees. Old beyond guessing, they seemed. Great trailing beards of lichen hung from them, blowing and swaying in the breeze[:] little furtive figures that in the dim light looked like elf-children in the deeps of time peering out of the Wild Wood in wonder at their first Dawn (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 59).

Freaked out by this sight, the ‘hobbits turned and fled deep into the shadows of the wood’, running as fast ‘as the dark and tangled forest allowed’ (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 59, 61). Compared to Mirkwood, which ‘was all dark and black, and the home of dark black things’, Fangorn was

Just dim, and *frightfully tree-ish*... The wood now gleamed with rich browns, and with the smooth black-greys of bark like polished leather. The boles of the trees glowed with a soft green like young grass: early spring or a fleeting vision of it was about them (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 62, italics added).

And then there was Treebeard. Of all Tolkien’s characters, he was perhaps the most intriguing, brought imaginatively to life as ‘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 (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 64).

And this Man-Troll-Tree spoke: when asked who or what he was by the hobbits, he responded, ‘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’ (Tolkien 1994 [1954]: 64). By presenting himself this way—as a Man-Troll-Tree—Treebeard exemplified an archetypal forest figure: the tree-numen, who often appeared in folklore as an old man who lived alone in the woods (Jung 1980 [1959]: §406).

Tolkien’s arborphilia in *LOTR* was further exhibited in Treebeard’s chant, in which the head Ent associated tree species with places and seasons: ‘willow-meads of Tasarinan’ (in spring), ‘elm-woods of

Ossiriand' (in summer), 'beeches of Nedoreth' (in autumn), and 'pine-trees upon the highland of Dorthonion' (in winter) (1994 [1954]: 70-71). As evergreens, pines were particularly revered by the Ents. In one scene featuring Treebeard ushering the hobbits to his domicile, they came across two huge trees (an arboreal two towers?) standing 'like living gateposts; but there was no gate save their crossing and interwoven boughs':

As the old Ent approached, the trees lifted up their branches, and all their leaves quivered and rustled. For they were evergreen trees, and their leaves were dark and polished, and gleamed in the twilight... Looking back, the hobbits saw that the trees in the court had also begun to glow, faintly at first, but steadily quickening, until every leaf was edged with light: some green, some gold, some red as copper; while the tree-trunks looked like pillars moulded [*sic*] out of luminous stone (1994 [1954]: 71, 72).

The tree trunks that appeared as stone pillars certainly evoked an image of Greek columns. In fact, the film captured this motif in a memorable scene featuring the heroic protagonist, Aragorn, and his lady love, the immortal Arwen, surrounded by columns and trees, as if they were in a sacred forest analogous to the one depicted by Turner in his *Golden Bough*. But Tolkien did not stop his cataloguing of tree species here; as the hobbits continued their foray through Fangorn, they saw 'thickets of birch and rowan' and even more unusual pines described as 'dark climbing pinewoods' that 'looked like an impenetrable wall of dark evergreen trees, trees of a kind that the hobbits had never seen before: they branched out right from the roots, and were densely clad in dark glossy leaves like thornless holly' (1994 [1954]: 83). And in another part of the forest 'there were no trees except three very tall and beautiful silver-birches that stood at the bottom' (1994 [1954]: 84).

### *Tree-People of Antiquity*

Tree-people in the human imagination go back in time at least to Ovid, who related the metamorphoses of the *bacchantes*—the women who followed Bacchus (a cognate of the Greek Dionysos)—into trees as punishment for their role in the death of Orpheus (1993: XI.69-79). In descriptions that conjure perverse sexuality, Bacchus first bound the women with 'twisting roots', then thrust them 'tight and hard into the sold ground':

each woman was  
held fast within the soil; and when she sought,  
in fear to free herself, the pliant root  
gripped even harder every time she shook.  
When any woman asked where were her toes,

her nails, her feet, the tree bark simply rose;  
 she watched it climb along her tender thighs;  
 she tried to beat those thighs in sign of grief,  
 but all she did was pound against a tree;  
 Her breast and shoulders now were wooden too;  
 you could have taken—not mistakenly—  
 her arms to be the boughs of an oak tree (Ovid 1993: XI.70-79).

