# “THEY ALWAYS WISHED TO TALK TO EVERYTHING”: RECOVERING THE BORDER-WALKING MYSTICS OF MIDDLE-EARTH

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ABSTRACT

“THEY ALWAYS WISHED TO TALK TO EVERYTHING”:
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The stories of J.R.R. Tolkien overflow with references to the spiritual and the ecological. Often, however, scholars interpret these themes as inherently traditional: spirituality is boiled down to staunch Catholicism and an intellectual interest in paganism; radical environmentalism is translated into the conservative ideal of stewardship, an anthropocentrism that negates the vibrant co-dependency that enlivens Arda. This new exploration of Middle-earth’s spirituality and materiality seeks to overcome these reductive tendencies by practicing a hospitable mode of critique: one which is open to a variety of voices, interpretations, and ways of being-in-the-world. In it, I deconstruct the term “intercessor” and rebuild it to refer to those persons who stand in the in-between, the gaps. I look at those persons who walk the borders and constantly call us to refocus our attention, to be accountable for our ethics of living. This reversal of our usual mode of attention is facilitated by a unique cast of characters, some of whom are quite popular among critics, and others of whom have often found themselves neglected or excluded. My purpose here is to provide an honest yet hopeful diagnosis of the communion of the spiritual and material, primarily through the lens of *The Lord of the Rings*, but also other texts as the need arises. Eventually we’ll see that both the spiritualities and the environmentalisms represented in Middle-earth are not only often radical or confrontational, but also diverse, complex, and contradictory. In all, they call characters and readers alike into account: they demand a reassessment of the ethics of our being-in-the-world and aspire to a communion of all things, envisioning a riotous celebration of our entanglement in the great becoming-with of our world.

Dedicated to
J.R.R. Tolkien
1892-1973
*Elen síla lúmenn' omentielvo*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

He used to often say that there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary.

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

The risk of listening to a story is that it can obligate us in ramifying webs that cannot be known in advance of venturing among their myriad threads.

— Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

## HOME IS BEHIND…

When Tolkien finished *The Lord of the Rings* in 1950, he was fully aware of the difficult position in which he had placed himself. With the publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937, readers had begged for "more about hobbits," but that was now 13 years in the past and Tolkien was feeling stretched and overwhelmed by the many responsibilities vying for his attention and by financial woes that were interfering with his efforts to find a typist for the enormous manuscript.[1] "And now I look at it, the magnitude of the disaster is apparent to me," he famously wrote to his publisher. "My work has escaped my control, and I have produced a monster: an immensely long, complex, rather bitter, and very terrifying romance, quite unfit for children (if fit for anybody); and it is not really a sequel to *The Hobbit* but to *The Silmarillion*" (*Letters* 136). Tolkien's anxieties may seem melodramatic to those of us who know that this "rather bitter, and

[1] These issues were compounded with the facts that Tolkien kept tinkering with the drafts, the unfortunate advent of paper-rationing, and Tolkien's obstinate (and perhaps desperate) insistence that *The Lord of the Rings* be published as a single volume and together with *The Silmarillion*, among other things. *The Fellowship of the Ring* wasthus not published until July 1954, with *The Two Towers* appearing in November of the same year; *The Return of the King*—inhibited by Tolkien's persistent niggling with the appendices and maps—was not published until late 1955.

very terrifying" book would revolutionize an entire genre and make its tired author a household name; but for the Tolkien, who often doubted himself and the value of his own work, the thought of "exposing [his] heart to be shot at" by an unsuspecting world was paralyzing (*Letters* 172). *The Hobbit* had been rather "lighthearted, quick-worded, and soon over" (to borrow Treebeard's phrase), completely "fit" for children, and, at least originally, not at all related to the dark and brooding mythos that was "The Silmarillion."[2] *The Lord of the Rings* was just the opposite.[3] It is a work of staggering bulk and density, and not just of plot, characters, and settings: as readers and scholars alike will attest, it is a work whose philosophical, theological, ethical, and theoretical depths are far from plumbed.

The level of complexity in Tolkien's major work has provided scholars and critics with grist for the mill for decades, and so a whole body of dedicated, insightful scholarship has grown up around the texts that both author and publishers feared no one would ever read.[4] However, if Tolkien Studies as a whole has a failing, it is that its scholarship is sadly dated: that is, it neglects (as a whole) interacting with current developments in literary criticism and critical theory, and as such it has been rather self-contained, only venturing out of its bubble to greet the friendly faces of medievalist studies, fantasy, mythology/theology, and (sometimes) modernism. This is not to say that individual scholars have never pushed these boundaries. They have. But, as a whole, Tolkien Studies has avoided raising its eyes to the surrounding world; or if it does, it quickly

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[2] In keeping with tradition, I use the figure "The Silmarillion" to refer to the entire body of Tolkien's Middle-earth legends and stories; *The Silmarillion* refers to the text collected, edited, and published by Christopher Tolkien.

[3] I want to be careful suggesting that *The Lord of the Rings* is "not for children," because I for one do not subscribe to that view. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were read to me when I was about five years old and I enjoyed them both immensely and equally. And I am not the only one with such an experience (see Luke Shelton's magnificent project dealing with young readers of *The Lord of the Rings*). What I mean here is rather that while *The Hobbit* was specifically written for children, *The Lord of the Rings* was specifically *not*, and even more consciously not in its revisions.

[4] We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that much of this scholarship has been made possible by the tireless efforts of Christopher Tolkien, without whom we would not have *The Silmarillion*, *The History of Middle-earth* volumes, or various other stand-alone works.

looks away, forestalling any possibility of being lastingly affected by such an exchange. If we believe and trust in the depth and value of Tolkien's work, we must open it further to contemporary conversations, lest the line of inquiry in which we so comfortably reside become stale and stagnant.

Take one particularly popular methodology: eco-criticism. Significant attention has been devoted to broad environmental issues within *The Lord of the Rings*, but scholarship is notably silent when it comes to interacting with current trends in ecocriticism. Instead, eco-focused readings of Tolkien's work tend to be radically conservative and dated, falling into the same old patterns that have been traced for decades: Tolkien as anti-industrial; Tolkien as champion of environmental stewardship; Tolkien the tree-lover.[5] These readings furthermore turn to predictable characters or moments in the text to make their arguments: Saruman the metal-minded wizard and his industrialization of the Shire is of course a clear and favored example.

Many of these eco-critical readings, too, depend on Tolkien's representation of trees and tree-ish subjects: Treebeard and the other Ents, and the Huorns: critics find an abundance of material ready-to-hand (or pen) in their discussions of the tree-culture of Middle-earth. Verlyn Flieger, in her somewhat-misleadingly titled article "How Trees Behave—Or Do They?", investigates the apparent lack of dryads or tree-fairies in Tolkien's legendarium, suggesting finally that the mysterious and unexplained Huorns are best understood as spirits of the trees rather than trees in actuality. While her argument is compelling, it does appear to mitigate the significance of Tolkien's professed dissatisfaction with Shakespeare's handling of the movement

[5] Such that in 1996, even Christopher Tolkien felt that his father's love of trees over other natural features or environments had become radically exaggerated.

of Birnam Wood,[6] as well as his involvement in literary traditions of militant trees.[7] Cynthia Cohen takes up these ideas more directly in "The Unique Representation of Trees in *The Lord of the Rings*," arguing that Tolkien expounded upon and revised the tradition of animate trees with his depiction of Ents and Huorns—though, she finally admits, it is never quite clear what Huorns *are*, or Ents either, for that matter.[8] Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans, in *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien*, begin tracing the entanglements of Middle-earth's ecology in a way that has great potential; but unfortunately the reading falls just short of the radical nature of Tolkien's interventions by re-inscribing Cartesian cuts between "human"/nonhuman or nature/culture, ultimately calling for a stewardship, inflected by a very specific interpretation of Christian doctrine, that takes into account "all forms of life" (227). Thus the reading slides back into a conservative appeal to an anthropocentric (even if Ents and Elves *are* included) concept of stewardship, eliding important distinctions and tensions in the ways various characters come head-to-head over their understandings of ecology.

Theological readings of Tolkien have suffered a similar fate in that they tend to rely overmuch on explaining the Catholicism of Tolkien's work; or the allegorical merits of Tolkien's representations of, say, the Eucharist; or, predictably, the importance of hope in dark times. Now, I don't wish to discount these readings. It is not that they are incorrect or "bad" readings of

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[6] Macbeth, IV.i.87-90:

> Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
> Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill
> Shall come against him.

Shakespeare "solves" the problem in a decidedly un-fantastic way: Birnam Wood is chopped down and its corpse dragged to Dunsinane.

[7] A few renditions of this tradition: From the Hebrew scriptures: "The people of Israel were defeated there before the servants of David, and the slaughter there that day was great, 20,000 men. For the battle there was spread over the whole countryside, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword devoured" (1 Sam 8:17-18). The Welsh tale *Câd Goddeu*, "The Battle of the Trees," is another. Shakespeare's startlingly unmagical (especially for a tale involving witches) version has already been mentioned.

[8] Are any of us sure? Are we supposed to be sure? I suspect that we are not.

Tolkien. But they *are* notably uncritical and romantic, even when they acknowledge Tolkien's many contradictions and doubts; and it is difficult to find work that discusses how Tolkien might be speaking into, challenging, and enlivening theological discourse rather than simply representing it. As a friend of mine commented, most of these works "aren't asking interesting questions because [of] a refusal to think alongside or with Tolkien himself" (Lance). Take for example (the innumerable) readings that highlight the tensions between pagan and Christian elements in Tolkien's work. Nearly all of these reach the conclusion that Tolkien found elements in each useful, fascinating, and even true, and thus incorporated them into his tales in a way that perfectly balanced the worldview of each. We've all read scholarship of this sort. And again, it's not *wrong*—but why must these elements be balanced? Why must we read them as an incorporation of both pagan mythology and Christian doctrine that allows coexistence in a single space? And why do readings of Tolkien as "pagan" never address the fact that England was awash in a great pagan revival as the young Ronald grew to adulthood?[9] It is not that I see Tolkien's interest in paganism or his devout commitment to Catholicism as insignificant; it is precisely *because of* their significance that I urge a more critical approach. If it teaches us anything, let the recurring need to defend Tolkien's work against charges of Manichaeism and moral paltriness teach us that our ardent deconstructions of such claims are going unheard. Again, Tolkien Studies must move beyond these safe, conventional readings if we are to sustain

[9] The 1890s, the period of the Decadents and aesthetes, was also the period of the pagans. Societies such as The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn flourished; William Sharp published his single-issue "Pagan Review"; Kenneth Grahame penned his *Pagan Papers*; Francis Thompson railed against the "new paganism" in his short essays; Arthur Machen reveled in his pagan horror stories. And these are only a few. But this "new paganism" was not simply a revived interest in the old gods: in fact, it was specifically *not* that, but rather a revised attention to the role of humanity as an integral part of ecology and nature, not privileged as an actor to nature's backdrop. Indeed, the idea of the dissolution of "Self" in the greatness and sublimity of "nature" (which now included humanity) was the core of this new pagan philosophy. This philosophy survived well into the twentieth century, but I have yet to read a work of scholarship dealing with Tolkien's (potential) relationship with this "new paganism." And I include myself among this number: my paper dealing with Tolkien's fascination with Thompson regrettably elides the latter's involvement in the colorful scene that accompanied the resurgence of paganism at the *fin de siècle*.

the work that we do and make our discipline a relevant, critical, and insightful voice in current literary scholarship at large.

With such a project in mind I cannot resist the temptation to direct our attention to the virulent and ever-present origin debates which so often occupy our time (my own included, as I have contributed to this vein of scholarship myself). So much of Tolkien Studies has for so long been entranced by the question of where Tolkien got _________. And why not? It provides a never-ending treasure hunt for those small and half-forgotten stories left by the wayside, taken up again, reinvented, revitalized, and perhaps even redeemed by the Professor himself. They are enjoyable to read, exciting to discover, and best when shared. So, I wish to preface my forthcoming remarks with an appeal: don't stop! We need this scholarship and we thrive on it (at least, I do). The danger is that we become so enthralled by it that we miss the larger issues that are at stake. That is, how might these readings open us to larger conversations? How might tracing these webby entanglements lead us to a more complex, intimate, and joyous understanding of the way the world works, rather than simply leading us back to Tolkien, as brilliant as he is? I don't wish to downplay what this scholarship has done for Tolkien Studies, or how it has enlivened and complicated discussions surrounding Tolkien's texts. I only wish us to raise our eyes from our single leaf, beautiful though it may be, and see the vast world, our primary world, in all its intricacies and entanglements, that made that leaf possible.

**…THE WORLD AHEAD**

All of this is to say that we must be proud of what we have accomplished these 60-odd years, but we cannot, must not, dare not rest on our laurels. We have done so much with our eyes fixed inward; imagine what we might do if the outside came to bear on our work! If we deconstructed the very boundaries between inside and outside and let them mingle as the intertwining of melodies that will make a great music? I hope I have not been overly critical of the work upon which my work stands: it is my great hope to honor was has gone before me in a celebration that, after the manner of Tolkien himself, brooks no unnatural filter on what may or may not find its way into our discussions.

On that note, I launch this project: a glorious, playful, serious, indiscriminate, critical exploration that opens its arms to an array of voices and silences, life and nonlife, from traditional Catholic readings of Tolkien to animism to quantum physics and beyond, all through the lifelines (a term I borrow from Anna Tsing) of a handful of characters. My goal in so doing is to reconfigure the ways we tend to talk about Tolkien. In this work I pick up patterns from the hands of Donna Haraway, whose incisive reading of the dangers of story opens this work, and whose exploration of string games provides its own methodology. As she says,

> It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (12)

I want us to be able to account for the stories we're telling about Tolkien's work and world, the thoughts we're thinking—and significantly, the characters, the people, we use to tell and think. In other words, the way we approach our scholarship is grounded on ethics, whether or not we always choose to recognize the fact, whether or not we always notice the fact, whether or not we are always directly affected by the fact. We need to notice the patterns we're making and how they might be provoking stagnation and discrimination rather than illumination. I'm asking that we practice "attentively and carefully reading differences that matter in their fine details," because "intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglements" (Dolphijn 50).

What does this mean, and how is it to be done? Here I would like to acquaint us with three important players in this game of ours: entanglement, intra-action, and phenomenon, with Karen Barad making the introductions:

> The neologism "intra-action" *signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*. That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction," which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the "distinct" agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements*. (Barad 33, emphasis original)

"Things" don't exist in isolation. They are entangled, related, co-dependent, webbed, sympoietic.[10] And they are productive of phenomena, which are "the *ontological* inseparability of agentially intra-acting components" (Barad 33, italics original). That is, phenomena are the things that arise from the impossibility of ontologically separating "things" (or people, or spaces, or places) that exist in intra-action. In this regard, we might say that all "things" are more or less phenomenal, in that nothing exists in isolation and all things are thus a product of a vast number of intra-actions.

Is Tolkien still with us, after all these twists and turns and refigurations? Of course he is. Here Tom Shippey steps in to remind us that Tolkien employed "the ancient and pre-novelistic device of *entrelacement*" in his work, and that furthermore he was distinctly aware "that the Icelandic word for 'short story' is *þattr*, 'a thread'; sagas often consist of several *þættir*, strands woven together. The image is in Gandalf's mind," adds Shippey, "when he says to Theoden, 'There are children in your land who, out of the twisted threads of story, could pick the answer to your question.'" Shippey then reveals the heart of this moment, and, unsurprisingly, it is ethical:

[10] Haraway gave me this final word, as well as the courage to loosen up my own writing style and adopt a tone that feels more natural and, hopefully, avoids snobbishness and incoherence.

