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Tolkien and the Technocratic Paradigm

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In his 2015 Encyclical *Laudato si,* Pope Francis critiques the notion that technology is a mere "neutral instrument."[1] Modern man has "taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm."[2] This "technocratic paradigm" lauds the concept of a subject who acquires control over all of the objects it encounters using rational and logical methods. Using the scientific method as its primary if not exclusive modus operandi, the subject inhabiting the technocratic paradigm seeks to master, possess, and manipulate reality: "It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves."[3] In the pre-technocratic period, man approached nature as a receiver, gaining from her what she allowed. Now, however, man disregards all dimensions of an object that fall outside of the technocratic paradigm's criteria, all the while working to maximize that which can be extracted from that which he masters. Pope Francis' diagnosis of the problem of technology, which he calls the "technocratic paradigm," is not novel. Rather, his is a continuation of a questioning put to technology by a number of early twentieth-century thinkers: Christian theologian Romano Guardini, whom Pope Francis quotes throughout the encyclical; German philosopher Martin Heidegger, to whom *Laudato si* is, we shall see, indebted; and the Christian author J.R.R. Tolkien. If we find a diagnosis of the technocratic paradigm, which he refers to as "the Machine," in Tolkien's letters, we find an unexpected anodyne in the poetic paradigm inculcated in his fantasy fiction.

In a letter to Milton Waldman Tolkien writes of his legendarium, "Anyway, all this stuff is mainly concerned with the Fall, Mortality, and the Machine . . . "[4] When the desire to be "Lord and God" of

[1] Pope Francis, "Laudato si" *Vatican*, accessed November 7, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

[2] ibid.

[3] ibid.

[4] J. R. R. Tolkien, Humphrey Carpenter, and Christopher Tolkien. 1981. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 145.

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one's own private creation combines with rebellion against the "laws of the Creator," we become driven by a desire for Power, and "for making the will more quickly effective," and thus "the Machine" gains importance. Tolkien goes on to explicate what he means by "the Machine":

> By the last I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner properties or talents—or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills. The Machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognized . . . The Enemy in successive forms is always 'naturally' concerned with sheer Domination, and so the Lord of magic and machines; but the problem: that this frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others—speedily and according to the benefactors own plans—is a recurrent motif.[5]

As Romano Guardini outlines in *The End of the Modern World,* the modern era justified technology as essential to the promotion of man's well-being. However, "in so doing, it masked the destructive effects of a ruthless system."[6] If technology were nothing more than that which "mak[es] the will more quickly effective," corrupted human will, and not technology, would be responsible for misuse; the machine would be mere *instrument*. However, as Heidegger contends in "The Question Concerning Technology," we will remain chained slavishly to technology, whether we reject it or passionately affirm its goodness, insofar as we "regard it as something neutral."[7] According to the instrumentalist understanding of technology as a mere tool, "everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means."[8] Heidegger finds impoverished all attempts to define technology *technologically*, because such approaches fail to locate the true essence of technology, which is nothing technological.

In spite of the vast valley that gapes between their philosophical and theological foundations,[9] Tolkien and Heidegger stand on

[5] Ibid, 146.

[6] Romano Guardini. 1998. *The end of the modern world*. Wilmington, Del: ISI Books, 56.

[7] Martin Heidegger. 1977. "The Question Concerning Technology." *The question concerning technology, and other essays.* New York: Harper & Row.

[8] ibid, 5.

[9] Martin Heidegger stands at the center of that influential circle of persons who malign much of the philosophical theology of the West by considering it idolatrous syncretism of metaphysics and theology in which God's being and the impenetrable mysteries of his existence have been subjected to the philosophical-scientific modes of analysis, and thereby de-mystified and, ultimately, dangerously reduced. Tolkien's work is marked by lucid imprints of this very tradition of philosophical theology—be it the work of Plato, St. Augustine, or St. Thomas Aquinas.

