LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

The Road Goes ever on and on: Re-reading The Lord of the Rings in Lockdown

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Perhaps naturally for an academic who researches mobility, who owns a boisterous golden retriever, and who lives in the countryside, I have spent much of my time over the summer months walking. First, under lockdown, then later, working from home, reeling like many from the topsy-turvy impacts of the lockdown on exams and marking, I found walking with my dog a chance to step back from the stresses of the moment. As someone who has spent relatively little time in my home village due to work-related travels, despite having lived in the Norfolk countryside for almost four years, walking through the fields and down the lanes hereabouts became for me a means of getting to know the area, its furrows and corners, its secrets and gestures, however belatedly.

Like many folks coping with the cumulative stresses and uncertainties of lockdown, I turned to reading old and favourite books, for their familiarity and comfort. I have read *The Lord of the Rings* through a number of times since my middle twenties, so re-reading this book is not out of character. However, this time I found myself dwelling more on the first 12-or-so chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which tell the story of Bilbo's departure from the Shire, Frodo's possession of the Ring and his own journey from Bag End towards Rivendell. Part of the attraction to me of these chapters has always been their picaresque, episodic nature. Frodo and his friends spend much of their time walking (and running, riding, and a small amount of ferry-paddling) on the Road, moving from adventure to adventure as they journey onwards. These chapters contain elements of the story that were summarily left out of Peter Jackson's film to avoid slowing it down, including the hobbits' famous encounter with Tom

Bombadil. In a story about the quest to destroy the One Ring and to save Middle-earth from evil, these chapters feel more like a prologue than a part of the main action.

Repeat readings of these chapters have also left me with a sense, perhaps unusual for someone reading Western culture's ur-fantasy novel, of realism inherent in the hobbits' journey. I do not mean that I would expect to encounter any hobbits as I walk out across the countryside near my house (they are far too small and move too softly to be seen, in any case). Rather, I mean that I find myself returning to these chapters in a time of global and emotional turmoil because they help to focus my attention on those elements of this world, of our world, that stand outside of the anxiety of 24-hour news coverage and political tit-for-tat: the woods, the paths and the wildlife that live in many ways apart from human concerns. This is, of course, fantasy's promise of escapism: a neo-medievalist promise that a world of elves, orcs and the Crownless King can help readers to cope with this world, in which Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* had to be written. For me, this affect is produced by the way in which Tolkien writes in these chapters about Frodo's adventures through the Shire and beyond. When Frodo, Sam and Pippin encounter the Elves in the forest near Woodhall, for example, Tolkien draws on his self-made mythology to enrich their world with poetic interpretations of the night sky. He writes:

> Away high in the East swung Remmirath, the Netted Stars, and slowly above the mists red Borgil rose, glowing like a jewel of fire. Then by some shift of airs all the mist was drawn away like a veil, and there leaned up, as he climbed over the rim of the world, the Swordsman of the Sky, Menelvagor with his shining belt. (Tolkien 2005: 81)

In contrast, when Tolkien writes about the hobbits' walking, the stars are never described as anything other than 'stars', the world covered by nothing more than ordinary twilight. These elements, so much closer to our own experiences of the coming of night in the actual world, help to draw the reader in to Frodo, Sam and Pippin's experiences and to make their wanderings *feel* much more real, more like the readers' own (that is, like my own) experiences of woodlands in evening.

My walking practices under lockdown have transformed how I read and re-read my favourite part of *The Lord of the Rings*. In particular, I find myself drawn to the power and importance of storytelling. These first chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first book of *The Lord of the Rings*, are also filled with stories, often told whilst walking. Frodo, Sam, Aragorn and those they meet spend many pages telling, chanting or singing stories – stories about walking, about bathing, about drinking and about home, in newly minted rhymes and age-old songs of lamentation. Stories work as metaphors to define the geographies of Middle-earth and its inhabitants. Gandalf, for instance, describes the evil land of Mordor as 'a shadow on the borders of old stories' for most hobbits; but he also tells stories to Frodo – of the Last Alliance of men and elves, of the finding of the Ring, and of his adventures on its trail - to better acquaint him with the history and geography of lands beyond the borders of his home and of the importance of his errand.

The telling of stories, particularly in these early chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, help to bind characters to places, both where they currently are and where they come from, and to each other. All of the stories related by different characters in these early chapters are performances - in both senses of the word: they are told out loud to an audience, of one or more, in speech, or chanting or in song as a deliberate act; they also express literary geographies' understanding of stories as performances (see Hones 2008, 2014; McLaughlin 2018; Rose 2016) in that they involve multiple actors, experience and memories and, in the process of telling, co-produce new spaces. Each story is performed in a particular place and time for a particular reason, and these places and times, as well as the character of the storytellers, work with the texts themselves to enact the story and the spaces it produces, whether imaginative or actual-world.