"To unravel *entrelacement*—that is at least one route to wisdom" (*Road* 161).[11] In this new context I am skeptical of the word "unravel," as if we could take apart and lay out the separate strands without any knots or entanglements, but in Shippey's process and purpose I find much to be invested in. What he is noticing, and what we must be particularly attentive to, is the way these strands of story or narrative or plot are twisted and woven together, capturing both the bewilderment[12] of the characters as they navigate the warp and the incisive clarity and logic of the method Tolkien employs to establish the complex sympoiesis taking place in Middle-earth. In other words, Shippey is using the idea of interlacement to explore how situations and scenes are radically dependent on and intimately affected by what is not physically proximate.[13] Tolkien is playing with string figures.

Shippey's example is salient here and should help us come to terms with this counterintuitive relationship: three times Frodo, Sam, and Sméagol see a Nazgûl fly above them; Sméagol reads this as a "threat." "What he says sounds plausible enough," Shippey writes, "but it's wrong. Three times is a coincidence, and actually we can guess each time what the Nazgûl are doing" (163). He pinpoints precisely where these Nazgûl are headed and what they are doing, referring to them as "cross-connections" and noting that "[a]cross the whole breadth of the story […] fly the Nazgûl," like so many neon signposts quite literally screaming for our attention. Finally, Shippey weaves this into his notion of interlacement with the following passage:

> These references and allusions tie the story together, we would say, or to use Gandalf's image, show one thread twisting over another. They prove that the author has the story under control, and are significant to any reader who has grasped the entire plot. However, this is not how they appear to the characters, or to the reader whose attention has lapsed

[11] I would very much like to quote Shippey's entire section, "The Ethics of Interlacement," here; but alas, it is as impractical as it is desirable: the section is long but beautifully complements the way I wish to trace entanglements.
[12] Shippey is fond of this word in this context.
[13] Shippey's earlier book explores a similar phenomenon in different terms. See "The Lord of the Rings (1): Mapping out a Plot" in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century.*

> (as whose does not?). In this contrast between half- and full-perception lies the point of interlacings. (163)

If we sit with this momentarily, several important points stand out. The first is the implication that only the reader who "has grasped the entire plot" can accurately interpret what is happening. While on a purely logical level this is true (you can't know what's going on if you don't know what's going on, in other words), it comes dangerously close to implying a *mastery* over the text or story, which can hardly coexist with the open, generous, entangled reading we're attempting. But Shippey's next sentence saves us from that fate, as he reminds us that the characters, to whom we of course ought to be paying attention all along, and even we ourselves, sometimes drop a thread or two and find ourselves wandering. Indeed, whose attention has not lapsed? Most readers of Tolkien will tell you that they discover new interlacements every time they embark on a new reading.[14] There is much to say, finally, about the final sentence here. What does Shippey mean, "In the contrast between half- and full-perception lies the point of interlacings"? For now I wish to leave this question unanswered, but carefully marked for return when our wanderings bring us round again. It may be sooner than we'd imagine.

I want to suggest that this "interlacement" happens not just with Tolkien's narratives and histories, but in how the characters relate to and respond to one another and their world. In order to properly discuss this, however, I need a word that will allow me to simultaneously acknowledge and trouble a few important notions. The first notion has to do with Tolkien's Catholicism. It is a truth universally acknowledged that Tolkien was a devout Catholic and that this affected his fiction;[15] here I would like to specifically *not* quote that oft-misunderstood passage about Tolkien's consciousness of this fact, and instead point out that this

[14] Myself very much included. I am constantly amazed by the threads I have not yet picked up on.
[15] Special thanks to Jane Austen.

acknowledgement brings with it an important consequence for our conversation about entanglement. That is: Tolkien is working from a specific way of understanding the world that, whether or not it explicitly makes its way into his fiction, affects his interpretation of the world's ontological and conceptual workings, and which is particularly relevant when it comes to the way relationships are represented and facilitated within *The Lord of the Rings*. I'm referring to the Fall. For Tolkien, the Fall of humanity caused fractures or gaps (dropped stitches, to continue the analogy) to form in the perception of relationships of all sorts—between God and humans; between humans and humans; and importantly, between humans and nonhumans. This is why, for Tolkien, so many stories, but especially fairy-stories, speak to "the desire [of humans] to converse with other living things," a desire we experience as a memory we can't quite place:

> A vivid sense of that separation is very ancient; but also a sense that it was a severance: a strange fate and a guilt lies on us. Other creatures are like other realms with which Man has broken off relations, and sees now only from the outside at a distance, being at war with them, or on the terms of an uneasy armistice. There are a few men who are privileged to travel abroad a little; others must be content with travellers' tales. (152)

Thus, Tolkien proposes that because of the Fall, humans are separated from "other creatures": there is still some superficial interaction, but little to no actual, intimate knowledge of the other. Doesn't this mean he is in disagreement with all the other players in this game? What about sympoiesis and intra-action? What are we to do with this "severance"? How should we juggle this language of externality and exclusion with entanglement and interlacement?

We must caution ourselves with the wisest words possible: "Not so hasty!" (*LotR*, III, iv, 465). First of all, Tolkien says there is a "*sense* of that separation" and a "*sense* that it was a severance" (my emphasis), which does not immediately suggest that the separation is in anyway literal or physical. We might have "broken off relations," but that does not mean that they might not be taken up again, as a dropped pattern in string games might be recovered, or a dropped stitch in weaving might be woven in once more;[16] that some are indeed “privileged to travel abroad a little” surely means that the connection still exists. To complicate matters further, Tolkien explains in a note that it is, in his opinion, quite impossible to suppose that there was at some point no distinction between “human” and “animal” (160). While it would be easy to read a certain level of conservativism or even anthropocentrism in Tolkien’s remarks, I’d encourage us not to take the easy way out, but to try living with the tension for a little. If the “sense of separation” arises from the Fall, what existed before it? Certainly not “‘an absence of the sense of separation’” (160)—of this much Tolkien is adamant, and, true to form, he doesn’t explain what he means, much less resolve the tension. But what if we unfolded this term “sense”? What if, instead of referring to a feeling, that is, a vague, not-quite-physical hunch, “sense” is allowed to materialize, to become physical, *sensual*? This doesn’t relieve all the tension, but perhaps it shouldn’t. All the same, this unfolding moves us to a new place and positions us to think about how Tolkien might be conceptualizing separation. I propose that it is a matter of perception.

Let’s invite the Elves to help us think this relationship. According to Tolkien, the Elves are driven to leave the earth, with which they are coexistent,[17] insofar as and in the moment in which they begin to long to return to something outside it (i.e., Valinor). This can be seen in action in the warning Galadriel sends Legolas:

> *Legolas Greenleaf long under tree*
> *In joy thou hast lived. Beware of the Sea!*
> *If thou hearest the cry of the gull on the shore,*
> *Thy heart shall then rest in the forest no more.*
> (*LotR*, III, v, 503)

[16] I ought to be more careful with my metaphors: I don’t weave, but I do knit and crochet, and in both of these cases dropped stitches are not the end of everything, though they might feel like it at the time.
[17] Tolkien is quite clear in numerous places that the live of the Elves are bound up with and fully dependent upon the life of Arda.

And so it is. When Legolas does at last hear the gulls, he is stricken with a desire to sail into the West and leave Middle-earth behind: "The Sea! Alas! I have not yet beheld it. But deep in the hearts of all my kindred lies the sea-longing, which it is perilous to stir. Alas! for the gulls. No peace shall I have again under beech or under elm" (*LotR,* V, ix, 873).[18] In the music of the water and the cry of the gulls there is the memory of Valinor beyond the Sea, where the Elves once lived in bliss; but they love Middle-earth, and the going is a grievous thing. For the Elves, any "sense of separation" is tangible—a longing—and it arises explicitly from a remembering of what is now "past" but preserved in the present by nature itself. This will be discussed in greater detail later on; suffice it to say that the Elves experience a "sense of separation" from Middle-earth only when their attention is turned to a space that is literally "beyond the circles of the world" and they begin to conceive of themselves as beings who are *not* wholly constituted by their entanglement in Middle-earthly phenomena.

This reveals something important about the "sense of separation" that haunts humans. Again, Tolkien directs our attention to the Fall as history's origin point, the point of sensed severance.[19] Humanity is "separated" from the earth insofar as and in the moment in which it seeks something without: which is to say, humans are always already separated from the earth. The Fall, for Tolkien, is the action at the beginning of "things" which sets history in motion, in which humanity imagines and thus constitutes itself as something utterly unnatural. The "sense of separation," of severance, is born. What Tolkien does not wish to imply is that before this, humans recognized no distinction between themselves and animals (hence his refusal to accept

[18] This "sea-longing" is explored by Tolkien in innumerable other formats and versions, but he explores it more, as it affects the Elves, in *The Silmarillion*.

[19] Tolkien does not explicitly state that human history starts with the Fall, but he does say so of the Elves, and so I think viewing human history in the same way is not unwarranted. The Fall is of course the first great disaster according to Christian historiography and thus, as Vilém Flusser would argue (and Tolkien appears to agree), the beginning point of human history: the first recorded event (Flusser 8).

the idea of the "absence of the sense of separation"); rather, the Fall occurs when humans imagine themselves as masters: as above the narrative rather than entangled within it: as "like God" (Gen. 3:5), which Adam and Eve take to mean something entirely other than it actually is. (God isn't removed by nature: God walks in their midst in the Garden before the Fall.) Thus, a vivid perception of individuality, a "sense of separation," enters the scene, not arising from intra-actions that constantly shift "subject" and "object" distinctions, as Barad suggests, or from intricate sympoiesis, as Haraway would add, but from the image of entities distinct and aloof, cut off, as it were, and unable to regain access because the "sense of separation" is grounded in the exceptionality and inherent difference of humanity.

Can we return now to Shippey's proposal of perception? Let's have the full sentence again. "In this contrast between half- and full-perception lies the point of interlacings" (*Road* 163). Half-perception is lacking—if we can couch the problem in those terms—because it relies on the very sense of separation that constitutes humans as utterly different and isolate, and as *inherently* so. It is not so much that an actual separation, rupture, or gap exists; rather, it is that humanity begins from a mode of perception that assumes the separation as fundamental to the ordering of the world. That is, the Fall is the thing we find ourselves returning to. It is the moment that humanity's vision becomes skewed and, importantly, it is the moment in which human history begins: prior to the Fall there can be no proper "human" history because humanity does not perceive itself as a distinct entity with a discrete history but as a participant in the teeming tangles of things of both "living and nonliving persuasions" (Haraway 105). From the perceptual rupture of the Fall humanity consistently sets forth and then wonders to find itself once again "bewildered," captured within its own independent subjecthood and looking in on the world from the outside. Remember, it's not that the separation is in anyway an aspect of reality, which is to say: humans are still entangled in the world whether they are able to recognize it or not. This is where full-perception comes in. The contrast between the two matters, but does not form a binary. Full-perception is not the precise opposite of half-perception; it does not entirely dissolve self, but rather is able to acknowledge its own entanglement and sympoiesis, the creation of a self that does not exist apart from its intra-actions: that is, a phenomenon. Full-perception *accounts* for the ways in which the world is always becoming-with[20] itself.

When Shippey says "In this contrast between half- and full-perception lies the point of interlacings," I take him to mean that Tolkien is pointing out to us where our attention has lapsed: the bewilderment of the characters—which arises in the clash, the contrast, between half- and full-perception—should signal to us that the course of events is being altered by something taking place outside our immediate purview. Where half- and full-perception are in tension, where bewilderment abounds, we find the point of interlacement, the place where the threads cross.

For Shippey, this is important because it's making two points about the structure of the story, the first being that Tolkien has it under control and is able to weave complicated and sympoietic patterns which the characters themselves usually fail to see.[21] It also allows Tolkien to develop suspense, surprise the reader, and to fabricate a reality in which, as we have all experienced at one point or another, characters and readers who are not able to account for the many entanglements find themselves bewildered as a result of their half-perception, even when the pattern is ostensibly clearer to someone on the outside (if it were strictly possible to *be* outside; even the reader is implicated in the story). This is Shippey's reading, and a powerful one

[20] I'm borrowing this term from Donna Haraway.

[21] When they do see, it's a moment of powerful revelation that totally reorients their relationship to the world. Some characters come to these moments more often and easier than others. We'll take a look at these—Legolas is one—later on.

at that. What happens if, as I proposed many pages ago now, we allow this methodology to extend to the characters and their relationships and not just the narrative? Something beautiful begins to happen. It is this happening, this beautiful becoming-with, which the rest of this project explores in detail.

What I want to finally suggest from all this is that the contrast between half- and full-perception allows Tolkien to trouble some significant preconceptions about the world: about spirituality, human relationality, and ecology. And he does this through characters whose lives "bridge the gap," as it were, between half- and full-perception. That is, characters who are attuned to the lively entanglements of life on Middle-earth become integral to Tolkien's work and world in that they walk the borders, the lifelines, the in-between spaces, reorienting the attention of their companions (and readers!) to "the world's intra-active becoming" (Barad 207). Now at last I'm offering that word I suggested was needed above. It's not a new one, however; in fact, we must reintroduce ourselves to a word that is quite familiar in Tolkien Studies, but which in this expanded environment takes on new meaning and significance.

*Intercessor*. I'm asking us to rethink this concept together, to move beyond its traditional theological, social, or even Tolkienian connotations, and to recognize in this well-known figure a more honest, more generous, more open way of accounting for the entanglements of the world and our own half-perception—a way of being brought gently to an acknowledgement of the moments when our "attention has lapsed" (Shippey 163). Just as Tolkien is using interlacement to mark for us the fact that much escapes our attention and notice, and that the world and story are entangled in ways we can't properly imagine, so some of his characters remind others that the world is always bigger on the inside: entangled, intra-active, phenomenal: a string-game practice of pattern-making. We have already met many of the companions in this fellowship that's gathering, but more will join: Gandalf, Glorfindel, and Eärendil; Legolas and Maedhros and Faramir. We'll find ourselves entangled and interlaced with horses and Orcs, Balrogs and Wizards, rocks and grass, seasons and weather and journeys of spirit and body. I've called our guides "mystics" for a number of reasons, some of which will only emerge the more entangled we become, but for now, think of them as figures who are able to leave behind perceptions of their distinct, separate individuality for a mode of storytelling and living that embraces becoming-with and holds open hospitable spaces for new voices, hands, stories, and other such phenomena.

### THE BORDER-WALKERS

In what follows, I've chosen to call our guides "border-walkers" because they inhabit that in-between space that is traditionally a marker of great mystical power. The ancient Celts, for example, considered spaces like seashores and edges of forests sacred, because they were thought to be places where the primary world touched the spiritual world with trembling clarity. Border-walkers thus seems to me a fitting term to describe those characters who live their lives in states of full-perception: who are aware of and regularly account for the entanglement of beings. They walk in a world vibrant with possibilities; a world that is always quivering on the edge of revelation. They stand in "the point of interlacings"—and in some respects, they are those points.