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common ground when they assess modern man's claims concerning the nature of technology, and the reductionist definitions that we so inadequately wield as we try to comprehend and use it. At first glance, however, it may seem as though Tolkien's initial argument that technology "mak[es] the will more effective" partakes of the instrumentalist's presuppositions. However, he goes on to note that "The Machine is our more obvious modern form, though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognized."[10] In calling attention to the correlation between Machine and Magic, Tolkien echoes Heidegger's claim that technology's essence is non-technological when he argues that there is something more than mechanical in the essence of the Machine. Far from being a mere means, technology is a "way of revealing."[11] Tracing the etymology of "technology," we find that it stems from the Greek word *Technikon,* which signifies that which belongs to *techne.* For the Greeks, *techne* signifies not merely the activities of the craftsman, but the "arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Techne* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*; it is something poietic."[12]

Can we find consonance between Heidegger's claim that technology is fundamentally a kind of *poiesis* or "a revealing" and Tolkien's contention that there is an affinity between the Machine and Magic? For Heidegger, "the revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging" which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it "supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such."[13]. Modern technology's challenging forever expedites in that it exposes and unlocks, and is always directed toward advancing something else, for instance, "toward driving on to the maximum yield at minimum expense."[14] Coal is extracted not merely so that it can be used in various homes, or in a power plant, but so that it can be "on call," ever available to deliver the sun's warmth. The sun is seen not as, say, the god Helios, as in Greek mythology, or a symbol of either the Good, as in Plato's *Republic,* or of the "Sun of Justice," but as "warmth that is challenged forth for heat," which powers steam, allowing a factory's gears to continue turning. Unlike the modern mechanized food industry, the work of the pre-modern farmer did not "challenge" the soil of the field.[15] This line bears striking resemblance to *Laudato si's* assessment of the "receptive" nature of pre-modern technology. Heidegger exemplifies this modern "challenging" most memorably in an extended consideration of "two Rhines." On the one hand, we have

[10] Tolkien, *Letters,* 146.
[11] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 12.
[12] ibid, 13.
[13] ibid, 14.
[14] ibid, 15.
[15] ibid, 15.

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"The Rhine" as revealed by the German poet Hölderlin's *poiesis,* and on the other "The Rhine" as "water power supplier," as "river . . . damned up into the power plant."[16] We may object that the Rhine is still a river in the landscape, but, Heidegger insists, "[H]ow? In no other way than as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry."[17] As we can see, the core problem resultant from modern technology is that it comes to *exclude other modes of revealing.* Under the technological gaze, all objects "disappear[] into the objectlessness of standing-reserve," a stock of various energies that can be called upon.[18] Eventually, however, the technological gaze fixes itself upon man *per se*, and "he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve."[19] Instead of recognizing his perilous state, at this very moment man so threatened "exalts himself to the posture of the lord of the earth . . . This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself."[20]

Strikingly, Tolkien also incorporates the modern mill as an exemplification of the Machine. On the first page of the "Prologue," we learn that hobbits "do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skillful with tools," indicating the creature's decisive adherence to premodern technology.[21] We gain an even sharper sense of the water-mill's import when Sam Gamgee gazes into the Mirror of Galadriel, only to find there a nightmare scenario: ". . . Sam noticed that the Old Mill had vanished, and a large red-brick building was being put up where it had stood. Lots of folk were busily at work. There was a tall red chimney nearby. Black smoke seemed to cloud the surface of the Mirror. / 'There's some devilry at work in the Shire,' he said."[22] The scene leaves little need for interpretation, as it resounds with a Dickensian, *Hard Times*-critique of industrialization via the Modern Machine. Finally, after Sam and Frodo have destroyed the Ring in Mount Doom, and they have returned to a markedly impoverished Shire, Farmer Cotton narrates the disturbing changes brought to the mill[23]:

[16] ibid, 16.
[17] ibid, 16.
[18] ibid, 19.
[19] ibid, 27.
[20] ibid.
[21] J.R.R. Tolkien, 1994. *The Lord of the Rings.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1.
[22] Ibid, 362-363.
[23] In his Preface to *The Lord of the Rings,* Tolkien addresses the decline of the old mill: "Recently I saw in a paper a picture of the last decrepitude of the once thriving corn-mill beside its pool that long ago seemed to me so important. I never liked the looks

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> Take Sandyman's mill now. Pimple knocked it down almost as soon as he came to Bag End. Then he brought in a lot o' dirty-looking Men to build a bigger one and fill it full o' wheels and outlandish contraptions. Only that fool Ted was pleased by that, and he works there cleaning wheels for the Men, where his dad was the Miller and his own master. Pimple's idea was to grind more and faster, or so he said. He's got other mills like it. But you've got to have grist before you can grind; and there was no more for the new mill to do than for the old. But since Sharkey came they don't grind no more corn at all. They're always a-hammering and a-letting out a smoke and a stench, and there isn't no peace even at night in Hobbiton. And they pour out filth a purpose; they've fouled all the lower Water, and it's getting down into Brandywine. If they want to make the Shire into a desert, they're going the right way about it.[24]

