Tolkien and Phenomenology:

On the concepts of recovery and epoché

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Introduction

What is the connection between one of the most proficient authors of the 20th century and a highly complicated philosophical school of thought and methodological approach? I must admit that I was quite amazed when I first found the connection – or the similarities – between Tolkien's theoretical writing in *On Fairy-Stories* and phenomenology. Phenomenology is a methodological approach primarily employed within the social sciences and the humanities (even though some areas within the natural and technological sciences have picked up phenomenology as well[1]) and originates from the works of philosopher Edmund Husserl. Since its conception around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, phenomenology has been developed through the works of scholars such as Martin Heidegger, Alfred Schütz and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and its prime focus is to enable scientific inquiry without the interference of dogmatic attitudes. Phenomenology began with Husserl who declared that the goal of phenomenology was to "go back to the things themselves"[2] – something that is, allowing for some simplifications, carried out through a set of steps through

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1   For an example of this: C.f. Gallagher, Shaun & Zahavi, Dan (2012) "*The Phenomenological Mind*," Routledge: London
2   Husserl, Edmund. (2001 [1900/1901]) "*Logical Investigations*," Dermot Moran (ed.), 2nd ed. 2 vols. Routledge: London

which the person conducting a phenomenological analysis frees his perspective from dogmatic attitudes, pre-judices and pre-conceptions; studies how the object is "given" to him or her in his or her experience; draws out the essential components of the object and; shares his or her findings with others.

The phenomenological approach to scientific inquiry is a highly complex one but in some parts it shares many features with Tolkien's On Fairy-Stories. The greatest similarity, I believe, is to be found between Tolkien's concept of *recovery* and the phenomenological concept of *epoché*. The continuation of this paper will concern itself with an analysis of the relationship between this two concepts. Using a hermeneutical approach I hope to be able to find some insights and further understand the two concepts, as separate entities and as well as two concepts in relation to each other.

Methodology

Analysing the two concepts, placing them side by side, in a hermeneutical analysis the two concepts are re-interpreted in the light of the other through circular movements from the parts making up the concepts to the wholes. Gadamer wrote that the task of hermeneutics is to, running from the whole and back to the whole, "expand in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning. Harmonizing all the particulars with the whole is at each stage the criterion of correct understanding. Its absence means the failure to understand."[3] This circular movement, and thus the whole and the parts, consists according to Gadamer, in part of the objective reality in which "the individual word belongs to the context of the sentence, so too the individual text belongs to the context of an author's works, and these to the whole of the literary genre in question or the whole of literature itself."[4] Thereby the analysis of the two concepts will seek to gain an understanding of the two concepts relation to each other, whilst still taking the fields within which the two concept were created.

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3   Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1959) "*On the Circle of Understanding*" in Hawermas, Stanley & MacIntyre, Alasdair "Hermeneutics Versus Science? Three German Views," University of Notre Dame Press: South Bend, Indiana p. 68
4   Ibid p. 69

Recovery and epoché

Εποχή

The ἐποχή (epoché) is one of the primary pillars of the phenomenological method and should be understood as the putting within brackets of all pre-conceptions and prejudices of the (social) world. This could be described as a reclaiming of the (social) world from the chains of it every-day-ness that come from our ideal typification of the same. Edmund Husserl defined the epoché as being the placing within brackets of one's pre-understanding (*vorverstehen*) of the world, a process in which

> "We are putting in brackets, as it were, all our feeling-intentions and all the apperceptions deriving from the intentionality of the feelings by virtue of which there constantly appear to us, prior to all thinking, spatio-temporal objectivities in immediate "intuitability" charged with certain characters of value and practice characters that altogether transcend the stratum of the mere thing. Thus, in this "pure" or purified theoretical attitude we no longer experience houses, tables, streets, or works of art; instead, we experience merely material things. Of those value-charged things, we experience only their stratum of spatiotemporal materiality; and similarly, of men and human societies, only the stratum of this psychic "nature" which is bound to the spatio- temporal 'Bodies."[5]

Thus, the goal of the epoché is to, by means of a reflective standpoint, leave the natural attitude (der natürlichen Einstellung) which is the attitude kept by the subject in his or her everyday interaction with the life world (lebens-welt), and by doing so become able to see things for what they are, or, to put it more precise, to see how things are given to us in our everyday interaction with them. The epoché is, in other words, a development of the Cartesian approach in which the person making inquiries should bracket out his or her previous knowledge and assumptions about the object into which inquiries are made by hypothetical assumptions of the objects non-existence.[6]

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5 Husserl, Edmund (1989) "*Ideas Pertraining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: 2nd book - Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitutions*," Kluwer Academic Publishers: Dordrecht p. 27.