The first point of interest is therefore the entanglement of the primary world with the spiritual. Here our guides are Gandalf, Glorfindel, and Eärendil, three characters of three different races who take up the mantle of intercessor—in both the new and the old sense—and part the veil, as it were. In their presence, the spiritual world gleams on the edge of perception. Sometimes it breaks through altogether in blinding, holy light. It so happens that these characters also play a significant mystical role in the texts. Indeed, this section on the spiritual will be the most decidedly mystical of the three, and we will discover that our guides actually fulfill the ancient ritual requirements of shamanic initiation, and that this is largely what allows them to act as spiritual intercessors to their companions and the world around them. We'll be visiting with the Eagles, with horses, and with ships and seabirds along the way; the shaman-intercessor always has a companion, and that relationship is simultaneously the bridge between the worlds and evidence of the entanglement of the primary world with the spiritual. Gandalf, Glorfindel, and Eärendil reveal to us that the spiritual world is always already breaking through, if we know how to look for it.

From the spiritual we come to the ecological, and leaving behind our shamans we join company with Legolas the elf. Legolas's role in the Fellowship is often downplayed, if not directly misunderstood. Even in Peter Jackson's film adaptation, he seems to exist primarily to provide a) backup for Aragorn; b) spectacles of inhuman nimbleness; and c) obvious observations about a current situation with appropriate gravity and accompanying dark premonitions. What gets lost in this interpretation—and, incidentally, in our willingness to designate Legolas one of the more or less "flat" characters of the company[22]—is his unique relationship with the world around him. Legolas, though not designated a shaman by the texts in even the remotest sense, is an intercessor whose skills set him apart from those around him. He is a border-walker. Just as Gandalf, Glorfindel, and Eärendil highlight the overlap of the primary and spiritual worlds, Legolas reinforces the ways in which the natural world, the environment, is indivisible from and integral to who, what, and why we are.

[22] I have heard this from several friends who were and perhaps are surprised to hear that I am able—i.e., that there is enough information—to devote an entire section solely to Legolas.

We'll also take a look at what seems to be a number of contradictions to this model, and live with the tensions or tangles for a moment. Here our guides will become somewhat unconventional, but no less significant. Maedhros will invite us into this new space. We'll think about the ways in which he is figured as an intercessor of the highest order only to be denied that role and ultimately shut out from the world's entanglement. In listening to the story of Maedhros, we have to come into a new way of thinking; we have to recognize that for Tolkien, "happily ever after" doesn't happen now, and that sometimes, threads snap, the pattern breaks, and stitches dropped aren't necessarily picked up again. Maedhros is Tolkien's admission that even the most well-intentioned are often overridden by darkness. From there, we'll stay a while in the company of Orcs as we wrestle, as Tolkien did before us, with their place in this entangled world and with the possibility of irredeemable evil. The Orcs, Easterlings, Southrons, and Woses have important stories to tell, if we're willing to listen—and since the role of the intercessor is all about restoring communication, recovering lost possibilities, and bringing the world into an accounting for interdependence, we can't ignore the apparent suggestion that not everyone is invited into this new awareness. To close out this section on contradictions and difficulties we will return to Legolas, this time investigating the now-troubled relationship between Elves, forests, and Ents. This conversation brings together the problems of exclusion and voicelessness by investigating the moments in which Tolkien's text, for all its ambition, tends to slide into a more or less comfortable, conservative vision of personhood and relationality.

Here, as the paper concludes, we'll fall in step with two more guides, unexpected friends on the way. Faramir will open to us a mode of living that is characterized by its awareness: he, as our final intercessor, takes account of our world, both its injustices and its beauties. He combines the traits of our other intercessors and presents us with the possibility of a more ethical response to the ecology of which we are a part. Éowyn steps up to this task along with him, and in time they come to a mutual understanding of their shared world that burgeons forth in the form of a restored garden. What I hope this argument suggests is that Tolkien's view of the entanglement of the world, of its becoming-with, is complicated, but also, in its best moments, progressive and even visionary. Tolkien is imagining a network that encompasses flora, fauna, geological structures, humanoids: that encompasses heaven and earth, the spiritual and the corporeal, knitting them all together into a complex web of vibrant being-in-the-world.

# I

# HEALING SPIRITUAL FRACTURES

> Why yes! Why had I forgotten? *A light when all other lights go out!* And now indeed light alone can help us.
>
> — J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

## CROSSING BOUNDARIES OF OUR OWN

Traditionally, discussions of the spirituality of Tolkien's work have revolved around his Catholicism, but Tolkien's texts are not indebted solely to Christian doctrine. Indeed, some critics, like Catherine Madsen, even suggest that the Christian aspects of the legendarium have been exploited to such an extent that their form has become shapeless and nearly drained of meaning. As briefly suggested earlier, this interplay between Christian and other worldviews and religions can be understood more fully by attending to the neopagan revival of the *fin de siècle*. Christopher Roman likewise argues that Tolkien's ecology bears significant resemblance to current trends in eco-criticism (specifically object-oriented ontology and perhaps even new materialism). These two claims might seem anachronistic and incompatible but for the fact that, as Dennis Denisoff has made abundantly clear, current models of ecocriticism have much in common with the environmental ethics of the western pagan revival that so marked *fin-de-siècle* England (and which is markedly absent from scholarship on Tolkien's spiritual and ecological visions). Denisoff notes that this distinct brand of paganism "problematized the false divisions between humans, other animals, and nature in general" ("Dissipating Nature" 443), which describes precisely the aspirations of Tolkien's fiction. This paganism was, for many or even most practitioners, far less about worshipping ancient gods and goddesses or even nature, and far more about coming to a clearer understanding of one's place in nature—of traversing again networks between beings that were once, in Christian thought, imagined to be irreparably broken. Indeed, this was "a pagan spirituality capable of undermining anthropocentrism while enhancing a responsible contribution to the ecological network—what Edward Carpenter describes as an 'intimately knit' organization engaged to the core of all living entities (*Civilization*, 132-3)" ("Post-human" 362). This way of relating to the world was deeply spiritual; and while Tolkien, as he himself claimed, created undeniably Catholic and Christian work, we must acknowledge first of all Tolkien's own mystic tendencies and his engagement as both an author and an academic with the world around him.[23]

We can, in fact, make a solid argument for the claim that Tolkien was influenced (if unconsciously) by the eco-pagan trend in England. First of all, his texts make numerous appeals to mystic ecstasy that results in or requires a sort of prelapsarian recovery of communion.[24] Mircea Eliade explores these concepts through myths involving shamanic ecstasy, arguing that "they imply the possibility, for certain privileged or elect persons, of returning to the origin of time, of recovering the mythical and paradisal moment before the 'fall,' that is, before the break in communications between heaven and earth" (493). Furthermore, in the process, renewed "communication between earth and heaven is established, in an effort to restore the 'communicability' that was the law *in illo tempore*. From one point of view, all these [ecstatic] rites pursue the reconstruction of a 'passage' to the beyond and hence abolition of the break between planes that is typical of the human condition after the 'fall'" (484). In essence, the

[23] And Tolkien was certainly something of a mystic. See especially Letter 89 in *Letters*.
[24] This claim will surface again when we turn to the idea of ecological intercession in Chapter II.

shaman recovers, through ecstasy, the spiritual condition that belonged to all humankind before a 'fall' produced alienation and distance. The shamans, or spiritual intercessors to use my vocabulary, stand in the gaps to reopen, validate, and make visible channels of communion between the spiritual and the material. They are ever-present reminders that we have not been cut off from the spiritual realm, but rather that we have forgotten or mislaid the ability to successfully locate those channels which provide access to the divine.

### A SHAMAN OF THE HIGHEST ORDER: GANDALF

Gandalf's story arc has invited enlightening and incisive readings: he is regularly read as one of the several Christ-figures of *The Lord of the Rings*, or conversely as the prototypical Odinic wanderer. Scholars from Marjorie Burns (in her foundational essay "Gandalf and Odin") to Verlyn Flieger to Tom Shippey have noted and commented on Gandalf's mirroring of the Nordic deity, citing such details as his affinity for mingling with the common folk, his signature grey cloak and hat, and his somewhat paradoxical capacity for both mischief and profound wisdom. Tolkien himself acknowledged the similarities (*Letters* 119), which are more marked in early drafts of the stories and even lessen in the transition from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*. The encounter between Gandalf and the Balrog on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, however, has perhaps inspired the most prolific of commentary on the wizard and his function in the tale. The scene has served as the foundation for and justification of Gandalf's affiliation with Christ in that it is often read as his death-as-sacrifice and subsequent resurrection into greater power, wisdom, and life. Likewise, it has been compared by numerous scholars with the Norse vision of Ragnarök, in which the world is dissolved into fire and abyss and even Odin meets his end, but that ultimately gives rise to a new world cycle, as it were, out of the ashes. Perhaps ironically, though, Gandalf never once claims that he *died* as a result of the encounter, and when other characters do so he responds cryptically, neither affirming nor denying their assumptions. Rather, he asserts that he “passed through fire and death” (III, vi, 514), implying not death and resurrection but the tradition shamanic soul-journey to and from the netherworld for an explicitly spiritual purpose. And yet, critics and lay readers alike speak unreservedly of Gandalf’s “death.”[25]

Despite the prodigious proliferation of these readings, however, few have attempted to read Gandalf’s encounter with the Balrog as an experience of ecstatic spirituality—as a sort of shamanic initiation rite.[26] Given that Odin is himself the “master of ecstasy,” this is undoubtedly surprising; and the scene itself is riddled with allusions to shamanic practices and ecstatic rituals. In my research I encountered only one that attempted to untangle these allusions. Yvette Kisor’s article “Totemic Reflexes in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*” dedicates a little more than a page to this problem. She writes, “The encounter with the Balrog, the descent into the underworld, the ascent into the sky, the configuration of the reality Gandalf experiences as being beyond time, and his description of his experience as a journey (“Now I have walked there [...] I wandered far on roads that I will not tell”)—all these features suggest the outlines of a shamanic initiation rite” (131-132). While I am clearly indebted to Kisor’s initial plowing, I here intend to investigate these rites in greater detail, appealing to Eliade and others rather than Glosecki. Like Kisor, however, I am interested first and foremost in Gandalf’s encounter with the Balrog in Moria.[27]

[25] Peter Jackson’s films reinforce this misconception. In *The Return of the King*, Gandalf and Pippin have a conversation in which they discuss death, and Gandalf describes his own experience with it as a way to comfort and encourage the young hobbit as the armies of Mordor are about to break into Minas Tirith.
[26] This is not meant to suggest in any way that these other interpretations are *incorrect*. Indeed, they are most significant in their own rights and, I believe, are equally valid readings of Gandalf’s character.
[27] The rest of this section, due to the intimate and even microscopic view of the text it takes, has been broken down into subsections to facilitate comprehension and preserve organization. I spend more time here defining in minute detail the shamanic experience because it will prove a useful framework with which to analyze other characters as we move forward.

### Triggering the Ecstatic Experience

It has been convincingly argued by numerous scholars that the use of rhythm, song, music, and dance all have been used to instigate experiences of ecstasy, especially in shamanic contexts. Mercia Eliade, whose groundbreaking work on archaic shamanism and ecstasy appeared (in its original French edition) in 1951, insists that "[t]he drum has a role of the first importance in shamanic ceremonies. […] It is indispensable in conducting the shamanic séance" (168).[28] H. Sidky likewise notes that drumming often accompanies induction into an altered state of consciousness (23). Trance initiation was not the only function of the shamanic drum, however. It was also used to hold the trance, as a symbolic or metaphorical shamanic weapon, and even served an animistic role in the transportation of souls to and from the underworld.

No one who has read *The Lord of the Rings* (or, I'll add in a fit of generosity, seen the film adaptation) can forget the moment that the Fellowship, in the pregnant darkness of Moria, suddenly hears the "drums in the deep," beating out the solemn rhythms of their doom:

> Gandalf had hardly spoken […] when there came a great noise: a rolling *Boom* that seemed to come from the depths far below, and to tremble in the stone at their feet. They sprang towards the door in alarm. *Doom, doom*, it rolled again, as if huge hands were turning the very caverns of Moria into a vast drum. (II, v, 323)

The drums reach a thunderous crescendo as the company descends towards the core of the caverns, as if they were the heartbeat of the mountain. Here the text is punctuated every now and again by a returning refrain whose pace quickens to frenzy: "*Doom, doom* rolled the drum-beats, growing louder and louder, *doom, doom*" (II, v, 329). The rhythmic beating anticipates the climax at the Bridge; tensions run high as the beat instills itself in the bodies of the nine

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[28] Eliade's definition of *shaman* (and really, his definition of *shamanism* as a whole) has been alternately contested and supported over the years, much like Joseph Campbell's reductive analysis of world mythology. Some scholars argue that popular understanding of shamanism has become so generalized as to make the term almost useless in critical studies (Sidky 8). I do not here intend to enter the debate. Even those scholars who are skeptical of Eliade's terminology tend to return to his detailed and unprecedented observations on ecstasy as authoritative; I am similarly relying on his records of ecstatic traditions.

companions. The pounding of the drum becomes a steady backdrop leading up to the actual ecstatic experience, as once the appropriate height and intensity is reached, the drums drop out, though they have thus far importantly served to narrow attention and, through the rush of adrenaline they prompt, heighten the sensory perceptions of the entire Fellowship. It is in this moment of high-strung potentiality that they come to the Bridge itself.

### THE BRIDGE OF KHAZAD-DÛM

The image of the bridge is likewise embedded in shamanic and ecstatic rituals. Eliade observes that "shamans, like the dead, must cross a bridge in the course of their journey to the underworld. Like death, ecstasy implies a 'mutation,' to which myth gives plastic expression by a 'perilous passage'" (482). The role of the shaman is to re-forge or reinstate the original link—a link perceived as broken—between humanity and the divine, between mortality and immortality, the mundane and the transcendent. The bridge symbolizes reunion and recovery, but those states are not directly attainable by any but the select few. Fittingly, then, the Bridge of Khazad-dûm is immeasurably high, sickeningly narrow.

Of course, it cannot be overlooked that the other eight members of the company also cross the Bridge—indeed that Gandalf is the only member of the company to *fail* to cross it. In this regard it is important to note that "the various roads are equally available to mythical *heroes* and to shamans (sorcerers, medicine men, etc.)" (491, my emphasis). Each member of the Fellowship is a hero of his own kind; the fact that each is able to cross is therefore not inexplicable in the context of the "perilous passage": their successful passage is symbolic of their transcendent courage. Gandalf's fate, however, his supposed "failure" to cross the Bridge, can be explained by observing that by facing the Balrog, the wizard is fulfilling his role as supernatural protector of his companions, just as the shaman defends his community against evil spirits, diseases, and other supernatural powers (Siikala 70). Gandalf's sacrifice ensures that the rest of the Fellowship can cross in safety. Ultimately, the Bridge represents Gandalf's opportunity to fulfill his divinely ordered vocation and to secure the transcendence of his dependents, for in order for the other members of the Fellowship to have safe passage, Gandalf must defeat the adversarial supernatural force in pursuit.

But the wizard is faced with another problem, for the Bridge is not just a representation of transcendence: its symbolism "is bound up with the symbolism of what we have called the 'paradoxical passage' because it sometimes proves to be an impossibility or a situation from which there is no escape" (Eliade 485). Gandalf cannot cross the Bridge without first facing the impossibility of surviving battle with the Balrog. His decision to defy the enemy rather than fly initiates a journey of startling paradoxes that are only revealed after his return. These paradoxes form yet another aspect of the ecstatic experience of the shaman.