Pimple's [Pimple is the alias of Lotho Sackville-Baggins] openly-stated intention to "grind more and faster," is a veritable paraphrase of Tolkien's contention that the machine is meant, at least in part, to make the will more quickly effective. The actual application of Pimple' intent, however, captures well Tolkien's further definition of the Machine as "all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner properties or talents—or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills."[25] Through Farmer Cotton's account we see that Pimple's is a technological gaze, under which all objects, in the words of Heidegger, "disappear[] into the objectlessness of standing-reserve."[26] *Laudato si* continues the implications of this objectlessness in is contention that, under the technocratic paradigm, man perpetually finds himself in "the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation."[27] He lusts for a machine that will grind faster and more, but ignores the inherent properties of nature and so fails to see that "you've got to have grist before you can grind; and there was no more for the new mill to do than for the old."[28] He "bulldozes" the real world and eventually hammering away and building a greater Machine seems to become an end in and of itself, as indicated by Cotton's complaint that "they don't grind no more corn at all"; the most prolific product seems to be "filth" which fouls the waters. As the Machine grinds on, the Shire itself, which is objectless under Pimple's gaze, is soon to become a "desert" a geographic metaphor for objectlessness.

of the Young miller, but his father, the Old miller, had a black beard, and he was not named Sandyman" (*LOTR* xxi).

[24] Ibid, 1013.

[25] Tolkien, *Letters,* 156.

[26] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 19.

[27] Pope Francis, *Laudato si.*

[28] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,* 1013.

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Hauntingly, Heidegger notes that when the technological gaze has looked long enough, man himself will become "standing-reserve." We see this in that Pimple brings in "a lot o' dirty-looking Men," outside "resources" that are noteworthy only insofar as their energy and labor is on call for Pimple's demands. In addition to "bulldozing the real world" Tolkien continues, the Machine is concerned with "coercing other wills," which ultimately shows-forth in sheer domination.

Importantly, Tolkien describes the Ring as symbol of "the will to mere power, seeking to make itself objective by physical force and mechanism, and so inevitably by lies."[29] Here in the Ring-maker's emphasis on "mechanism," "physical force" and purported or attempted "objectivity" we hear echoes of a Heideggerian analysis of modern technology. Although a "mechanism," it ultimately only challenges-forth when its user imposes physical force over others and other things, and in so doing aspires to a sort of mastery over reality that "discovers" all things as primarily "standing reserve." In a letter to Rhona Beare, Tolkien further explains the Ring in a manner that reveals further Heideggerian[30] affinities:

> The Ring of Sauron is only one of the various mythical treatments of the placing of one's life, or power, in some external object, which is thus exposed to capture or destruction with disastrous results to oneself. If I were to philosophize this myth, or at least the Ring of Sauron, I should say it was a mythical way of representing the truth that potency (or perhaps rather potentiality) if it is to be exercised, and produce results, has to be externalized and so as it were passes, to a greater or less degree, out of one's direct control. A man who wishes to exert power must have subjects, who are not himself. But he then depends on them.[31]

Understood as an exemplar of modern technology, the Ring of Sauron demonstrates the fact that insofar as we insert our power and life into the machine, that life and power pass "out of [our] control."

[29] Tolkien, *Letters,* 160.

[30] It is also worth noting an intriguing connection between the Ring, the Machine, and Hegel's master-slave dialectic. As Peter Kreeft polemicizes, modern man pines not for human slaves, because we have substitutes for them: machines. The Industrial Revolution made slavery inefficient and unnecessary. But our addiction is the same whether the slaves are made of flesh, metal, or plastic. We have done exactly what Sauron did in forging the Ring. We have put our power into things in order to increase our power. And the result is, as everyone knows but no one admits, that we are now weak little wimps, Shelob's slaves, unable to survive a blow to the great spider of our technological network. We tremble before a nationwide electrical blackout or a global computer virus. . . In our drive for power we have deceived ourselves into thinking that we have become more powerful when all the time we have been becoming less. We are miserable little Nietzsches dreaming we are supermen. For in gaining the world we have lost our selves. See Peter Kreeft, 2005. *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind* The Lord of the Rings. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 187-188.

[31] Tolkien, *Letters,* 279.