Being turned into a tree was not always considered punishment, however. Ovid also related the story of Philemon and Baucis, who were rewarded for their obeisance to the gods by having their home turned into a ‘temple’: ‘In place of those forked poles that had sustained the roof, now marble columns stood’<sup>14</sup> (1993: VIII.691-722). Later, as the couple approached old age,

Old Baucis saw that boughs were covering Philemon, even as the old Philemon saw his dear Baucis covered by green boughs. One treetop covered both their faces now...bark had sealed their lips. And Phrygian farmers still will show two trunks that stand beside each other, two that once were Baucis’ and Philemon’s bodies (1993: VIII.691-722).

The tree–human analogy was additionally noted in Ovid’s tale of Orpheus, the divine musician, who attracted a veritable catalogue of tree species for an audience when he sang in grief for his lost love, Eurydice:

Together with the tree  
 of the Chaonians,<sup>15</sup> these came to listen;  
 the tall and leafy *oak*, the tender *linden*;  
 the *poplar*, shape that suited Helios’ daughters;  
 the *willow*, most at home near flowing waters;  
 the virgin *laurel*, *beech*, and brittle *hazel*;  
 the *ash*, so fit for fashioning spear shafts;  
 the silver-*fir* with its smooth trunk, the *myrtle*  
 with its two hues, and the delightful *platan*;  
 the *maple* with its shifting colors, and  
 the water-loving lotus, evergreen  
*boxwood*, as well as slender *tamarisk*;  
 and with its deep-blue berries, the *viburnum*;  
 and bent beneath its acorns’ weight, the *ilex*.  
 You, ivy, with your feet that twist and flex,  
 came, too; and at your side came tendrils rich

14. Ovid’s lines offer further evidence that columns eventually supplanted wooden poles in sacred edifices.

15. The Chaonians were a collective of ancient Greek tribes who inhabited the northwest region of modern Greece and southern Albania. The oak trees of Dodona in Chaonia were reportedly sacred to Zeus and believed to be prophetic (Hubbard 2003: 378).

with clustered grapes, and *elm* trees draped with vines;  
 the mountain-*ash*, the pitch-*pine*, the *arbutus*  
 red with its fruits, the pliant *palm*, the prize  
 of victors; and that *pine* which tucks its boughs  
 up high to form its shaggy crown—the tree  
 dear to the mother of the gods, Cybele,  
 If it be true that Attis, for her sake,  
 shed his own human form, that he might take  
 the stiff trunk of that *pine* as his new shape.  
 The cone-shaped *cypress* joined this crowd of trees:  
 though now a tree, it once had been a boy— (Ovid 1993: X.90-105, italics  
 added).

The use of ‘arms’ as a trope for the boughs of a tree was not Ovid’s sole invention; it was noted by Evans regarding Siamese Buddhist monks, who believed ‘that there are souls everywhere, and that to destroy anything whatever is forcibly to dispossess a soul’, and would not break a branch of a tree, ‘as they [would] not break the arm of an innocent person’ (Evans 2008 [1901]: IX.4).<sup>16</sup>

### *Arborphilia and Environmental Ethics*

Perceived deficiencies of literary faithfulness notwithstanding, *The Two Towers* warrants attention for its projection of an environmental ethos. Film critic Joe Stramondo (2011 [2003]) claimed that the real value of the film lay in its correspondences between Middle-earth and our contemporary ‘global community. In director Peter Jackson’s (2002) vision of Tolkien’s work, environmentalism was key. Even before the Ents were introduced as Tolkien’s race of ancient but very sentient tree-like men, a distaste for the destruction of ecosystems is apparent’. Stramondo (2011 [2003]) cited the simple hobbit lifestyle along with that of the elves as examples of this ecological ethos: ‘The elves are the embodiment of grace, dignity, and an almost divine goodness as they live in complete harmony with nature’. Elvish society ‘dwells among the forest, their architecture very organic in style, blending with its surroundings’ (Stramondo 2011 [2003]). This environmental theme was highlighted even more by the Ents and Treebeard, who were ultimately driven to retaliate against evil-doer Saruman for his crimes against nature.<sup>17</sup>

16. Nor are tree people a figment only of the European imagination; trees are personified and sacred in India (Haberman 2010, 2013).