### Fire and Ice, Burning and Freezing

Perhaps the most significant symbol present in the battle of Khazad-dûm is that of fire. Indeed, according to Eliade, "Many 'primitive' tribes [and, he adds later, "more complex religions"] conceive of magico-religious power as 'burning' or express it in terms meaning 'heat,' 'burn,' 'very hot,' and the like" (474). Even more importantly, "All these myths and beliefs have their counterparts, we should note, in initiatory rituals that involve a real 'mastery over fire,'" for "often the shamanic ecstasy is not attained until after the shaman is 'heated'" (476). We see this played out in the text in several ways.

First, and most evidently, Gandalf declares that he is "a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor," referring, it is assumed, both to his work in the service of Ilúvatar, who keeps the Imperishable Flame, and to the Ring of Fire, of which he is the bearer (II, v, 330).

More trivially, perhaps, Gandalf is also a firework master, and his “fame in the Shire [is] due mainly to his skill with fires, smokes, and lights” (25). Clearly, the wizard already possesses “a real ‘mastery over fire,’” and this is proven by his words on the Bridge and by the subsequent events.[29] Gandalf furthermore challenges the Balrog with the words “The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow!” (II, v, 330).

More significant, however, are the events as Gandalf relates them to Legolas, Aragorn, and Gimli in the chapter “The White Rider.” Here the paradoxes of the journey, as well as the trial by fire, become most clear. Indeed, the tale as Gandalf tells it is riddled with striking, cryptic, nearly unbelievable paradoxes in which fire and ice, height and depth, light and dark are follow upon each other’s heels in an almost dizzying exchange:

> ‘Long time I fell,’ he said at last, slowly, as if thinking back with difficulty. ‘Long I fell, and he fell with me. His fire was about me. I was burned. Then we plunged into the deep water and all was dark. Cold it was as the tide of death: almost it froze my heart. […] His fire was quenched, but now he was a thing of slime, stronger than a strangling snake. […] From the lowest dungeon to the highest peak [we] climbed. […] The sun shone fiercely there, but all below was wrapped in cloud. Out he sprang, and even as I came behind, he burst into new flame. […] A great smoke rose about us, vapour and steam. Ice fell like rain.’ (III, v, 501-502)

Gandalf’s ability to act heroically amidst the opposites—to transcend them, even—is one and the same with his ability to overcome his demonic enemy and is essential to the ecstatic experience that he is undergoing. Acute suffering—raw pain—is at the very heart of shamanic ecstasy (Riboli & Torri 5), and for Gandalf, his body bombarded by paradoxical extremes, the experience is no different. It is suffering, the shamans believe, that births transcendence, the ascent of the soul from the underworld to the heights (Siikala 150).

[29] Preceding events point to this too. Gandalf saves the Fellowship from wolves with fire only pages before (II, iv, 299).

## “The uttermost foundations of stone”

The next stage in the journey is the descent to the underworld that precedes of necessity the ascent into the heights. Eliade notes, in multiple places, that one of the particular functions of shamanic ecstasy is to facilitate travel to the underworld; Sidky concurs in his more recent study (140), as does Siikala (83). Although most sources agree that the primary purpose of the shamanic journey to the netherworld is for the purpose of retrieving lost souls, there is also some indication that shamans might attempt the journey in order to fight off evil spirits. Gandalf’s experience clearly could be interpreted this way, but the peculiar words used in his recounting of it practically beg for a reading informed by Norse cosmology.

Gandalf assures Gimli that the abyss “‘has a bottom, beyond light and knowledge’” (III, v, 501), and he and the Balrog reach it after “‘plung[ing] into the deep water’” (III, v, 501). The placement of a definite article (“*the* deep water”) is curious, but Gandalf does not pause to situate his audience with any sort of explanation. Curiously though, his three companions are not startled by the remark; Gimli does interrupt, but only to observe that “‘Deep is the abyss of Durin’s Bridge, and none has measured it’” (III, v, 501). I suggest that all the explanation readers need might be found by reading on. Gandalf says that he and the Balrog

> ‘Fought under the living earth, where time is not counted. Ever he clutched me, and ever I hewed him, till at last he fled into dark tunnels. They were not made by Durin’s folk, Gimli son of Gloín. Far, far below the deepest delvings of the Dwarves, the world is gnawed by nameless things. Even Sauron knows them not. They are older than he.’ (III, v, 501)

Gandalf’s description of the netherplaces of the world bear a striking resemblance to Eddic descriptions of the roots of the World Tree, Yggdrasil. In the Prose Edda we read that “‘The third [root of Yggdrasil] reaches down to Niflheim, and under this root is the well Hvergelmir; but Nidhogg […] gnaws at this root from below’” (24). Hvergelmir is a roiling well that feeds the rivers of the shadow world (Niflheim) and parallels “the deep water” that Gandalf describes.

Nidhogg is the serpent that is constantly biting at the root of Yggdrasil; he is joined by "'so many serpents […] that no tongue can count them'" (27). Compare this with Gandalf's description: "'the world is gnawed by nameless things.'" [30] Remember, too, that Odin himself (Gandalf's double, as Burns argues) facilitates his ecstatic experience by hanging in agony from Yggdrasil, over Hvergelmir, for nine days and nine nights, until he is rewarded by a glimpse and understanding of runes of power (Larrington 32). This notion of the World Tree, however, brings us to yet another stage in our exploration.

### CLIMBING THE ENDLESS STAIR

Upward movement now characterizes Gandalf's tale. The enemies, locked in combat, climb the Endless Stair that runs "from the lowest dungeon to the highest peak […], ascending in many thousand steps, until it issues at last in Durin's Tower carved in the living rock of Zirakzigil, the pinnacle of the Silvertine […] a dizzy eerie above the mists of the world" (III, v, 502). Their struggle becomes "the Battle of the Peak" and when at last Gandalf gains the upper hand the Balrog "'[falls] from the high place and [breaks] the mountain-side where he smote it in his ruin.'" The symbol of the stair or ladder are usually interpreted (along with the motif of the World Tree) as "images of the connection between heaven and earth"—specifically suggesting that "communication between heaven and earth could be brought about—or could be *in illo tempore*—by some physical means" like climbing (Eliade 492). Eliade further notes that "shamanic ecstasy can be regarded as a recovery of the human condition before the 'fall'; in other words, it reproduces a primordial 'situation' available to the rest of mankind only through

[30] It is worth noting here that the gods of the Æsir, too, must cross their rainbow bridge, Bifrost, to reach the roots of Yggdrasil; the Poetic Edda says that it "burns all with flames," resembling the fiery encounter of the Bridge of Khazad-dûm (52). We might also point to the etymological equivalence of Midgard and Middle-earth, and their respective positions in relation to the two underworlds pictured here (Moria = "black pits," Niflheim or Niflhel = "shadow/mist world" or "shadow/mist hell").

death" (493). That is to say, the imagery employed by Gandalf in this passage is precisely the imagery used to describe the ecstatic ascent of the shamanic soul as it rises above the mortal world and is rewarded, at least for a time, with some sort of immortal or primordial condition—which, in turn, means that he accomplishes spiritual intercession.

Again, the fact that Gandalf's passage is conducted via intense suffering is not insignificant. The shaman's journey is one that passes through a symbolic death and reemerges out of symbolic rebirth or resurrection and suffering is the bridge between the two states. "Pain," Siikala explains, "according to its anthropological concept, features, in the shamanic initiation, as a symbolic dismemberment; yet, it also denotes the endurance of physical pain. The individual, the shaman, suffers alone for the community [c.f. Gandalf suffering for the Fellowship], because the experience of pain is a pivotal element in the human formula for obtaining knowledge" (155). The transcendence of the soul through pain leads to wisdom, the catalyst for rebirth.

### Straying Out of Thought and Time

The next piece of Gandalf's narrative is the most explicitly mystical of the entire passage, so I quote it here in full.

> 'Then darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell.
>
> 'Naked I was sent back—for a brief time, until my task is done. And naked I lay upon the mountain-top. The tower behind was crumbled into dust, the window gone; the ruined stair was choked with burned and broken stone. I was alone, forgotten, without escape upon the hard horn of the world. There I lay staring upward, while the stars wheeled over, and each day was as long as a life-age of the earth. Faint to my ears came the gathered rumor of all lands: the springing and the dying, the song and the weeping, and the slow everlasting groan of overburdened stone.' (III, v, 502)

This description contains a range of symptoms recorded as being part of the ecstatic experience. Sidky offers a synthesized list of these potential symptoms, gathered broadly from shamans who have experienced altered states of consciousness, and it is here we turn to inform our reading of this passage.

First of all, Gandalf recalls "feelings of timelessness and changes in the perception of the passage of time, as extremely fast or slow" (Sidky 24). One day becomes a life-age while simultaneously being "'out of thought and time.'" He experiences a "hyperacuteness of perceptions" in that he hears such inaudible things as birth and death, joy and sorrow (25). "Perceptions and feelings of profound insight and illumination" are his in this moment (25)—he is aware of "the gathered rumor of all lands." Gandalf is touched by a "sense of the ineffable: the inability to communicate one's sensations because of the uniqueness of the subjective experience" (25). He "'will not tell'" the road he traveled, just as earlier he says he will "'bring no rumor'" of the dark places beneath the world and, more significantly, that even "'if there were a year to spend, I would not tell you all'" (III, v, 501). Finally, Gandalf emerges from the experiences "with a new sense of hope or a feeling of rebirth" (25): he tells his companions, "'I felt life in me again'" (III, v, 502), which is as close as he comes to implying his death.[31] All things considered, Gandalf's account of his ecstasy is an almost textbook-perfect example, and the appearance of Gwaihir the Windlord at this most crucial of moments only confirms these suspicions.

### VALOR IS A THING WITH FEATHERS

Even as early as the writing of *The Hobbit*, Gandalf has a remarkably close relationship (or identification) with the Eagles: he is knowledgeable about the customs of the folk and "[knows] the correct reply" to their farewell (*Hobbit* 113). Their relationship develops significantly in *The*

[31] There is some indication that such experiences—as with Gandalf's—may also have involved a type of "ritual nudity" (Eliade 146) that emphasized the metaphorical rebirth, but overall my sources do not come down definitively on one side or the other.

*Lord of the Rings*, to the point that Gwaihir remarks that he is *fated* to appear when Gandalf needs him (III, v, 502). The relationship is not, however, as unprecedented as it might seem. The eagle is often associated with divinity, both within and without Tolkien's legendarium. Manwë, for instance, is the lord of the Eagles; they respond to his bidding (*S* 26). Thus, we could read Gandalf's connection with the great birds as a reflection of Manwë's lordship, given that Gandalf, as Olórin, served that Vala as his Maia (Burns 225).[32] But there is much more to be said.

Eliade observes that in several cultural traditions, an eagle is the father of the first shaman (157). The eagle is, incidentally, one of the animals most commonly associated with shamanic activity: because of the bird's impressive flight capabilities, it was often used to represent the movement of the shaman's soul from earth to heaven (157). In fact, Eliade even records the belief that shamans could transform themselves into eagles or other birds in order to perform their transcendental ascent (480)! Even the fact that it was Galadriel who sent Gwaihir to search for Gandalf does not detract from the significance of the latter's relationship with the eagles (III, v, 502).[33] Indeed, Eliade devotes an entire section of his book to the female helping-spirits who were believed to assist shamans in their spirit-world travels and their rituals of ecstasy (79).

It should be noted here that other birds were often ritually invoked alongside the eagle—some shaman costumes were decorated, significantly, with swans' feathers (Eliade 155). In our key passage, Gandalf relates his conversation with Gwaihir, including the eagle's seemingly

[32] Interestingly, Burns more than once refers to Odin's/Manwë's eagles as "representative of shamanistic transference," but she never extends that idea to include Gandalf in its scope ("Gandalf" 221, 225).
[33] There are many reasons to read Galadriel as a shaman in her own right, and not simply as a "helping spirit," but the limits on space and time unfortunately prevent me from exploring this fascinating possibility in more detail at present.

strange observation that the wizard is "light as a swan's feather in [his] claw" (III, v, 502).[34] I would suggest that while the Eagles have often been (correctly) interpreted as luck, divine favor, grace, etc., they might be read equally well as signs of the soul's transcendence in moments of acute suffering, imminent death, or overwhelming courage.[35, 36]

### BY STRANGE ROADS

Ultimately, Gandalf's ecstatic journey produces several notable results. First of all, he returns to Middle-earth as the White Wizard, eventually replacing Saruman as the head of the Order. Color is important: several scholars note that some cultures seem to acknowledge a distinction between "white" or "light" shamans and "black" or "dark" shamans—the latter being those who fraternize with demons and evil spirits and use black magic to accomplish their goals (Eliade 184-189).[37] "Since they have access to power," Strathern and Stewart point out, "and may become its vessel or its incarnation, all depends on how they use it (a shamanic equivalent of the 'power corrupts' adage)" (13). Saruman loses his powers because he does not use them well and does not transcend the material world but exploits it; Gandalf retains *and* increases his through ecstasy

[34] Limits on space force me to avoid discussing the concept of weightlessness in any detail, but it should be noted that a shaman's ability to ascend to/descend from the spirit world in ecstasy was often dependent on his "lightness" or "weightlessness," or in some cases even his swiftness (Eliade 485). The purer the soul, the lighter the shaman.
[35] The sudden appearance of Thorondor King of Eagles to Maedhros and Fingon in *The Silmarillion*, for example, is a moment that incorporates all three of these elements (*S* 110). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Eagles tend to appear only when Gandalf is present and/or involved (St. Clair 95).
[36] I am thinking here of Tolkien's "'theory of courage'" as explicated by Tom Shippey in *The Road to Middle-earth*. He writes, "The central pillar of that theory was Ragnarök—the day when gods and men would fight evil and giants, and inevitably be defeated" (156). This is the courage whose "mainspring is despair, its spirit often heathen ferocity" (157). It is "courage undiluted by confidence—but at the same time untainted by rage and despair" (158).
[37] We might read the Balrog as a "dark shaman," especially considering the fact that the Balrogs were, like Sauron, fallen Maiar corrupted through the influence of Melkor/Morgoth, and as such were supernaturally (relatively) coequal with Gandalf. Ironically, this may also provide some sort of answer to the eternal debate of the wings, or lack thereof, of the Balrog, for Eliade also notes that shamanic costumes often included a pair of wings, or, the shaman was said to sprout wings in a kind of shape-shifting moment. Both of these ideas Eliade interprets as being symbolic of the ascension of the soul, but he also points out that in some cases, the shaman is said to be escorted to the underworld by a winged demon (see 476-482 for a discussion of shamanic flight). Whether or not Balrogs have "real" wings, it certainly seems that they should be associated either with dark shamans or demon-escorts and are certainly "winged" in a metaphorical sense.

because he uses them wisely (i.e., against other supernaturals and for the protection of his community). The fact that Gandalf sets his semi-divine power only against the power of other supernatural forces is a reflection of a sort of shamanic code of conduct: "What the shaman is able—and almost addicted to doing—to his vocational colleagues [i.e., other shamans], he will never do to his clients or any lay person of his community. He does it all—as part of his calling—to another species of beings: the supernatural forces that cause illness, bad luck and calamities" (Oppitz 26).