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In other words, it is not merely that we, as modern wimps, are more dependent on machines. The danger is greater: our *wills* themselves become "standing-reserve" for the Ring.[32]

In *Laudato si,* Pope Francis continues Heidegger's work of unravelling the "neutrality" argument: "Science and technology are not neutral; from the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on distinct shapes."[33] In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* the character Boromir, more than any other, approaches the Ring as a neutral instrument. During the Council of Elrond, when Elves, Men, Dwarfs, Hobbits, and Wizard gather to decide what should be done with the One Ring of the Dark Lord, Boromir asks:

> Why do you speak ever of hiding and destroying? Why should we not think that the Great Ring has come into our hands to serve us in the very hour of need? Wielding it the Free Lords of the Free may surely defeat the Enemy. That is what he most fears, I deem. 'The Men of Gondor are valiant, and they will never submit; but they may be beaten down. Valour needs first strength, and then a weapon. Let the Ring be your weapon, if it has such power as you say. Take it and go forth to victory!'[34]

In arguing that "Valour needs first strength, and then a weapon," Boromir is one more voice enunciating the idea that the Ring is, as at least part of Tolkien's analysis of the Machine suggests, merely an instrument to sharpen and quicken the will. In Heidegger's articulation of this disposition, "Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as means."

Elrond opposes Boromir's naïve diagnosis and proposition:

> We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we now know too well. It belongs to Sauron and was made by him alone, and is altogether evil. Its strength, Boromir, is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier peril.[35]

Sauron's *intentions* have been so infused into the "instrument" that all of its prospective wearers will, in the words of *Laudato si,* "take on [a] distinct shape."[36]

The solution to this solipsistic-humanistic technological challenging is, for Heidegger, to be found in what the Greeks called *poiesis, techne,* or art, through which they "brought the presence of the gods,

[32] Tolkien, *Letters,* 279.
[33] Pope Francis, *Laudato si.*
[34] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,* 267.
[35] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,* 267-8.
[36] Pope Francis, *Laudato si.*

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brought the dialogue of divine and human destinings, to radiance."[37] Pope Francis acknowledges the same—sans romantic valorization of the Greeks—when he notes that "It cannot be maintained that empirical science provides a complete explanation of life, the interplay of all creatures and the whole of reality. If we reason only within the confines of the latter, little room would be left for aesthetic sensibility, poetry, or even reason's ability to grasp the ultimate meaning and purpose of things."[38] However, for the purposes of our present investigation, in order to delve further into the difference between poetic and modern-technological modes of revealing-concealing, we must, with Tolkien, determine that which both binds and separates the Machine and Magic. Further, with Tolkien, we must make distinctions between types of magic.

Tolkien uses the word "magic" to mean manifold things. Indeed, in another letter, he admits to being "afraid that I have been far too casual about 'magic' and especially the use of the word."[39] He goes on to offer an explanation of magic that is at first glance remarkably similar to the instrumentalist argument concerning technology. Tolkien admits to a latent distinction, in *The Lord of the Rings,* between *goeteia,* or "bad magic" on the one hand, and *magia,* or "good magic," on the other. In his tale, Tolkien contends, "neither is . . . good or bad (per se), but only by motive or purpose or use."[40] However, he does point to a "supremely bad motive" which is "domination of other 'free' wills."[41] Here, then, we come to a crucial passage that links magic to Machine:

> The Enemy's operations are by no means all *goetic* deceits, but 'magic' that produces real effects in the physical world. But his *magia* he uses to bulldoze both people and things, and his *goeteia* to terrify and subjugate. Their *magia* the Elves and Gandalf use (sparingly): a *magia*, producing real results (like fire in a wet faggot) for specific beneficent purposes. Their *goetic* effects are entirely artistic and not intended to deceive: they never deceive Elves (but may deceive or bewilder unaware Men) since the difference is to them as clear as the difference to us between fiction, painting, and sculpture, and 'life'.[42]

First, we note that although some opponents of the Enemy do use *goeteia,* they use them for "entirely artistic" purposes, never intending to deceive in a moral sense, but only in the sense of creating supreme fictions as distinct from life. Unlike the "Enframing" of the technological gaze, which not only disguises the nearness of the

[37] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology,"34.
[38] Pope Francis, *Laudato si.*
[39] Tolkien, *Letters.*
[40] Tolkien, *Letters,* Ibid.
[41] Tolkien, *Letters,* Ibid.
[42] Tolkien, *Letters,* Ibid.