17. Shakespeare (2014a, 2014b) made notable use as well of the tree-person trope in *Macbeth*. As Malcolm and his loyal troops prepare to march on Macbeth’s castle at Dunsinane, he instructed each man to cut a branch from Birnam Wood as an arboreal

Not surprisingly, Tolkien has been popular with the New Age, back-to-nature, anti-megacorporation activists since the 1960s. His loving attention to the natural landscape was manifested in the forests, fields, pools, mountains, gorges, and caves depicted throughout the text. Yet, nature in *The Lord of the Rings* was more than merely a setting; it was a character, or rather, *characters*. As such, its mirroring of the disastrous period before the War of the Ring reveals the state of the world today. To achieve this imagery, Tolkien borrowed from romantic poetry a depth psychological concept in which the external world reflects the collective unconscious, and the catastrophic conflict portrayed—especially cinematically—paralleled the characters' *psychic* crises. Part of Tolkien's genius, I suggest, lay in his ability to express this insight so clearly: by acknowledging that all aspects, both negative and positive, of the external world echo the internal, psychic world, a certain comprehension of reality obtains. Harrison (1992: 227) put it succinctly: 'All that is to be learned about what is real and not real lies in the exteriority of our inner lives. Nature is the setting of this exteriority, if only because it is that to which we remain external.' In other words, our perceptions of nature are projections of our often ambivalent preconceptions.

*Seeing the Forest for, of, and with the Trees:  
Concluding Remarks*

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,  
All alone stood it, and the moss hung down from the branches,  
Without any companion it grew there, glistening out joyous leaves of dark  
green,  
And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself (Whitman  
2003 [1860]).

The discussion of myth and folklore has hopefully reinforced the notion that humans have often revered and romanticized trees, a quasi-empathic association that has arguably facilitated a deep-rooted need to identify with and consequently preserve trees and groves around the world. Archetypal psychologist James Hillman (2004) likened the contemporary

camouflage: 'What wood is this before us? / The wood of Birnam. / Let every soldier hew him down a bough / And bear't before him: thereby shall we shadow [hide] / our true numbers and avoid discovery (V.IV.4-8). Macbeth had been warned about such a possibility in the preceding act when the third apparition—a child wearing a crown and holding a tree—had said, 'Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill [Macbeth's castle] / Shall come against him' (IV.I.92-94). Macbeth failed to take heed, however, erroneously figuring that nothing could move a forest.

environmentalist impulse to archaic paganism, both of which for him demonstrated the allocation of psychological subjectivity to the outer, non-human world, including the world of nature. If we define paganism as ‘the people of a place and defenders of this-place-here against the alienation brought by universalist science and religion’, then ‘The place consciousness and place priority of environmentalism is paganism up-to-date: tree-huggers recapitulating the tree-worshippers of sacred groves’ (Hillman 2004 [1983]: 77-78). Hillman’s concept of paganism compares favorably with what Taylor has called Dark Green Religion in his eponymous book (2010).

For these reasons, I suggest a neo-romantic approach to environmental ethics that is tempered with science. While it may be true that forests and trees can be enjoyed without knowing, for example, their taxonomical names, I find that I appreciate them far more once I know scientific information like species and eco-place, or how they fit into their ecological niches. This is because knowing arboreal taxonomy enables my identification of a tree’s ecosystem and consequently, that of the flora and fauna nearby or on it—facts that for me are indispensable to a successful coexistence with nature, or what I call ‘indigenization’.

Although author John Fowles claimed that he was ‘a heretic about Linnaeus’ in that he believed naming trees was an anthropocentric behavior that ‘detach[ed] an object from its surroundings’ (1990 [1979]: 658), he ultimately came to understand ‘that the key to [his] fiction’ lay in his ‘relationship with nature [and] in trees’, and a great part of this bonding came from knowing their Linnaean names and the ‘society’ they kept (1990 [1979]: 661):

We feel, or think we feel, nearest to a tree’s ‘essence’ (or that of its species) when it chances to stand like us, in isolation; but evolution did not intend trees to grow singly. Far more than ourselves they are social creatures, and no more natural as isolated specimens than [are humans]... The true wood, the true place of any kind, is the sum of all its phenomena. They are all in some sense symbiotic, being together in a togetherness of beings (Fowles 1990 [1979]: 659).