Secondly, the experience opens the way for Gandalf's acquisition of Shadowfax, the silver-white stallion who is able to travel throughout Middle-earth at tremendous speeds. The shaman is associated with a powerful horse in many different traditions, in which the animal is yet another symbol of the shaman's ability to engage in fantastic or mystical travel. Odin's eight-legged stallion Sleipnir, which allows him to travel quickly and invisibly throughout the Nine Worlds, is not least of these equine sidekicks; and many scholars have noted the similarities between Sleipnir and Shadowfax in their discussions of the relationship between Odin and Gandalf (see Green; Noel; and Burns). And indeed, Gandalf's relationship with Shadowfax and the horse's mystical powers of transportation are foreshadowed several pages before the horse's appearance by Aragorn, who says to Gandalf, "'I do not doubt that you will come [to Edoras] before me if you wish'" (III, v, 501). And, when Gandalf does not respond, he adds, "'Do I not say truly, Gandalf, […] that you could go withersoever you wished quicker than I? And this I also say to you: you are our captain and our banner. The Dark Lord has Nine. But we have One, mightier than they: the White Rider. He has passed through the fire and the abyss, and they shall fear him'" (III, v, 501). Here, Aragorn associates Gandalf's role as the White *Rider* with his ecstatic experience in "the fire and the abyss." Only a few pages later, a question from Legolas prompts the wizard to reveal that he and the horse share some kind of psychic or telepathic connection as well (III, v, 505). Notice also that though Gandalf is not reunited with Shadowfax until the final pages, the chapter is titled "The White Rider." The wizard's identity and purpose are now functions of his relationship with his supernatural horse.

But Shadowfax does more than this: he is also a visible symbol of Gandalf's role as spiritual and political intercessor. Like the horse which enables the shaman to travel between worlds, including the spirit realm, Shadowfax becomes the way in which Gandalf traverses vast distances to unite the West against Sauron. This is political in that he is bringing together estranged people groups (Rohan and Gondor, for example); it is spiritual in that in the mode of the White Rider he is recognized as the greatest foe of Sauron, who, incidentally, is a fallen spirit of the same order as Gandalf. It is in this guise also that he sallies out against the Nazgûl, saving Faramir's company by the literal and metaphorical light of his presence. All this is facilitated through the avenue of ecstasy. Gandalf's return is thus not simply a weak cop-out to avoid a favorite character's death (though that is what George R.R. Martin would have us think), or even just a way to figure Gandalf as a significant messianic figure in the text; it is the turning point on which the entire narrative hinges. Without Gandalf as intercessor, all the schemes of the Lords of the West would have come to nothing. Only the White Rider could have battled Saruman for Théoden's soul. Only the White Rider, with Shadowfax, could have united Rohan and Gondor and strengthened the resolved of the beleaguered soldiers of Minas Tirith: the narrator says, "Wherever he came men's hearts would lift again, and the winged shadows pass from memory" (V, iv, 824). Gandalf as shaman is able to raise the hearts of humans above their dire circumstance, and his spiritual light drives away the shadows. Without shamanic ecstasy, and its attendant intercession, there is no story to be told.

### "A SHINING FIGURE OF WHITE LIGHT": GLORFINDEL

Glorfindel is the natural figure to read alongside Gandalf. He has the distinction of being one of the few Tolkien characters to actually rise from the dead, or perhaps reincarnate, depending on how we choose to read his death and return. Glorfindel's encounter with the Balrog is clearly an early conception of Gandalf's experience, but it remains as a functional part of the narrative and though the elf quite obviously dies and is buried—his grave is a monument until the apocalypse reshapes the world[38]—he also is resurrected and returns as an avatar for otherworldly spiritual power in *The Lord of the Rings*. This section will walk through Glorfindel's character arc, pointing out significant moments that mark him as a shaman and spiritual intercessor: in this section I avoid the same level of intricate detail that I employed with the previous section, simply because many of the specifics are here the same. Instead, I will focus on what is unique to Glorfindel's iteration of the spiritual intercessor and simply gloss those areas that fall into Gandalf's pattern; this means that I will spend more time in this section on Glorfindel's role in saving Frodo at the Ford of Bruinen.

Glorfindel's battle with the Balrog is significant firstly because it takes place in "a dreadful pass, Cirith Thoronath […], the Eagles' Cleft" (*S* 243). Already, then, the text is signaling that we are going to be dealing with ecstasy; it is quite literally inscribed within the place name through its invocation of eagles. The description of the battle found in *The Silmarillion* is scant at best, but an earlier version published in *The Fall of Gondolin* gives us a fuller account of the meeting on the high cliffs. In this text, Glorfindel is accompanying Tuor, Idril, and the other refugees from the sack of Gondolin, but they are set upon by an army of Orcs and a Balrog. Here, the Balrog is explicitly referred to as a "demon" in opposition to Glorfindel's

[38] As we will see later, monuments are specific constructions meant to direct attention to what has gone before, to other hands and minds and lives.

light: the elf's "armour gleamed strangely in the moon" (107). It is "the ardour of Glorfindel" that drives the battle to a high peak (the soul ascending) in the sight of all the company, who—significantly—is able to escape while Glorfindel, the shaman, takes on the demon of darkness. Glorfindel has the mastery even as he falls to his death, and not only does his sacrifice rid the fleeing company of the demon, but "at the death-cry of the Balrog the Orcs before and behind wavered and were slain or fled far away" (108). Then, in that moment, Thorondor Lord of Eagles stoops into the abyss and carries up the body of Glorfindel to be buried "beyond the perilous way by the precipice of Eagle-stream, and Thorondor has let not yet any harm come thereto" (108). Here, in less detail and with less development, are many of the same markers that appear in Gandalf's ecstatic encounter with another Balrog-demon. There is the battle of the good shaman with a demon (or dark shaman) that takes place in order to allow a group of people to escape unscathed; a dangerous pass that must be navigated while facing enemies (the Orcs are here figured as lesser demons); a fight in the heights that results in a fall to great depths; and finally, a recovery of a body from a distance by a great eagle, representing the ensuing transfiguration of the soul.

Of course, we also know that Glorfindel experiences a sort of resurrection, for he appears again in *The Lord of the Rings* to reprise his battle with the Balrog-demon, this time in the form of a number of Black Riders, who, as we will see, are also figured as demons or dark shamans. There isn't space here to explore the particulars of Elvish reincarnation (especially since Tolkien himself never settled on an authoritative theory), but it should be noted that the very process of resurrection or reincarnation signals a metaphorical rebirth that is the climax of the ecstatic journey of the shaman. Only through this symbolic death and rebirth can the shaman truly fulfill his role as protector against evil spirits and warrior of the light. In fact, Tolkien's recurring positing of Elvish reincarnation theories seems to have been driven partly by his desire to reconcile the Glorfindel of *The Fall of Gondolin* with the one in *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps this was an implicit recognition of the fact that the shamanic role of Glorfindel in that latter work could be internally coherent only if the one who filled that role had experienced a traditional, believable shamanic initiation.

We must turn now to Glorfindel's other significant appearance, when he appears beyond all hope and saves Frodo and his companions from the combined assault of the Nazgûl. Even before the elf lord is physically present in the text, we see him fulfilling his shamanic duties: he leaves a token, a green beryl stone, on a bridge to claim it for the forces of the light and thus secure or signal safe-passage for those who follow after him (II, xii, 201). Then, when Glorfindel is first approaching, he is marked out by the distinctly shamnaic sounds that accompany him: the "light *clippety-clippety-clip*" of his horse's hooves and "faintly, as if it was blown away from them by the breeze, […] a dim ringing, as of small bells tinkling" (I, xii, 209). Frodo's immediate response is that it "does not sound like a Black Rider's horse!" and Aragorn (or Strider as he is better known at this point) is moved to joy by the sound (I, xii, 209). Already, Glorfindel's relationship to his horse, Asfaloth, is marked out: even the hobbits, who know little of these matters, identify the sound with a friend; Aragorn, who knows better, understands almost immediately that they have been saved and rushes out of hiding to hail the rider. I will say more about Asfaloth below, specifically noting the significance of the fact that it is Asfaloth and not Glorfindel who is first described; but for now, I wish to pick up with the first description of the latter that we're given.

Of Glorfindel this is said: "The rider's cloak streamed behind him, and his hood was thrown back; his golden hair flowed shimmering in the wind of his speed. To Frodo it appeared that a white light was shining through the form and raiment of the rider, as if through a thin veil" (I, xii, 209). The first thing to note is that all the verbs in the first sentence are words indicating movement: streamed, thrown, flowed. They are also not, significantly, first of all descriptions of Glorfindel himself, but of his clothes, and then his hair. The whole passage works to draw us inward as it begins with the sound of the wind in the leaves, then the sounds of bells and hooves, and then Asfaloth, and then moves to the cloak, and then the hood, and then the hair—until suddenly, through the eyes of Frodo we see *past* the horse, the raiment, the body itself, and we see Glorfindel's defining feature: "a white light shining through [his] form and raiment." This is what marks him as a spiritual intercessor, as a bearer of holy and sanctifying light, even salvation.

Another thing to point out in this passage is that it establishes several patterns that Tolkien returns to numerous times through the end of the chapter. The first is this constant movement, specifically the somewhat strange phrase "the wind of his speed," which recurs in slightly altered but still recognizable forms, and with increasing frequency as the Nazgûl enter the scene. Another is of course the invocation of "white light," which is reflected (besides its reappearance as a function of Glorfindel's power) in the "gleaming" of Asfaloth's white coat, described also as "flash of white fire," the headstall which "flickered and flashed, as if it were studded with gems like living stars," and again in the "silver-studded flask" from which Glorfindel gives them miruvor for their refreshment (I, xii, 209, 211, 213). These are all emphasized by the somewhat contradictory assertion that the night is utterly black, with neither moon nor stars to guide their way (I, xii, 211). It is Glorfindel's spiritual light which illuminates and brings hope to this all-but impossible situation.

The next aspect of Glorfindel's character that is revealed is again an acoustic one: "he dismounted and ran to meet [Aragorn] calling out: *Ai na vedui Dunadan! Mae govannen!* His speech and clear ringing voice left no doubt in their hearts: the rider was of the Elven-folk. No others in the wild world had voices so fair to hear" (I, xii, 209). The qualities specifically called out in describing Glorfindel's voice—clear and ringing—replicate the ringing of the bells that we have just heard, which are first a "dim ringing" and later grow "clearer," drawing an explicit connection between elf and horse that I'll explore in detail shortly.

Glorfindel is also immediately positioned in the text as a kind of spiritual healer. When he is told of Frodo's affliction, despite his own disquiet, he examines the hilt of the Nazgûl's knife, and then searches the wound. Though "his face [grows] graver" and he admits that he has not the ability to completely heal the hobbit, he is able to provide Frodo with some relief: "Frodo felt the chill lessen in his side and arm; a little warmth crept down from his shoulder to his hand, and the pain grew easier. The dusk of evening seemed to grow lighter about him, as if a cloud had withdrawn" (I, xii, 211). Both cold and dimness of sight are repeatedly associated with the Nazgûl, and with Frodo's spiritual malady,[39] and thus in drawing the hobbit out of both by providing clarity (again that word) and warmth, Glorfindel positions himself directly against the Riders.

Given that in this passage Glorfindel is introduced first and foremost as a rider, now is the time to welcome Asfaloth to our conversation—to converse, as it were, *with* Asfaloth as Glorfindel himself does. Directly after drawing Frodo to some extent from the clutches of the Shadow, Glorfindel declares that the hobbit shall ride Asfaloth: "'you need not fear,'" he says: "'my horse will not let any rider fall that I command him to bear'" (I, xii, 211). This is, firstly,

[39] This is true later in the text as well, when Frodo is repeatedly cold and often brushes his hand across his eyes, as if trying to clear his vision. The clarity of his memories also begin to fade into mere shadows.

not unlike Gandalf's reassurance regarding Shadowfax. As the wizard tells Pippin, "'[Shadowfax] is willing to carry you—or not. If he is willing, that is enough. It is then his business to see that you remain on his back, unless you jump off into the air'" (III, xi, 596). There is a slight difference, of course, in that Glorfindel *commands* where Gandalf leaves all decisions to Shadowfax; but both Gandalf and Glorfindel are shamans, though perhaps of different orders, and as such both work in partnership with white horses who are remarkable first of all for their speed and powerful senses, and secondly because of their ability to protect their riders. Whereas Shadowfax often functions as a means of travelling between "worlds," Asfaloth is located specifically on Road, Bridge, and Ford (all of which are consistently uppercased in this chapter, reinforcing their metaphoric function). Thus, Asfaloth is very much a spiritual guide who facilitates dangerous passages. It is not insignificant that the "lot" fell to Glorfindel to take the Road, nor that because he is a rider he is, again, able to drive the Nazgûl away from the Bridge, leaving his own token of safe-passage there, and to pursue them westward (I, xii, 210). Nor is it a coincidence that Frodo is able to safely cross the Ford only on the back of Asfaloth, the soul-guide. In some sense, Asfaloth is the most important player here, more so even than Glorfindel, as he is the escort on the dangerous passage of the soul. Indeed, Glorfindel literally steps aside to allow Asfaloth to conduct the troubled soul to safety.

Not only is Asfaloth allowed to fulfill a shamanic role in this situation, he is also explicitly linked to flying; and birds, as we have already seen, are directly symbolic of the ascent of the soul. The narrator says that Asfaloth "sped like the wind," and again, the horse and rider pass "like a flash of white fire, the elf-horse speeding as if on wings" (I, xii, 213). Glorfindel first sends the horse off with the command "'Fly!'" (I, xii, 212). In this moment, the white horse acts as the vehicle for the fleeing soul's escape from the Shadow, passing through the Ford of

Bruinen, which itself acts as a gap, threshold, or "thin place" between worlds. After the crossing, Frodo remembers nothing and wakes up in the first last safe haven, Imladris.

But there are more white and white-flamed horses to consider in this moment. As Frodo falls and all seems lost, as Asfaloth surges up onto the opposite bank, gaining safety, the River itself rises up against the touch of the Nazgûl and (through the contribution of Gandalf, our other shaman), takes shape as "a plumed cavalry of waves. White flames seemed to Frodo to flicker on their crests, and he half fancied that he saw amid the water white riders upon white horses with frothing manes" (I, xii, 214). Thus these "half fancied" water horses—kelpies, we might be tempted to say—both refigure and aid the "real" shamanic horse, Asfaloth, and through their combined influence Frodo, with his spirit intact, is able to escape the chilling darkness of wraithdom. Both the real horse and the figured ones represent the white light of spiritual intervention and the flames of shamanic initiation.