6 Husserl, Edmund (2004) "*Idéer till en ren fenomenologi och fenomenologisk filosofi*," Thales: Stockholm p. 114 ff.

Recovery

Recovery is a term coined by Tolkien who used the term to describe a process by which one can regain a clear view on objects when encountering an object from the primary world (i.e. our everyday world) in the unfamiliar setting of a secondary worlds – such as within a work of literary art – and is tied to the phenomena of secondary belief, or the taking for true what the narrator relates as long as it accords with the rules of that particular secondary world:

> "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining of a clear view. I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or where) meant to see them' – as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness. Of all faces those of our *familiares* are the ones both most difficult to play fantastic tricks with, and most difficult really to see with fresh attention, perceiving their likeness and unlikeness: that they are faces, and yet unique faces. This triteness is really the penalty of 'appropriation': the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. We say we know them. They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them."[7]

Recovery, in other words, is a concept used to describe a fresh view, or a fresh perspective, that is brought about through the encounter of an appropriated, familiar object within a secondary world.

Analysis

Placing the two concepts side by side, analysing the one in the light of the other, one can at first glance notice some commonalities between the two. One such aspect is that both concepts describe a form of mooreefoc-effect where a slightly alterer perspective – such as the reading of a word from the wrong angle – can enable the subject to re-gain a fresh perspective on an object via some form of alteration of the milieu in which engage with the object. One of the clearest differences however, is that the epoché describes a highly conscious process in which one actively seeks to re-gain said fresh perspective through a highly complex scientific methodology, whilst recovery is described by Tolkien as being more of an unconscious phenomena as the reader does not – or at least need not – be looking to bring about this regained fresh perspective. Another apparent

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7   Tolkien J.R.R (2006) "On Fairy-Stories" in Tolkien, Christopher *"The Monsters and the Critics,"* HarperCollinsPublishers: London p.146

similarity between the two concepts is that they both describe processes by which a subject can turn back the effects of appropriation and familiarity. In phenomenology the subject should modify his or her perspective on the object by modifying the thesis which he or she uses to describe, or experience, said object. Tolkien on the other hand describes the same process as a chance meeting where the subject, more or less, stumbles upon the appropriated object within a secondary world and by this becomes able to once again appreciate it afresh.

Taking a close look at the concept of epoché through the light of recovery however, we can re-interpret Husserl's complex description as the placing within an unfamiliar setting (i.e. the scientific setting) of an object from the primary world in order to enable the subject to regain a fresh perspective through modifying the milieu in which the object is encountered. Say for example that we want to study phenomena X using the phenomenological approach. Then we, to use the terminology of Tolkien, would place the phenomena in a secondary world, enabling us to slightly alter our perspective, whereby we would enable ourselves to see this object afresh, freed from the triteness of familiarity. At the same time, Tolkien's concept of recovery can be translated into a modification of the thesis which, in our familiarity with the object, guide our experience of said object. By encountering the object in an unfamiliar setting, we become able to appreciate the object without having our perspective being clouded being charged with pre-judices, pre-conceptions and pre-knowledge of the object.

Now, going further into details, one interesting point of Tolkien's description of recovery is how he places it in relation to contemporary philosophy by paraphrasing the phenomenological motto of "go back to the things themselves"[8]:

> "Recovery (…) is a re-gaining of a clear view. I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers"[9]

It would, of course, be a terrible sin to use this passage as a definite proof that Tolkien was influenced by the phenomenological school. What it does show, however, is that Tolkien was aware of phenomenology, or at least similar schools of thought, whilst working on the theories presented in On Fairy-Stories. Continuing to read the sections quoted above closely we can then compare the definitions of the different concepts. Both Husserl and Tolkien describe the state in which the

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8 See the introduction for more information about this motto.
9 Tolkien J.R.R (2006), p. 146

subject experience the objects in his or her surroundings as being an unreflected a-priori. In Tolkien's text this a-priori is identified as "familiarity" and "appropriation" which has made us stop seeing things as we first saw them. Husserl on the other hand does not use a quite as metaphorical language when describing the a-priori. Instead he writes that objects appear to us carrying "certain characters of value and practice" which "transcend the mere thing."