Rolston put this holistic notion accordingly:

To understand a forest, one needs concepts, such as carbon bonding, oxidation, oxygen balance, photosynthesis, and knowledge of glucose, cellulose, or nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous. Science takes away the colors, if you insist; apart from beholders, there is no autumn splendor or spring green. But science gives us the trees solidly there, photosynthesizing without us, energetically vital to the system of life of which we are also a part (1998: 161).

For Rolston, science secularized the forest, but only in terms of being 'no longer enchanted' (1998: 164). Yet, the forest remained 'strangely resistant to being secularized in the etymological sense of that term, being reduced to "this present age" (Latin *saeculum*), or in any reductionist or profane senses either' (Rolston 1998: 164):

The spirit of place returns. Science leaves us puzzled whether the values in the woods are intrinsic or instrumental, and if intrinsic whether they are anthropogenic and projected onto the trees or autonomously intrinsic and found by the forest beholder, whose aesthetic experience tunes him or her in to what is going on. The forest is there, but so also is the person here, trying to figure it all out. The answers seem to lie in terms of what is discovered in the forests, not merely in terms of what preferences we adopt toward it. But when value is discovered there, the forest as archetype, as spontaneously self-organizing, as generator of life, not merely as resource, but as Source of being, the forest starts to become a sacrament of something beyond, something ultimate in, with, and under these cathedral groves. The forest has a way of spontaneously re-enchanting itself. Forests are not haunted, but that does not mean that there is nothing haunting about forests (Rolston 1998: 164-65).

Indeed, Rolston's mythopoeic verbiage may be understood as 're-enchanting' the forests with the spirituality they always enjoyed but was rendered invisible and imperceptible in the modern, urbanized world.

Thus it may be seen that studying mythopoeic narratives for the ways in which they impart, or do not, ecological information, including how we perceive our arboreal environment, is a fruitful endeavor given our looming ecocrisis, which has motivated many to search for solutions to it. I have also endeavored to establish that forests, groves, and trees continue to obtain potent power in the imagination, as exemplified by the myths of Egypt's *djed*-pillar cults and of Artemis, Asherah, and Celtic post-worshippers; by Dante's *Commedia*; by medieval folktales; by Morrison's *Beloved*; by *The Lord of the Rings*; by the stage production *Tree*; by the films *Tree of Life* and *Avatar*; and most recently by the HBO series *True Detective*. The investigation of these narratives has ostensibly demonstrated that

Given their deep roots in human history, it is no cultural accident that trees, groves, and forests continue to occupy an important place in the human mind and heart. Indeed, they have long been central to the spiritual and moral imagination of our species. And it appears that, even though we have dramatically reduced the number and diversity of trees on planet Earth, for many of us, they remain important affectively, spiritually, politically, and ethically (Taylor 2013a: 241).

Taylor suggested that, assuming the significance of trees to humans, if we continue to eradicate them from the earth,<sup>18</sup> we could suffer dire consequences—not only *ecologically*, but *psychologically*. To have ‘roots’, as in Taylor’s above trope, is to be firmly attached to some *place*, whether concrete or—in Taylor’s usage—abstract, in memory. For, ‘The Self is the tree—that which is greater than the ego’ (von Franz 1995 [1974]: 43). And to speak of ‘rootedness’ to a particular location or region is to evoke arboreal imagery with spiritual connotations. Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday illustrated this notion when describing Ko-sahn, a tribal elder:

This landscape, in which she had lived for a hundred years, was the common denominator of everything that she knew and would ever know—and her knowledge was profound. Her *roots* ran deep into the earth, and from those depths she drew strength enough to hold still against all the forces of chance and disorder. And she drew therefrom the sustenance of meaning and of mystery as well (1993 [1970]: 611, italics added).