We have moved somewhat away from Glorfindel, but now we must re-turn our attention in his direction, splitting our focus between the actual events in "The Flight to the Ford" and Gandalf's explanation of those events in "Many Meetings." As Frodo's vision fades, he *thinks* he sees, "with his last failing senses," "a shining figure of white light; and behind it ran small shadowy forms waving flames, that flared red in the grey mist that was falling over the world" (I, xii, 214). The uncertainty surrounding the events in this passage should not be overlooked—and should not frustrate us. As we have already discovered, there is always surrounding ecstatic experiences a sort of veil that later renders the moment ineffable. We should thus be intensely alert: from the moment in which the company first "seems" to hear the bells on Asfaloth's halter, the text is littered with similes and metaphors, and Frodo especially only "seems" to hear and see what is going on around him, or he "feels" that things are a certain way. Regardless, what Frodo seems to see when he looks at Glorfindel is in fact reality: Gandalf confirms this when the two converse for the first time after Frodo's ordeal. "'I thought I saw a white figure that shone and did not grow dim like the others,'" Frodo says. "'Was that Glorfindel then?'" (II, i, 223). Gandalf's answer comes in two parts, one before Frodo even asks the question. First, he explains that "'here in Rivendell there live still some of [Sauron's] chief foes: the Elven-wise, lords of the Eldar from beyond the furthest seas. They do not fear the Ringwraiths, for those who have dwelt in the Blessed Realm live at one in both worlds, and against both the Seen and the Unseen they have great power'" (I, i, 222-223). Valinor is situated in relation to Middle-earth as a version of Elven paradise, and therefore Gandalf's comment emphasizes the spiritual divide that these figures bridge; they have a foot in both worlds, as it were, and thus they are able to channel their divine power to bring endangered souls to safety; i.e., to act as shamans. Gandalf's response also accentuates the problem of visibility, which haunts the text like the wraiths which constantly threaten the Ring-bearer. These shamanistic "lords of the Eldar" are spiritual intercessors who are able to bring the power of the otherworld, of Valinor, to Middle-earth even while the Valar themselves remain aloof and supposedly withhold aid from the peoples therein (actually, it is rather that the help they proffer is simply not often perceived as coming directly from them). The spiritual is far from absent: it is simply largely "Unseen." Attention has lapsed, proving it invisible. Glorfindel is the only one of these powerful lords that we see in close contact.

The second part of Gandalf's answer focuses more specifically on Glorfindel, rather than "the Elven-wise" as a larger group (especially significant since none of the others are identified by name). "'Yes,'" he reassures Frodo, "'you saw him for a moment as he is upon the other side: one of the mighty of the Firstborn. He is an Elf-lord of a house of princes. Indeed there is a power in Rivendell to withstand the might of Mordor, for a while'" (II, i, 223). With these comments Gandalf confirms Frodo's suspicions, that the "shining figure of white light" was indeed Glorfindel unveiling himself against those dark shamans, the Nazgûl: and "[c]aught between fire and water, and seeing an Elf-lord revealed in his wrath, they were dismayed, and their horses were stricken with madness" (II, i, 224). Again, elements are put in opposition, much like the alternating warmth and chill in "The Flight to the Ford," only here we have fire and water, recalling Gandalf's fight with the Balrog and the transcendence of—or survival in—extreme opposites. That it is Glorfindel who initiates this dichotomic situation is reflective of the elf's status as shaman and spiritual intercessor: "for [he] knew that a flood would come down, if the Riders tried to cross, and then he would have to deal with any that were left on his side of the river" (II, i, 224). Glorfindel thus overcomes the Nazgûl by forcing them into the liminal space between opposites; unlike the elf-lord, the Nazgûl are not able to transcend the difference and are thus stripped of their corporeality and left to return "unhorsed" to Sauron—and given the extent to which shamans depend on their equine partners, the defeat is a great one indeed despite the fact that "the Ringwraiths themselves cannot be so easily destroyed" (II, i, 224).[40]

In these two passages, Glorfindel is pitted directly against the "dark shamans" in the same way that Gandalf is pitted against the text's other Maiar, Sauron and the Balrog. Glorfindel, significantly, does not go off to war nor does he accompany the Fellowship on their Quest, for his business is with the spiritual world, and as we noted of the transfigured Gandalf (that is, Gandalf post-ecstasy), the shaman has a duty to specifically use his power against other shamans rather than non-shamans (Oppitz 26). This is why it would be pointless to send someone like Glorfindel with the Fellowship (II, iii, 276). It would be to no avail. Glorfindel must be always

[40] A similar situation occurs when Legolas shoots a Nazgûl from the sky. The Nazgûl are now riding *winged* steeds, a reflection of their growing power as shamans; the fact that Legolas "unhorses" one is thus "'a good deed,'" according to Gandalf, but always "'the Rider [is] soon horsed again'" (*TT*, III, v, 498).

and only opposed to those of the spirit realm, who are, in the paradoxical words of Gandalf, both "'Seen and Unseen'" (I, i, 222-223). Only he and a few others, after all, can "'ride openly against the Nine'" (I, xii, 210).

In a very late essay, presented roughly in two parts (as a sort of note and then as a more complete, though still unfinished draft), Tolkien expounds upon Glorfindel's role in the text. An "air of special power and sanctity […] surrounds" him because of his death and reincarnation, Tolkien explains. In fact, through his sojourn in Valinor, between said death and "resurrection," the elf lord actually "regained the primitive innocence and grace of the Eldar," such that he had become "almost an equal" of the Maiar (*PM* 381). This claim is particularly significant because Glorfindel, as a follower of Turgon and a lord of Gondolin, was a leading participant in the rebellion of the Noldor against the Valar; his return to "primitive innocence and grace" is a therefore return to a prelapsarian state, a hallmark of the shamanic nature. His rise to a level of power that rivaled that of a Maia like Gandalf[41] not only establishes him as a notable adversary to the Lord of the Nazgûl, but it also emphasizes the fact that Glorfindel is very much of two worlds at once. Within his person the spiritual and the material take up residence. He straddles the divisions between worlds: between Valinor and Middle-earth, the seen and the unseen. As such, and in this specific circumstance, he is the ideal conductor and guardian for the endangered soul seeking to outrun the Nazgûl.[42]

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[41] According to this same essay, Glorfindel was likely a companion and follower of Gandalf while the two were still in Valinor (*PM* 378).

[42] This explains my frustration over and rejection of Arwen's appearance in Glorfindel's place in Peter Jackson's film adaption: Arwen could not possibly have faced the Nazgûl (even supposing that Elrond would have allowed her to leave Rivendell during such a dangerous time [and I know this particular opinion is conjectural, but I hardly think it likely he would have done so]). Though likely powerful in her own right, she was not a shaman. She had not "dwelt in the Blessed Realm" and did not "live at once in both worlds" (II, i, 223). As Glorfindel explains, "'[t]here are few even in Rivendell that can ride openly against the Nine'" (I, xii, 210). Arwen was not one of these. Indeed, if anything, Arwen's brief and almost nonexistent role in *The Lord of the Rings* rather serves to emphasize the extent to which the Elves have declined since the days of her counterpart Lúthien: where Lúthien is able to face even Morgoth and challenge him with her power, and indeed to break the foundations of Sauron's stronghold and send his

**THE SPIRITUAL INTERCESSOR IN MIDDLE-EARTH**

This section concludes with a brief look at Eärendil, who, like Gandalf and Glorfindel, is transformed into a sort of shaman. In this particular case, however, Eärendil's initiation occurs not through direct contact with fire, as the previous two shamans experienced in the form of the Balrogs, but through the brilliant and holy light of a Silmaril, one of the three jewels that hold the primal light of the universe—a light that is sometimes described as a flame and jewels created by Fëanor, whose name means "spirit of fire." Eärendil does, however, become an intercessor of a more traditional type in that he becomes the emissary of Middle-earth who petitions the Valar to intercede against Morgoth on behalf of Elves and Men—both races of the Children of Ilúvatar (*Road* 246). Significantly, Eärendil is both elf and man; he already stands in that threshold and indeed determines to become an intercessor because he alone of all on Middle-earth can appropriately speak for both races. But this is not enough. At first, he is unable to reach the Undying Lands because he has not been initiated. He possesses no quality that directly facilitates the ascent of the soul apart from bare courage. When, however, Elwing his wife comes to him in the form of a seabird, carrying a Silmaril, a change takes place:

> *The Silmaril she bound on him*
> *and crowned him with the living light,*
> *and dauntless then with burning brow*
> *he turned his prow; and in the night*
> *from Otherworld beyond the Sea*
> *there strong and free a storm arose;*
> *a wind of power in Tarmenel;*
> *by paths that seldom mortal goes*
> *his boat it bore with biting breath*
> *as might of death across the grey*
> *and long-forsaken seas distressed:*
> *from east to west he passed away.*
> (II, i, 234-235)

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naked spirit "quaking back to Morgoth" (*S* 175), Arwen vacillates between two safe havens, Rivendell and Lothlórien.

This is Bilbo's interpretation of the event, of course, but it contains important markers that we've already learned to recognize. The intimation of fire in the word "burning"; the sudden surge of otherworldly power that facilitates ecstasy; and here, a new movement that is again representative of the ascent of the soul: the passage from east to west. In many myths, including Tolkien's, travel to the west indicates a passage into another world, a journey often symbolic of death especially because it follows the direction of the setting sun. Thus, the light of the other-world, delivered by Elwing in bird-form (and that in itself is a marker of ecstasy, remember), makes it possible for Eärendil to experience initiation in a death-like experience and a "resurrection" on the other side as "A wanderer escaped from night/To haven white he came at last":

> *He tarried there from errantry,*
> *and melodies they taught to him,*
> *and sages old him marvels told,*
> *and harps of gold they brought to him.*
> *They clothed him then in elven-white*
> *and seven lights before him sent,*
> *as through the Calacirian*
> *to hidden land forlorn he went.*
> (II, i, 235)

The growth in knowledge and the re-clothing in white are both significant markers attesting that Eärendil has indeed passed the shamanic initiation ritual and become a spiritual intercessor. He (apparently) speaks to the Valar and is transformed even further, this time becoming a star, a sign of the Valar's continuing care for Middle-earth even when they are presumably absent. But he also is a permanent intercessor. As Bilbo's song says he is "for ever still a herald on/an errand that should never rest" (II, i, 236). Thus he dwells eternally in the sky in an intermediary state, between earth and heaven, as it were, as a constant reminder to both the Children of Ilúvatar and the Valar that they are in an unbreakable relationship. Each has a claim on the other; the spiritual is always present to the material, if you know where to look.

Tom Shippey (in *The Road to Middle-earth*), Verlyn Flieger (in “The Jewels, the Stone, the Ring, and the Making of Meaning”), and others have wrestled without clear success with the seemingly ambiguous nature of Eärendil’s appearing and the fact that it seems to prompt expressions of both fear and relief. What does he symbolize? they ask. Is he, or his star, a sign of hope or despair? The answer is, ironically, both; and not because Tolkien (un)knowingly contradicted himself or because the narrative simply doesn’t line up. The rising of the Evenstar is greeted with such mixed reactions because it is a constant reminder of both the anguish of Middle-earth and the Valar’s merciful response to that suffering. Eärendil, standing in the gap, the in-between, the thin place between full- and half-perception, can represent both hope and despair, joy and sorrow, rescue and disaster, because he is a sign of both. His errand is one that always needs to be restated. It is a journey that must be retaken daily as Middle-earth labors under the effects of Morgoth’s corruption; but his going and coming each day reminds the inhabitants of the Hither Shore that he will continue to intercede with the Powers in their behalf. They never need worry that the spiritual has withdrawn itself from their lives.

The eternal significance of Eärendil’s sky-journey is revealed later in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Galadriel gives Frodo a phial filled with water, in which is somehow “caught the light of Eärendil’s star,” that becomes a beacon of hope for both Frodo and Sam in their quest and a symbol of the spiritual power which is yet available to those who trust in it. “‘It will shine still brighter when night is about you,’” Galadriel tells him. “‘May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out’” (II, viii, 376). In other words, much like we hear of the virtues of *lembas*, its power grows the more solely it is relied upon. When Sam faces Shelob in

Cirith Ungol, his "indomitable spirit" wakes the phial and "the glass blaze[s] suddenly like a white torch in his hand" (IV, x, 730). Trust and hope, then, are crucial factors in its fulfilling its purpose. Eärendil, too, is a light "when all other lights go out," a sign of hope that flames against the whelming darkness of Morgoth and a preventative against assuming that Middle-earth and its inhabitants have been spiritually abandoned. Indeed, when Frodo first takes out the star-glass in the darkness of Shelob's tunnels, the narrator says that it was at first "faint as a rising star struggling in heavy earthward mists, and then as its power waxed, and hope grew in Frodo's mind, it began to burn, and kindled to a silver flame, a minute heart of dazzling light, as though Eärendil had himself come down from the high sunset paths with the last Silmaril upon his brow" (IV, ix, 720). In this passage the starlight's power grows along with Frodo's hope; they are intimately connected, and Eärendil becomes again a symbol of hope and intercession, as the primal light of the world joins Frodo and Sam in their fight against darkness and fear, as though the intercessor himself had come among them like "a shining figure of white light" to escort them through the dangerous passage of Cirith Ungol.

This is the role of the spiritual intercessors, of Gandalf, Glorfindel, Eärendil, and others. They are symbols of the reality that the Powers of Arda are still intimately acquainted with and compassionate towards the earth and its inhabitants. They are the ones who come to fight demons and secure the escape of their companions; who accept eternal exile in exchange for the permanent reminder that we are not alone. They bridge the gap and stand in the threshold to draw our attention to the light, to the many ways in which the spiritual or supernatural is with us and protecting us, interceding on our behalf, and bringing the light into our midst. These spiritual intercessors are there to themselves become lights when all other lights go out; when all seems hopeless and dark, they are the only ones who can show a way through. They inspire those around them to be better than they could otherwise be, and in so doing facilitate and secure the ascent of the souls of their communities, raising them above "heavy earthward mists" as stars of white flame. The role isn't extended to everyone. Some, such as Fëanor, attempt it and fail. Those who succeed, however, consistently point us to a greater understanding of our interconnectedness, our interdependence, and our indebtedness to worlds beyond our own, both literally and metaphorically. But here we must turn from these emissaries of Otherworld beyond the Sea and direct our attention on the worlds around us: the material, the physical, the rocks and trees and winds of Middle-earth and their role in the web of being that is being woven by all its many participants.

# III

## Ecological Intercession

> Whether they've made the land, or the land's made them, it's hard to say, if you take my meaning.
>
> — J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

### Leaving Stewardship Behind

It would be easy to talk about Tolkien's environmentalism as a pastoral romanticism, or as finally a commitment to stewardship that once again places "human" over "animal" in a hierarchic binary established on power and control. Such a reading would foreground Ents and gardeners, Tom Bombadil, and the like; but we've seen this reading time and again.[43] Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans, for example, espouse this view of the world in *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* when they write that "[s]tewardship is simply the proper exercise of authority granted by a higher authority, bound by limits and circumscribed by consequences" (64). This, they argue, is Tolkien's understanding of environmental stewardship as opposed to "the modern materialist myth that sees humankind as simply a part of the physical world" (64). While to a certain extent Tolkien does see "humans" as being separate in some way from "nature," however, he also in many instances prompts us to notice and appreciate the ways in which the lives of all things are bound together: the ways in which we might actually be "simply a part of the physical world"

[43] Another example: Michael J. Brisbois seems to be taking his reading of the natural world of Middle-earth in a different direction in "Tolkien's Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth," but his reading ultimately re-inscribes the stewardship model.

and how attending to these aspects of our lives make us more ethical, response-able persons.[44] Margarita Carretero González, for example, points out that Tolkien "uses the relationship individuals maintain with the natural world as a major tool for characterisation, to such an extent that this relationship is at the core of the distinction established between the representatives of the forces of good and those who fight on the evil side" (152). While her assessment might slip again into anthropocentrism (i.e., in reading ecological relationships as a mere indicator of human morality), her point pushes us to think more critically about the environmental relationships initiated and maintained throughout Tolkien's legendarium.