Good examples of the affective power of Middle-earth stories to create bonds between characters and places, near and far, can be found in the chapter 'Three is Company', which tell the story of Frodo, Sam and Merry Brandybuck starting their walk across the Shire, from Bag End in Hobbiton to Crickhollow in the Buckland, on their way, eventually, out of the Shire and east towards Rivendell. Walking through the dark, in a country they know well, but already missing the comforts of warm beds and a roof over their heads, the hobbits together sing a walking song. It goes in part:

> Upon the hearth the fire is red,
> Beneath the roof there is a bed;
> But not yet weary are our feet…
>
> Still round the corner there may wait
> A new road or a secret gate,
> And though we pass them by today,
> Tomorrow we may come this way
> And take the hidden paths that run
> Towards the Moon or to the Sun.
>
> (Tolkien 2005: 77)

Performed together, this song acts both as an expression of their feeling at ease in the Shire, their collective home, as well as a means of connecting their walking to both the comforts of home - hearth and bed - and to the anticipatory excitement of discovering new paths and new ways. A short while after first encountering what the narrator describes as this 'walking-song (though not, of course, without any mention of supper and bed)' (Tolkien 2005: 77), the hobbits path is crossed by a group of elves, journeying towards the Grey Havens and on to their immortal home in the West of the world. With this encounter, the reader is introduced to a different kind of story - a lamentation for a place once known but not forgotten:

> O Elbereth! Gilthoneil!
> We still remember, we who dwell
> In this far land beneath the trees,
> Thy starlight on the Western Seas.
>
> (Tolkien 2005: 79)

The elves' song and its performance is powerful enactment place-attachment, binding them at once to their home in 'a far land beyond the Sea' and to Middle-earth, in which they are journeying, 'this far land beneath the trees' (Tolkien 2005: 79).

These examples (and there are many more in the first few chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring*) illustrate the affective power that stories have, when performed, to incite community feeling and a sense of belonging. Ben Anderson's prompt to geographers to think about 'how a representation operates and make a difference as part of a relational configuration' (Anderson 2018: 3), alongside Sheila Hones's definition of fiction as 'a geographical event, a dynamic unfolding collaboration happening in time and space' (Hones 2014: 32), illuminates what is going on here. For Frodo, Sam and Pippin, as for the Elves, the performance of stories of home and away relate to the light of the moon, the dirt of the road, the chill of the night air and the motion of their bodies through the world to enact a sense of belonging in place - they are the very practices of Hideggerian *dwelling*. If, as Mitch Rose has argued, stories are one of the starting points for thought (where the narration of experience leads to the formation of meaning, values and ideas) (Rose 2016: 138), Tolkien's characters remind us that they are also active participants in the enactment of the here-and-now.

One story-full character whose wanderings and singing bring this enmeshment of embodied mobility, storied performance and belonging-in-place into being in a powerful way is Tom Bombadil. Liked and disliked in equal measure (and wholly overlooked by Peter Jackson's film), Bombadil looms large over these early chapters. From his first encounter with the Hobbits beside the River Withywindle, to his final parting at the side of the road to Bree, Tom Bombadil hardly stops singing, telling stories, and walking or dancing about:

> Often his voice would turn to song, and he would get out of his chair and dance about… Suddenly Tom's talk left the woods and went leaping up the young stream, over bulling waterfalls, over pebbles and worn rocks, and among small flowers in close grass and wet crannies, wandering at last up on to the Downs… When they caught his words again they found that he had now wandered into strange regions beyond their memory and beyond their waking thought, into times when the world was wider, and the seas flowed straight to the western Shore. (Tolkien 2005: 129-30)

Bombadil's stories tie him to a world that is living, vibrant and close at hand over which he is Master and to which he belongs; however, they also cut him off from the world at large - except that which lives on in memories and songs. As he tells the hobbits: 'Out east my knowledge fails', and 'Tom's country ends here: he will not pass the borders' (Tolkien 2005:

147). For Tom Bombadil, stories and songs are more than representative of the world - their performance enacts belonging and rootedness, to the extent that, without them, he will not venture abroad into new places.

Outside of Middle-earth, back in the British summer of lockdown and its aftermath, the regular tramping of the same roads, the same paths, can often bring on a feeling akin to that of Tom Bombadil's stories. That lands further away, lives once lived are consigned to the over-there, beyond the horizon, or left behind in what people are increasingly referring to as the 'beforetime': the months and years before the coronavirus pandemic hit.

However, in moments of shadow, when the walls of the world seem to close in all about us, it is worth remembering the hope that lies in the hobbits' favourite Road song - the hope of the unknown:

> The Road goes ever on and on,
> Down from the door where it began.
> Now far ahead the Road has gone,
> And I must follow if I can,
> Pursuing it with eager feet,
> Until it joins some larger way
> Where many paths and errands meet.
> And whither then? I cannot say.
>
> (Tolkien 2005: 73)

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