That ‘roots’ happen to symbolize human groundedness and place attachment is no accident: in many shamanic traditions, trees were employed not so much as ‘ladders’ to the sky but as access to the underworld. Ethnologist Michael Harner, for example, explicated the ‘basic form’ of the shamanic journey as through an ‘entrance into the Lowerworld’ that for some California Indians ‘was a hollow tree stump’ (1982: 31, 32). Similarly, the Arunta (Aranda) of Australia gained entry to the underworld through a hollow tree, and the Conibo Indians of Peru followed the roots of the giant *catahua* tree into the ground (Harner 1982: 32). Along this line, because the ash has ‘peculiarly wide-spreading roots’, it may have been chosen as the World Tree Yggdrasill, whose roots were believed to extend down to the underworld (Davidson 1988: 170). Conversely, to be ‘uprooted’ is to be ‘disoriented’, according to Momaday: ‘One effect of the Technological Revolution has been to *uproot* us from the soil... We have suffered a kind of psychic dislocation of ourselves in time and space’ (1993 [1970]: 610, italics added). To extend the metaphor even further, being ‘out on a limb’ represents figuratively being in a vulnerable position.

Clearly, as Walt Whitman (2003 [1860]) poetically noted in the excerpt above from his poem, ‘Live Oak, with Moss’, the trope of self-as-tree has taken root in the imagination and was beautifully articulated by Sandra Cisneros’s narrator, Esperanza, in an excerpt from her novel, *The House on Mango Street*:

18. One study estimates ‘a net loss of ten billion trees a year’—mostly from human activities such as logging—a rate that if continued will mean the extermination of all trees on earth in 300 years (Borenstein 2015).

They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city. From our room we can hear them.

Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep.

Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be (Cisneros 1993 [1984]: 419-20).

For Esperanza, identifying with the ‘four skinny trees’ on her street allowed her to maintain a sense of equilibrium in the otherwise senseless universe surrounding her.<sup>19</sup> Esperanza’s tree narrative gave her the hope and strength to deal with life’s mundane and often disagreeable realities—a dynamic found in the Osiris myth, as explained by Neumann (1973 [1954]). By providing a potent embodiment of self-transformation, the Osiris myth demonstrated how critically trees figured in the ancient Egyptian imagination. As Neumann pointed out,

The story of Osiris is the first self-delineation of this process of personality transformation, whose counterpart is the visible emergence of the spiritual principle from the natural or biological principle. It is no accident that in the figure of Osiris we can see a matriarchal life-affirming world changing into a patriarchal one, where the accent falls on spirit (1973 [1954]: 222).

In Dante’s *Commedia* we also found the world changing, but this time into one with a dominant Christian ethos that demonized the woods; in Grimms’ fairytales, we perceived the world changing yet again, as forests were re-enchanted with female heroines (R.P. Harrison 1992: 168). And finally, in neo-romantic narratives such as Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, we discovered a longing for Paradise that re-animated the spirits of the forest, or *genius loci*, who were once thought to inhabit the sacred groves. If our environment is a projection of psyche, as the depth psychologists believe, then each re-visioning of the woods represents a concomitant transformation in the collective unconscious. This *transformative value* of nature is theorized as well by environmental philosopher Bryan Norton

19. For another narrative about conversing with trees, see Stuckey 2010. And for the hit song, ‘I Talk to the Trees’, from the movie *Paint Your Wagon* (1969) and sung by Clint Eastwood, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn8YubD01sk>.

(1990), who suggested that empathic nature-experiences can motivate more ecoethical views and behavior.<sup>20</sup> In other words, by viewing trees neo-romantically, we may be inspired toward pro-environmental attitudes and actions.

But just as dreaming, speaking, hearing, writing, and reading mythopoeic narratives can be transformational, so can viewing them. Taylor observed, 'It could well be that the cinematic arts provide the most powerful medium for myth making in the modern world' (2013b: 322). S. Brent Plate extended the notion of cinema's mythopoeic capabilities by articulating how it aspires to 'world-encompassing visions of the *nomos* and *cosmos*':

Cinema allows us to see in new ways, through new technologies, re-creating the world anew, telescoping the macrocosmic past and far away, and bringing these visions to bear on the microcosmic structures in the here and now. Filmmakers, artists, scientists, authors, and the rest of us seek to legitimate personal stories and grander histories. Such legitimations are found in words, but equally so in images. By re-viewing some historical imagery, we find new and very old ways of mythologizing, which is to say: finding our lives relevant beyond ourselves, in the past, present, and future, in word and image (Plate 2012: 535).