Instead of falling once again into the seductive snares of the environmental stewardship model—which, I should be clear, are not necessarily incorrect but rather incomplete—I hope to push the boundaries of eco-critical readings of Tolkien's work by focusing on relationships and entanglements of equality, equity, and mutual knowing. As Christopher Roman observes, "Middle-earth is complicated by the various commitments to 'nature' and the ethical responses to it, and Tolkien works against an easy romanticizing of the natural world as some sort of pastoral ideal by presenting us with the problem of the object and its interactions in the world. In Tolkien's work the environment is best described as an acting agent" (97). Like Roman, I hope to complicate our understanding of Tolkien's ecological vision. The first step in so doing is to insist that by "ecological vision" I quite specifically do not mean "what Tolkien hoped for or thought our relationship to the environment could be if we approached it correctly." Rather,

[44] As noted above, Tolkien does speak of the "sense of separation" that comes between "humans" and "nature," but I have asked us to think about this in more directly physical terms: as a phenomenon that affects our senses and other modes of perception. So, the claim that "humans" must be *de facto* stewards of "nature" because we are fundamentally different and separate from it actually reflects that very distortion of our perception of our being-in-the-world.

“ecological vision” stands for the way in which Tolkien conceived of the environment and our relation to it: literally how he *saw* (vision) what was already there.

To begin reorienting ourselves in the landscape of Middle-earth, let’s direct our attention to one of Treebeard the Ent’s laments for what has been lost in the world around him:

> *In the willow-meads of Tasarinan I walked in the Spring.*
> *Ah! the sight and the smell of the Spring in Nan-tasarion!*
> *And I said that was good.*
> *I wandered in Summer in the elm-woods of Ossiriand.*
> *Ah! the light and the music in the Summer by the Seven Rivers of Ossir!*
> *And I thought that was best.*
> *To the beeches of Neldoreth I came in the Autumn.*
> *Ah! the gold and the red and the sighing of leaves in the Autumn in Taur-na-neldor!*
> *It was more than my desire.*
> *To the pine-trees upon the highland of Dorthonion I climbed in the Winter.*
> *Ah! the wind and the whiteness and the black branches of Winter upon Orod-na-Thôn!*
> *My voice went up and sang in the sky.*
> *And now all those lands lie under the wave,*
> *And I walk in Ambaróna, in Tauremorna, in Aldalómë,*
> *In my own land, in the country of Fangorn,*
> *Where the roots are long,*
> *And the years lie thicker than the leaves*
> *In Tauremornalómë.*
>
> He ended, and strode on silently, and in all the wood, as far as ear could reach, there was not a sound. (III, iv, 468)

The ecological lament is a central feature of Tolkien’s fiction, appearing time and again in both his major and minor works,[45] often taking a variety of forms, but always there to mark and give voice to grief (personal and environmental), recovery, and the passage of time. *The Lord of the Rings* in particular conceives of the Elves as frequent mourners (more on this later), but others, such as Treebeard, also participate. The passage quoted above points to one such moment. It is also prefaced by a significant comment that directs the reader’s attention to what has been lost: “‘Those were the broad days! Time was when I could walk and sing all day and hear no more

[45] In “Smith of Wootton Major,” for example, a birch trees literally weeps after being ravaged by a storm that arrives to punish a human interloper (30-31).

than the echo of my own voice in the hollow hills. The woods were like the woods of Lothlórien, only thicker, stronger, younger. And the smell of the air! I used to spend a week just breathing'" (*TT*, III, iv, 469). Here time is—or was—marked by Treebeard's ability to "walk and sing all day" without interruption. "Time *was*," meaning naturally that it is no longer. This past age of Middle-earth was one in which your own voice became intertwined with that of nature and found its own echoes therein—one in which a week might be spent simply exchanging breath with surrounding world. In "the broad days," in other words, life was defined by intra-actions.

It is difficult to say precisely what Tolkien meant by the phrase "the broad days." There is a sense in which it refers to spatial qualities (i.e., that Treebeard is able to walk all day without interruption implies a certain "broadness" of landscape); but the OED also notes a c1400 Middle English reference to the phrase "broad days" without, unfortunately, attempting to explain what it means. Tolkien's use of it could be evidence of his investment in Middle English language study, or it might be a remnant of his fascination with the conception of time as a (physical, embodied) field (see Flieger), an entanglement of temporality and materiality that implies a new cutting of the boundaries between time, space, and matter. We see this in Treebeard's memorial song, which is prefaced with that singular phrase: "Time was when I could walk and sing all day." The past tense of the phrase has already been noted, but we could also point to the fact that Treebeard engages with time *not* as a mere notion of temporality, as a simple matter of one's (skewed) perception, but as a phenomenon emerging from intra-actions of materialities: he does not say something like "Those were the days in which I could do these things," but instead explicitly states that time itself was a certain thing. Time and space are therefore "broad" in that they are intimately entangled and thus not isolated concepts: they range over a network of meanings. That is, time is both temporal and spatial, while space is both spatial and temporal.

A similar thing is happening in the song itself. Treebeard methodically names and recalls images of his former environment: this is the way things were in the Spring; in the Summer; in the Autumn; and this is how they perished in the Winter. Note that no year is given. No specific marker of yearly time is necessary because the reader already knows that the time is "past," given the foregoing ("Time was"), and also that the word *time* isn't a reference to self-contained temporality. The song refers to real, annual seasons, but (notice the definite articles and capital letters) it more generally evokes the slow solemn passage of "time" in the traditional sense, days that are simultaneously seasons of a year and cycles/"seasons" of life as it passes from birth to grave and is reborn. But Tolkien is never content with the traditional. He envisions the intra-actions of time and space as a distinctly material relationship,[46] grounding each season in a specific place ("the Spring in Nan-tasarion," "the Autumn in Taur-na-neldor," etc.), which in turn redirects our attentions to lands that no longer exist, or exist only "under the wave," a phrase which once again marks an entanglement of place and time since it refers to the mythos's Atlantean apocalypse.[47] The song is a useful example of eco-lament in *The Lord of the Rings* because most other instances of lamentation follow a comparable pattern. So, we could say that

[46] In another place he writes this, in the voice of Legolas: "'time does not tarry ever, […] but change and growth is not in all things and all places alike. For the Elves the world moves, and it moves both swift and very slow. Swift, because they themselves change little, and all else fleets by: it is a grief to them. Slow, because they need not count the running years, not for themselves. The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long long stream. Yet beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last'" (II, ix, 388). "Time" is here implicitly defined as "change and growth," which are once again spatial-temporal phenomena. Legolas, whose intimate understanding of intra-actions and sympoiesis (Haraway) is foregrounded throughout the entire book, clearly recognizes that "time" is a phenomenon that simultaneously defines and is defined by one's perception: spacetimematter, as Karen Barad would have it. Legolas chooses the metaphor of a stream to describe time and seasons, and while at first thought this might seem rather conventional, the idea takes one more complexity the more it is interrogated. Where do you mark past, present, and future on a running stream? The traditional divisions of time readily dissolve in Legolas's liquid description; the adjectives become almost interchangeable. And at the core of it all is that remarkable phrase, "it is a grief to them." Lament is born.

[47] Notably, apocalypse in Tolkien is itself an event that collapses distinctions between past, present, and future, representing a dissipation of the self in the world at large: a concept Tolkien may have culled from the tenets of the neo-pagan revival of the *fin de siècle*.

for Tolkien, the lament re-members place, story, and the past, thus preserving the memory of what has been lost by re-inscribing it on/in the landscape of today.

What is the role of nature in this outpouring of grief? Is nature simply a vessel, an unwritten page, a blank canvas in/onto which the "human" has the authority to mark his or her own memory, such that the ground beneath one's feet bears the brunt of the labor of preservation? Not for Tolkien. Rather, his contribution is one that transcends expectations by radically refiguring the very "nature" and function of the eco-lament. *The Lord of the Rings* itself can be read as one powerful lament for all that has been lost (aspects of nature in particular, though not exclusively); but it does not, significantly, reinstate the "human" as the sole author/expresser of this grief with an external Nature as the object or receptacle. Margarita Carretero González argues that "[n]ature in *The Lord of the Rings* acts as a character in its own right, often inscrutable, opaque, unreadable, claiming its own existence and behavior, independent of human life" (152).[48] Tom Shippey takes this idea a step further, insisting that "The true hero of *The Lord of the Rings* is not Aragorn or Sam Gamgee or even Frodo but Middle-earth itself, from the tilth of the Shire to the Riders' prairie, from the managed woodlands of Lórien to the deep dales of Fangorn, where the Huorns lurk in the hundreds" (Dickerson 269). Shippey's passage continues to enumerate various aspects of Middle-earth that are "all described with careful and loving attention" by Tolkien. This attention to nature is an aspect of the text that no one can deny—and one that, ironically, often trips up first-time readers, who (surely unfairly) complain of pages-long descriptions of a single tree, mountain, or stream. But the fact remains: the natural world of Middle-earth is foregrounded rather than serving as a background or setting for "human" (inter)action. Nature is neither a container nor an object of

[48] I of course take issue with her claim that nature is necessarily "independent of human life." This is clearly not the case, as the epigraph to this chapter indicates.

observation. As such it becomes a participant[49] in an entangled web of intra-actions from which arises the re-membering lament. It is a joint-effort, a sympoiesis.

To truly understand this new positioning of nature in Middle-earth, I ask us to direct our attentions toward a single character—one who is often brushed to the side as being less complex and multidimensional than his peers, but one who, I believe, is the clearest representation of Tolkien's "ecological vision." That character is Legolas. Even Tolkien wrote of him that he "probably achieved the least of the Nine Walkers" (*UT* 412), but in this section I hope to lead us on a leisurely, thoughtful walk through the sylvan entanglements that make this elf precisely the one member of the Fellowship who is able to identify where his companions have gone wrong in their treatment of ecology: indeed, the sole member of the Company who embraces so fully his role as intercessor that, the more carefully we listen, the less we hear his voice. Remember that above we reconstructed the term "intercessor" to mean one who takes part in a more honest, more generous, more open way of accounting for the entanglements of the world and our own half-perception—a way of being brought gently to an acknowledgement of the moments when our "attention has lapsed" (Shippey 163). Legolas stands in the threshold to draw into relationship entities who are haunted by the "sense of separation" that affects one's awareness of how the world around us is intricately connected. Legolas's recognition of his own place in ecology's complex entanglements of intra-actions, or its phenomena (a la Barad)—not as an external, viewing/reading subject but as himself the fluid result of innumerable actants—marks

[49] In "The Evolution of J.R.R. Tolkien's Portrayal of Nature: Foreshadowing Anti-speciesism," Eleanor R. Simpson argues that we can trace a definite movement towards anti-speciesism from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*. Specifically, she says that this "challenge[s] the notion of animals as 'other,' inherently different and less valuable people." This means that "our understanding of humanity [must] include animals" (71). While I would push back against the notion that Tolkien might be including "animals" in the category of the "human," I agree that Tolkien's portrayal of nature in his later works reveals a strikingly more sensitive and complicated understanding of the relationships between humanity and nature—not that we are one and the same, but that we are all part of something greater and as equal, active participants in the world, deserve respect and acknowledgement.

him as a unique expression of an ecological understanding far more radical than is generally credited to Tolkien.

### SEEING THE TREE BECAUSE OF THE LEAF

Legolas repeatedly redirects his companions' collective attention towards more appropriate ways of being-in-the-world. His methodology is startlingly unique, even for a book that so foregrounds nature as a key player in the unfolding drama, so what we need is an entry point into this new way of being-in-the-world—and it may be that Legolas's *sensible* relation to the world is just that. What is surprising about this elf in particular is that he consistently relies on aural and tactile rather than visual cues—he *listens* and *touches* rather than *looks*, despite the fact that Elves "can tell a sparrow from a finch a league off" (III, vii, 527) and that Legolas in particular can see the tongues of flame in Mordor while standing in Meduseld (III, vi, 517).[50] Actually, the single most notable time he does attempt to interpret based on what he sees (he attempts to explain the disappearance of Merry and Pippin at the border of Fangorn), he "fails" to such a degree that the moment is strangely ridiculous and almost out-of-character; Aragorn corrects him, obviously amused (III, v, 489), and the reader is left to wonder both at Legolas's "blindness" and Aragorn's skill (which is, perhaps, part of the point). But could we read this differently? If we allow ourselves the liberty of *not* jumping to the obvious conclusion, we might notice that the way in which Legolas attempts to "read" is startlingly different than Aragorn's method. In fact, it's not "reading" at all. Firstly, Legolas does not find any of the clues himself: Aragorn finds the mallorn-leaf, crumbs, and cut rope; Gimli finds the knife which apparently cut said rope. Using this information, Legolas points out several noticeable, logical conundrums:

[50] An earlier iteration of Legolas is decidedly ocular-centric: the Legolas Greenleaf who aids in the escape from the sack of Gondolin "knew all the plain by day or by dark, and was night-sighted" (*FoG* 100). Later this claim is expanded: Legolas is now the one "whose eyes were like cats' for the dark, yet they could see further," and thus are the refugees of Gondolin saved from the pursuit of Morgoth's hoard (*FoG* 103-104).

> 'If his legs were tied, how did he walk? And if his arms were tied, how did he use the knife? And if neither were tied, why did he cut the cords at all? Being pleased with his skill, he then sat down and quietly ate some waybread! That at least is enough to show that he was a hobbit, without the mallorn-leaf. After that, I suppose, he turned his arms into wings and flew away singing into the trees. It should be easy to find him: we only need wings ourselves!' (III, v, 489)

Gimli, overlooking both Legolas's gentle mockery of Aragorn and the elf's actual point, instantly exclaims that "'there was sorcery here right enough,'" but this is not at all what Legolas is implying. Legolas's interpretation first relies on information conveyed through others, and secondly on his knowledge of the two hobbits specifically: even without the "mark" of the mallorn-leaf, his familiarity with hobbit-behavior renders the situation *coherent* if still illogical or "impossible." Then, rather than *looking* for more clues—rather than "reading" the ground in front of him—he gives an explanation that, though it seems ridiculous, actually reveals his intimate understanding of the world and of hobbits. What I mean is this: Legolas's understanding/interpretation of the situation does not exist apart from his intra-actions with hobbits.

Let us break down this claim further in order to understand precisely what is happening here. Legolas apparently knows three particular facts about Hobbits that shape his interpretation of the situation. He learned these through journeying with the Hobbits; we must look elsewhere. First, the prologue to *The Lord of the Rings* tells us that Hobbits "possessed from the first the art of disappearing swiftly and silently, when large folk whom they do not wish to meet come blundering by; and this art they have developed until to Men it may seem magical. But […] their elusiveness is due solely to a professional skill that heredity and practice, and a close friendship with the earth, have rendered inimitable by bigger and clumsier races" (1). In other words, Hobbits have the ability to vanish much like a bird that suddenly takes flight and leaves little to no trace of its having been present, and they can do this presumably because of a mutual understanding with the earth. Secondly, Hobbits are exceedingly fond of song, as is well known. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, when the company comes to the eaves of Lothlórien, Legolas and Pippin engage in a brief altercation:

> 'Whatever it [the way of the trees' growth] may be,' said Pippin, 'they will be marvellous trees indeed if they can offer any rest at night, except to birds. I cannot sleep on a perch!'
>
> 'Then dig a hole in the ground,' said Legolas, 'if that is more after the fashion of your kind. But you must dig swift and deep, if you wish to hide from Orcs.' (II, vi, 342).