Husserl and Tolkien respectively described the product of the process their respective concepts describe as the result of having "cleaned" ones windows, or "purified" an attitude:

> "[T]hough I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or where) meant to see them' – as things apart from ourselves.We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness."[10]

> "Thus, in this "pure" or purified theoretical attitude we no longer experience houses, tables, streets, or works of art; instead, we experience merely material things. Of those value-charged things, we experience only their stratum of spatiotemporal materiality"[11]

Placing these two definitions of the final product of recovery and epoché side by side the metaphorical language of Tolkien and Husserl makes it apparent that the goal of the the processes they describe are described as a form of un-clouding of the mind or view of the subject who thereby will become able to look upon an object without the distortion brought about by familiarity or dogmatic attitudes. Both Tolkien and Husserl further emphasise that the objects we encounter in the primary world are entangled with ourselves through our appropriation of them or our dogmatic attitudes towards them. Through recovery or the epoché one can disentangle the objects from ourselves in order to engage with them as separate entities. This, in the long run, also positions the two concepts among the schools of though within metaphysical philosophy that emphasise the separation of objective reality and subjective consciousness.

Turning, once again, to the concepts as wholes there are many similarities between them. This is first and foremost true for the operations that drive the processes. One important difference however are the different ways through which these two processes are brought about. Tolkien's recovery appear to be a bi-product of fantastical story telling (or the careful and successful crafting of secondary worlds) whilst the epoché as it is defined by Husserl is an intentional process that is brought about by the subject who actively places an object from the primary world in the secondary

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10 Tolkien J.R.R (2006), p. 146
11 Husserl, Edmund (1989), p. 27

world of phenomenological analysis. One could, I am certain, argue that this difference is as unimportant as the difference between falling and lying down if one is merely considered with the lying-on-the-floor that is brought about by both phenomena. This difference between the two concepts does however provide important insight into what the focuses Tolkien and Husserl respectively were. Whilst Husserl is primarily looking to describe a scientific methodological process, Tolkien sought to describe the processes at work in crafting and experiencing fantastical literature. The difference here is about agency. In Tolkien's concept of recovery, the agent is the text that affects the reader experiencing it. At the same tim Husserl's agent is the philosopher or scientist who seeks to analyse an object through first disentangling it from his or her pre-conceptions, pre-judices and pre-knowledge.

Conclusions

However different the two authors motifs or ambitions might have been it seems like they both identified important processes and thereby helped to further our understanding of how a subject experiences the surrounding world and the objects that he or she encounters therein. There are important differences between the two concepts of recovery and epoché, but at the same time there are sufficient similarities to enable a reading of Husserl's highly complex definition of the epoché through the prism and language of Tolkien's recovery. Furthermore, such a reading can help to enable a furthered understanding of the epoché and the operations that drive this process. Re-interpreting the epoché in the language of Tolkien, in other words, enables even the non-experienced reader (as well as the experienced reader) to understand such a demanding definition as the one, eloquently, provided by Husserl. It is, after all, true that most persons are far more familiar with literary text and vocabulary than they are with philosophical dittos. There are also interesting things to learn from seeing Tolkien's concept of recovery re-interpreted through the lens of phenomenology. A reading of Tolkien's definition of recovery through the definition of the epoché can help to further insights into how the process of recovery, and the reading and experiencing fantastical works of art, work. Translating Tolkien's concept into a phenomenological context we can approach recovery as being the modification of our interpretations of an object in our experience of it, and this process is carried out through the mooreeffec-esque shift of viewpoint that comes from encountering an object in an unfamiliar setting.

Unfortunately there are no room in this analysis to further investigate the link between

Tolkien's writings in On Fairy-Stories and phenomenology. There are traces in the texts and many of the features of the recovery share much with the phenomenological epoché. This is however not sufficient for anybody to declare Tolkien a phenomenologist. What this analysis really has been able to show however, is how the reading of fantastical literature can be viewed as a transcendental activity through which we place within brackets our some of our previous experiences and dogmatic attitudes. As long as the author has succeeded in his or her ambition of crafting a secondary world, to which a reader may grant secondary belief, there is a possibility of recovery and a fresh perspective on something that might have been lost to triteness for ages. The rules are, however, a bit different for the phenomenologist. Instead of placing object within fantastical settings the scientist places them in carefully crafted articles and books on complex subjects. And instead of encountering a familiar object within a secondary world, the scientist needs often to carry the object into its new setting before being able to seek the shift in angle or perspective that can purify his or her gaze. No matter what, there seems to be an interesting link between recovery and epoché in particular as well as between Tolkien's writings on fantastical literature and phenomenology in general.

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