Because film has such 'affective power', it serves 'an ethical function' to renew humanity's relationship to the world' (Taylor 2013b: 323). It also functions to revitalize our relationships with each other, because it is through mythopoeic stories that people bond with others not only on an *interpersonal* level, as they identify with the teller-protagonist, but on an *intrapersonal* level: that is, psychically. Such uniting and convincing through myth suggests that the coming together for a common cause like environmentalism can only take place when there exists an embedded ethos within a guiding narrative that is recognized and internalized within a community. Like the uprising of the Na'vi to defend Pandora in *Avatar*, the revolt of the Ents to defend Fangorn Forest clearly demonstrated this phenomenon.<sup>21</sup>

As with *Avatar*, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy has been dismissed for sentimentalizing forests and trees. They are in good company, however;

20. See also Devall and Sessions 1985; Naess 1989; Callicott 2011; Leopold 1949.

21. For example, Roger Gottlieb (2006) calls such spiritual action 'religious environmentalism', Hillman (2006) names it 'responsive environmentalism', and Taylor, 'eco-spiritual activism' (2013a: 241). In Sweden such activism has led to the establishment of an 'eco-park' (Ernstson 2009). Indeed, 'The strong moralistic element of American environmentalism...has convinced [many]...that environmentalism does, in fact, constitute a kind of religion' (Stoll 2012: 271). For more on this dynamic in *Avatar*, see Greenberg 2013.

Darwin was scorned for his tree-of-life theory for the same reason. According to science correspondent Ian Sample of *The Guardian*, modern genetics has indicated that symbolizing evolution as a tree is 'misleading' because the origins and interrelatedness of species are more realistically represented as an 'impenetrable thicket' (2009). Furthermore, maintained evolutionary biologist Eric Baptiste, 'We have no evidence at all that the tree of life is a reality' (in Sample 2009). Such responses are only all too common among many postmodernists, who consistently challenge any perspective that even remotely smacks of sentimentalizing ancient traditions (e.g., Lertzman 2010; F. Harrison 1991; Smith 1995, 2001). For example, Fraser Harrison (1991) accused those seeking "'new communion with nature [of] indulging in fatuous romanticism'" (in Curry 2000: 286).

Nonetheless, a growing coterie of advocates consider romanticism indispensable for environmentalism, possibly accounting for its revival in ecocritical discourse (e.g., Bate 1996; Coupe 2000; Hay 1988). This may be partly because many, as did ecopsychologist Theodor Roszak, are acknowledging the importance of the 'subjective aspect of human relationships in the natural environment' (Snell, Simmonds, and Webster 2011: 106) as opposed to the strictly objective approach favored by science. Subjectivity is, of course, the hallmark of romanticism, of which Roszak was an avid proponent. For Roszak, the Romantic Movement was a 'healthier alternative to the scientific worldview of urban-industrial culture' (Snell, Simmonds, and Webster 2011: 107). In *The Making of the Counter Culture* (1970), he proposed spiritual questing and experiencing oneness as ways to surmount a domineering scientific worldview. By focusing on experiences of the sacred, individuals would 'realize that the objective mode of consciousness, useful as it is on occasion, cuts them off from too much that is valuable' (Roszak 1970: 235). Yet, Roszak resisted dismissing the scientific method altogether: 'scientific thinking should be included as one part of a greater vision of reality that values and investigates multiple models of experience and knowledge, particularly the sacred and spiritual' (Snell, Simmonds, and Webster 2011: 107). In this way, Roszak strove to re-place the sciences into the ancient mythologies in which they once resided for eons before the Greek philosophers deracinated myths of their inherent disciplines, including the prototypical forms of astronomy, psychology, meteorology, biology, and so on.