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world but "disguises even this, its disguising," the *goetic* effects of Gandalf and the Elves are *evident,* are undisguised: being altogether artistic, they allow others to better know Beauty.[43] In his assessment of the Enemy's operations, Tolkien returns again to the image of bulldozing, this time both people and things, but adds the aim to "terrify" which is part of his will to subjugate. At last, then, the link between Magic and the Machine becomes utterly lucid:

> The Enemy, or those who have become like him, go in for 'machinery' — with destructive and evil effects — because 'magicians', who have become chiefly concerned to use *magia* for their own power, would do so (do do so). The basic motive for *magia* — quite apart from any philosophic consideration of how it would work — is immediacy: speed, reduction of labour, and reduction also to a minimum (or vanishing point) of the gap between the idea or desire and the result or effect.[44]

Neither Gandalf nor the Elves "go in for machinery," no matter their use of the *goetic.* The motives of machine and magic meet insofar as their aims are "reduction to a minimum (or vanishing point) of the gap between the idea or desire and the result or effect." In his famous lecture "On-Fairy Stories," Tolkien makes yet another clarifying distinction, even if it at first adds yet another meaning to his use of "magic," and thus demonstrates that he was rightly concerned with prospective ambiguity in this regard. Magic, he notes, "is *power* in this world, domination of things or wills," while enchantment "does not seek delusion, nor bewitchment and domination; it seeks enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves." (need citation). It would seem, then, that *enchantment* can serve as a kind of corollary force that stands as more good, true, and beautiful than magic and the technocratic spell. The technocratic paradigm emerges in part as a result of and in part as a harbinger of disenchantment. As Charles Taylor relates, disenchantment "designat[es] one of the main features of the process we know as secularization."[45] The German word for "disenchantment" is "Entzauberung", which contains the word "Zauber," or *magic*: it literally translates as *de-magicification*.

Taylor locates "two main" elements of the enchanted world that "disenchantment did away with."[46] The first was that the world "was one filled with spirits [God, angels, Satan, demons, spirits of the wood that were "almost indistinguishable from the loci they inhabit . . . and moral forces [that] impinged on human beings . . . (the boundary between humans and these were "porous."[47] The

[43] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 46.
[44] Tolkien, *Letters,* Ibid.
[45] Charles Taylor, 2007. *A Secular Age,* Harvard: Harvard University Press, 278.
[46] Ibid. 279.
[47] Ibid., 287.

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second was that "meaning [was] within the cosmos" because it was a "Great Chain of Being" — being was understood to have levels, and to be hierarchical, so that some things would share meaning and even power."[48]

For Tolkien, this enchantment comes about through "fairy-stories" such as, we can add, his own *legendarium,* from the *Silmarillion to The Return of the King.* How, though, would, say, Tolkien's *legendarium,* grant us recovery of that which has been lost from our sight by looking at things too long now with technological gazes? In "On Fairy Stories" Tolkien argues that fairy is deeply concerned with:

> Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a regaining—regaining 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 were) 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.[49]

But this still seems too abstract. Tolkien insists that fairy-stories are concerned largely with fundamental, simple things, "but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting . . . It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine" (Ibid). The importance of this passage cannot be overstated. Part of the problem with the technocratic paradigm is its submersion of its subjects into a characteristically modern prejudice: meaning is in the mind, not in *things. The Lord of the Rings* may help us to "see things as we were meant to see them," but this doesn't simply mean that it cleanses our perception; it shows us the *being* of things, things freed from the technocratic paradigm and gaze. Consider Sam's return home after he has laid down his life to help Frodo destroy the Ring of Power. Tolkien takes Sam home, even as we too come to grasp our place amidst these enchanted, ordinary things:

> And he went on, and there was yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap.
> He drew a deep breath. "Well, I'm back," he said.

A cynical reading of this passage might perhaps resist it as sentimental, or even cliché. But in her article "'My Precious': Tolkien's Fetishized Ring" Alison Milbank offers a far more enchanting

[48] Ibid.

[49] J.R.R. Tolkien, 2008. "On Fairy Stories," *Tales From the Perilous Realm*, New York: Harper Collins, 373.

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interpretation: "The objects of fire, food, light, and shelter unite here to signify human warmth and community. By making Sam function as a chair for his little daughter in a family trinity, the text affirms the familial relation of objects to persons. Chairs are only chairs; they have no magical qualities, but they allow human connection" (43). Freed from the objectlessness of standing reserve, objects can signify themselves. Delivered from the possessiveness of the technocratic paradigm, we can see things *as they are,* or, at the very least, "as we were meant to see them." This movement precedes the necessary next one: making things as we were meant to make them.

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