As a result of these two-thousand-year-old events, we now find ourselves craving ecoethical mythic narratives to explain the world and unify us, a situation that has arguably been exacerbated by the post-modern project, which scorns what are termed 'metanarratives' (Aden 1999). For this reason, rhetorician Roger C. Aden (1999) favored a romantic approach to balance what he viewed as problems with the

postmodern critique. Because of postmodernism's *deconstruction* of modernism's grand narratives, new narrative and mythic *reconstruction*, including the narrative of romantic spirituality, is being sought. For romantic narratives offer 'a stable, communal place through spirit; [and] the sacred garden community of others is the site of promised lands. These narratives are often cyclical in nature, promising a return to a natural, sacred home as one travels through life' (Aden 1999: 43). Such stories are of paramount import, for a culture cannot sustain itself without a meta- or 'grand' narrative, as Aden pointed out:

Each of us *must* subscribe to some form of grand narrative in order to function within a culture that, paradoxically, seems to discount grand narratives. Each of us requires a sense of *telos*, or purpose, and we typically find such *telos* in the stories that help us to envision promised lands (1999: 49, italics original).

To the extent that nostalgia is defined as a romantic impulse, romantic narratives are nostalgic in their culling 'gardenic images of the past to make sense of the present' (Aden 1999: 43; see also R.P. Harrison 1992: 155-56). Neo-romantic narratives thus offer rhetorical responses to the inadequacies of both modern and postmodern narratives, thereby mediating them.<sup>22</sup>

Objecting to the notion that romanticism and postmodernism are polar opposites, geographer Denis Cosgrove identified 'new romanticism' or 'green ideology' as one of 'the most environmentally sensitive of the many ideological strands identifiable within post-modernism' (1990: 353). Rather than distinct from and *outside* postmodern ideology, romanticism may be understood as but one of sundry elements *within* the postmodern project. Cosgrove believed that romanticism's 'holistic perspective' was salvageable specifically because postmodernism has exposed us to 'non-linear logic', liberating us from the 'tyranny of subject and object, appearance and reality, surface and depth' (1990: 353). Such linking of postmodernism with romanticism is arguably responsible for the 'emergence and growing socio-political impact of contemporary environmentalism' (Cosgrove 1990: 354). Yet, Cosgrove made clear that neo-romanticism is not about merely seeking 'some romantic primitivism, an escape into pure *poesis*' (1990: 357, italics original). Rather than abnegating *techne*, neo-romanticism attempts to reconcile it with *poesis*, establishing both on a continuum and thereby resolving modernism's insistence upon diametric opposition. In this way, neo-romanticism

22. On the significance of stories for establishing self and community identity, see, for example, Taylor 1989: 48; Coles 1989; Callicott 2002; Berry 1990; Stuckey 2010; and Le Hunte and Golembiewski 2014, to name but a few.

distances itself from romanticism while concomitantly embracing its 'alternative language and psychology capable of explaining why a life entwined with natural landscapes and temporal rhythms offers deeper satisfactions than one addicted to intense sensory stimuli' (Hinchman and Hinchman 2007: 350). The neo-romantic ethos thus embeds 'an intuitive feel for the integrity of the life-world' (2007: 350).

It is precisely such an ecoethics that was advocated in *Avatar*, most overtly during the scene in which the ethnobotanist Grace Augustine pointed out that an 'electrochemical communication between the roots like synapses' existed on Pandora, giving the trees 'more connections than the human brain', providing a means of cultural rootedness and identity among the Na'vi that the invaders decidedly lacked. Once again, by comparing the root-like connections of the forest trees to synapses, arboreal imagery was invoked metaphorically.

A neo-romantic ethos was also propounded by Tolkien in *LOTR* and may be why the trilogy is so beloved by environmentalists. Tolkien understood the efficacy of telling, reading, and ultimately *watching* fairy stories, which, through the 'sub-creator's art'—the storytellers and those who revisioned the narratives—became *mythopoeic*, or myth-making (1966: 36-37). That said, literature rooted in myths and fairytales of the archaic past deserves to be taken seriously in our present situation. At worst it can offer 'escape, recovery, and consolation to a weary and disheartened age' (Tolkien in Zuck 1976: 308); at best it can inspire pro-environmental attitudes and behavior.

Meanwhile, detractors continue to look askance at those who admire *Avatar* and Tolkien as hopeless romantics pathologically nostalgic for a mythical Golden Age, but is it merely being nostalgic to spotlight flagrant unsustainability amid a looming ecocrisis and question whether this is really what we desire? In the long run, it may well be that neo-romantic longing for a time when all of nature was sacred and forests, groves, and trees were venerated is not pathological but pragmatic. Our survival as a species may depend on it.

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