Later, Pippin will refer to the elvish flet as a "bird-loft" (II, vi, 344). Again, three important things are at play here: first, Hobbits possess an uncanny ability to vanish without leaving a trace; second, Hobbits are inclined to singing; and third, Hobbits' fear of heights prompts them view trees as the proper habitation of birds, though here they are obliged to take refuge in one to escape Orcs. Each of these is present in Legolas's explanation of the situation on the border of Fangorn. Indeed, even if we choose not to take his explanation seriously (if Legolas is in fact joking, in other words), his words still arise out of his relationship with the hobbits, despite the fact that they rarely interact verbally in the written text, and even his invocation of wing-sprouting is a humorous reference to Pippin's rejection of trees as a proper refuge for anything apart from birds. What this should make us realize is that Legolas is not, as it were, reading marks upon the earth, or clues, but instead coming to conclusions by tracing lines of intra-action and allowing the "past" to bear on the "present."

This is strikingly different than Aragorn's method, which depends completely on his ability to read marks on the earth as words on a page: so he points out where Legolas's "reading"[51] went wrong: "'There are some signs near at hand that you have not considered,'" he admonishes (III, v, 489). Even the fact that the prisoner took a moment to eat is not, for Aragorn,

[51] Legolas's suggestion is explicitly called a "reading" by Gimli, once again underscoring the dwarf's misrecognition of the elf's intent.

a detail that corresponds with his knowledge of Hobbits and their love of food, but rather to his knowledge of the trail: "'He was exhausted and hungry, and it is not to be wondered at'" he explains. All this is to say that Aragorn, unlike Legolas, relies on what he can see—what is apparent to him based on the signs on the page set before him. Who and what Hobbits are simply doesn't seem to apply.

This claim, that is, that Legolas exists within and understands the world in a way fundamentally different from his companions, can be reinforced by the deceptively trivial fact that he possesses the ability to walk on top of snow drifts in "light shoes," "his feet [making] little imprint on the snow" (II, iii, 292) as the Company climbs Caradhras. Legolas leaves only the slightest of marks on the world that he co-habits precisely because he is *not* an outside observer: his way in the world is not to plunge into the midst of things and push his way through, as Aragorn and Boromir, the "Strong Men," do (II, iii, 292), to make and read marks as on a page or as engravings in stone; his skills are for, as he says, "'running light over grass and leaf, or over snow,'" and through these tasks he is able to "'go to find the Sun!'" On his return he has ready his own unique explanation for his companions: the Sun "'is walking in the blue fields of the South, and a little wreath of snow on this Redhorn hillock troubles her not at all'" (II, iii, 292).[52] Where Aragorn reads marks *on* the earth (evidence, perhaps, of an understanding of nature as originally "undisturbed" by or independent of "human" activity), Legolas attends to the entanglements of memory, relationships, and habits *within* an ecology that includes "humans," not as a container that holds them or a book that must be read by them, but as, together, a phenomenon that is always, as it were, bigger and more intricate the further inside one probes.

[52] This moment is, in fact, another example of Legolas's tendency to draw past moments into the present. His comment arises from a brief exchange with Gandalf only paragraphs before, in which Legolas suggests that Gandalf make a great light to melt the snow before them, and Gandalf snappishly responds that "'If Elves could fly over mountains, they might fetch the Sun to save us'" (II, iii, 291).

Taking another step backwards, we can see Legolas's mode of being-in-the-world all the clearer. Upon the Fellowship's arrival in Hollin, Gandalf remarks that they "'will rest here, not only today but tonight as well. There is wholesome air about Hollin. Much evil must befall a country before it wholly forgets the Elves, if once they dwelt there'" (II, iii, 283). The wizard's appeal to the memory of the earth is telling, as is the implication that the earth remembers Elves particularly well; but even more significant is Legolas' response, a lamentation that echoes the words he shares with his companions even as he says them. "'That is true,' said Legolas. 'But the Elves of this land were of a race strange to us of the silvan folk, and the trees and grasses do not now remember them. Only I hear the stones lament them: *deep they delved us, fair they wrought us, high they builded us; but they are gone.* They are gone. They sought the Havens long ago'" (II, iii, 283-284, italics original). Legolas's words are interesting for several reasons. First, he points out that the elves who lived in Hollin were not his people: a strange thing to do, as Gandalf said nothing about *Legolas* possessing memory of the land, but rather the *land* possessing memory of the Elves. His ambivalent response to Gandalf's optimistic appraisal of their safety suggests that he understood the remark to mean that the company would find safety there because *his own presence in particular* would prompt the land to remember its previous occupants, and thus protect its current ones.

Legolas's observation forestalls that possibility by pointing out that while the rocks—the foundations of the earth—may remember the Elves, the grasses and even the trees (usually vessels of ancient memory in Tolkien) do not. Without any legitimate foundation for a relationship, who can say how the land will react to their presence? Legolas's people were and are strangers to that land, which means that neither he nor Hollin have a personal, preserved memory of the other, and thus it is best (and this is a pattern Legolas upholds throughout the book) not to jump to conclusions or to assume too much where prior intra-actions have not laid the appropriate groundwork. In the end the rocks can only lament what is now lost along with Legolas himself, who is apparently only able to understand their voices[53] because he knows what happened there long ago.[54] Amy Amendt-Raduege points out that

> By their very nature, graves and monuments are deliberate interruptions of the landscape, one person's attempt to call attention to the former existence of another. They insist on explanation, and that requires that someone must know the stories to explain their presence. The stories, in turn, make the past 'live again,' giving it agency in the present and therefore the potential to be passed own into the future. (51)

Amendt-Raduege is specifically discussing monuments and gravesites, as is obvious from the quoted passage, but even though Hollin is not intentionally a monument, but a ruin, her point is equally applicable here. The corpse of a long-dead civilization demands attention, demands that it be accounted for. Legolas's response acknowledges this call, but it also pushes back against the assumption (which Amendt-Raduege makes later in the chapter) that knowledge of a place or person's story is enough to claim communion with that person or place. The memories of Hollin and Legolas are not wholly estranged, in other words: they are connected via story—but in a very personal sense they are strangers. Significantly, this correction of Gandalf's reading, as it were, is Legolas's only contribution to any recorded conversation while the company remains in Hollin. Once the *crebain*, the bird-spies of Saruman, appear, it is Aragorn who says (note the "reading" of the signs) that "Hollin is no longer wholesome for [them]" because they "are being watched" (II, iii, 285). Legolas, on the other hand, knows that the rocks, the trees, and the grasses have been "watching" and remembering the entire time.

[53] This is not the only place where Legolas "listens" to rocks: when the Company is searching for the Redhorn Gate into Moria, which is, significantly, also made by the Elves of Hollin and is marked by the holly tree, Legolas "pressed against the rock, as if listening" (II, iv, 304).
[54] Hollin was the dwelling-place of the Noldor, but specifically of Celebrimbor, the renowned smith who forged the three Elven Rings and rescued them from Sauron before the latter was aware of them.

As the company approaches Lothlórien[55] Legolas becomes increasingly vocal, and his speech is once again centered around the land and the memory of the land. When they come upon the stream called Nimrodel, he explains, "'Of this stream the Silvan Elves made many songs long ago, and still we sing them in the North, remembering the rainbow on its falls, and the golden flowers floating in its foam'" (II, vi, 339). The songs the Elves sing recall what is past, but they also literally re-member the past: that is, they re-embody them, give them form, bring them together again, incarnated once more in the places that bear their names. Likewise, when Legolas tells his companions stories of Lothlórien and Nimrodel, they are tales "that the Elves of Mirkwood still kept in their hearts, of sunlight and starlight upon the meadows by the Great River before the world was grey" (II, vi, 339). Finally, as his story closes in a grief that recalls the lament of Hollin, he says that "'in the spring when the wind is in the new leaves the echo of [Nimrodel's] voice may still be heard by the falls that bear her name. And when the wind is in the South the voice of Amroth [her lover] comes up from the sea […]. But neither Nimrodel nor Amroth came ever back'" (II, vi, 341).

For the Elves to have memory of a land is for them to have a memory of a person or persons, for they are intimately related. Indeed, who is to say that the South wind is not Amroth himself, and the wind in the new leaves, Nimrodel? Legolas's tale equates them, recalling Tolkien's discussion of nature and mythology in "On Fairy-Stories." How can anyone decide whether thunder or the Norse god Thórr came first? Tolkien asks. Without Thórr, or before Thórr, thunder is/was unheard by human ear. Thórr creates thunder as much as it creates him; without one the other does not exist (*MC* 124). This somewhat strange collapse or association represents Tolkien's sensitivity to the relationship between "humans" and "nature" and the

[55] Its older name is *Laurelindórenan*, the "Land of the Valley of Singing Gold"

stories told about them. These stories, or myths, themselves like intercessors, draw our attention to moments of entanglement: they point out to us the nodes of intra-action within which we all could not live without each other. Without Nimrodel and Amroth, would the falls sing their song of sorrow, or would the wind, coming up from the sea, cry out in tones of bereavement? Or would they go unnoticed, unheard, by "human" ear, their connection with us distorted and even made invisible by our lack of perception? Legolas's story directs attention to the co-dependence of Elf and wind and water. It quite literally accounts for, gives an account of, their entanglement. One does not exist without the other. As Aragorn tells Éomer, the green earth "'is a might matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day!'" (III, ii, 434). This is what he means: land and story find their being within each other, becoming-with and fading-with each other. And this extends even to their present moment. Legolas himself, for example, is clad in the greens and browns of the wood and is one of the woodland folk (II, ii, 240), once characterized as "thoughtful and silent as a young tree in a windless night" (III, ii, 426). Tolkien, in a letter, writes that he was "tall as a young tree, lithe, immensely strong, […] endowed with the tremendous vitality of Elvish bodies" (*BLT II* 333). Nimrodel, likewise, is both elf maiden and stream, just as Amroth is lover and South wind.[56] So, for Legolas especially, to lament the passing of one is to grieve the fading and loss of the other, as well as to be aware of our growing distraction and inattention when it comes to the networks of being running through us. Where one fades or is destroyed, so the other.

Finally (though there is a small multitude of other passages that might be examined), Legolas's reaction to and interaction with the forest of Fangorn is of particular interest. When Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli first come to the eaves of Fangorn and make their camp, the elf

[56] Note that it is Legolas who shortly thereafter sings with the voice of the South wind at Boromir's memorial.

stands "alone in the open, looking towards the profound shadow of the wood, leaning forward, as one who listens to voices calling from a distance," and later he observes that the tree that shelters them "'is glad of the fire'" they have built (III, ii, 441). The next morning, he tells Aragorn that their horses, which had either run away or been stolen the previous night, "'spoke as horses will when they meet a friend that they have long missed'" (III, v, 488).[57] When the three companions prepare to enter the forest, Legolas once again stands "under the eaves of the forest, stooping forward, as if he were listening" (III, v, 490-491). He accounts for the forest in his conversation with Aragorn and Gimli, saying that Fangorn "'is not evil; or what evil is in it is far away. I catch only the faintest echoes of dark places where the hearts of the trees are black. There is no malice here, only watchfulness, and anger. […] I feel young again, as I have not felt since I journeyed with you children. It is old and *full of memory*. I could have been happy here'" (III, v, 491, emphasis mine). That Legolas is able to understand the forest falls perfectly in line with his characterization thus far; once again he comments on the trees as one might a group of human persons, and his remarks once again include references to the land's memory and his place in it.

In each of these examples, Legolas is communicating and communing with living things and objects that are generally considered to be outside traditional methods of conversation (trees, rocks, etc.). There is some hint that he and his race have this ability because, as Elves, they are *natural* beings: that is, their very existence is bound up with that of the earth. In that regard, it is not surprising that their memories are shared with the earth itself or that the lines of communication have not here been disappeared as they apparently have for humans. As Tolkien points out in "On Fairy-Stories," fairies and Elves do not fall under the category of the supernatural, though we tend to assign them to it; but, "it can hardly be applied [to them], unless

[57] Later, at the mouth of the Paths of the Dead, Legolas will quiet his horse's fear by singing (V, ii, 786).

*super* is taken merely as a superlative prefix. For it is man who is in contrast to fairies, supernatural […]; whereas they are natural, far more natural than he. Such is their doom" (110, italics original). Despite this essential difference between the two races, however, Tolkien still sees the Elves as representatives and reflections of primal human desires, and as such, their abilities and motivations are worth a close examination. What is not said, however (and indeed it is explicitly denied), is that Legolas is instantaneously and effortlessly able to become a channel of extra-human communication because of his race. What I mean is this: there are moments when even Legolas's listening fails to result in intelligibility.

### MIND THE GAP

An interesting situation that arises from the Company's sojourn in Lothlórien is the restored relationship between Legolas and Gimli, two persons whose races have been locked in hostility from time out of mind. Added to this embedded racism is, of course, the fact that Legolas's father once imprisoned Gimli's father for, truthfully, a somewhat petty instance of trespassing (if Bilbo is to be believed). The early books of *The Lord of the Rings* are filled with the recurring nagging and lightly veiled antagonism of the elf and dwarf, and they are called out on it multiple times by Gandalf. But, quite suddenly, that all changes in Lothlórien, and the two become inseparable companions, such that (if the tales be true) Legolas takes Gimli with him when he leaves Middle-earth for the Undying Lands. We can see from the text that this transformation is initiated in some way by the welcome Gimli receives from Celeborn and Galadriel. When the Company first arrives, Celeborn hopes that Gimli's presence in Caras Galadhon will "'be a sign that though the world is now dark better days are at hand, and that friendship shall be renewed between our peoples'" (II, vii, 355). Later Celeborn is less courteous, but Galadriel makes up for this and defends the Dwarves' attempted reclamation of Moria, even speaking in the Dwarf-tongue. It isn't hard to imagine that Legolas was moved by this to reconsider their difficult relationship.

However, it must be observed that, misguided as was his original appraisal of Gimli, Legolas was even then adhering to his usual method of viewing the world: he was, in other words, interacting with Gimli based on what he knew of (and here a subtle distinction arises) the Dwarvish race. What he fails to do here that he does unfailingly elsewhere is encounter Gimli as an individual who may or may not live up to Legolas's own knowledge of the people group to which he belongs. Here, Legolas allows his personal prejudices, likely acquired through stories he learned from his father and others, to cloud his perception of who Gimli is as a person. Legolas forgets that he doesn't actually know anything about Gimli. What changes in Lothlórien? I would argue that these prejudices fall away when the two bond over a mutual growth in their understanding of natural environments. Though perhaps prompted by Galadriel's ability to see past racialization and connect with Gimli over Dwarvish landmarks (and Gimli's civil response), it is Legolas who, like the intercessor he is becoming, initiates this change, this growth. Not long after their arrival in Lothlórien, the narrator informs us that "Legolas was away much among the Galadhrim, and after the first night he did not sleep with the other companions, though he returned to eat and talk with them. Often he took Gimli with him when he went abroad in the land, and the others wondered at this change" (II, vii, 359). There is great speculation over what happened during these short journeys (fanfiction abounds), and even their companions have no answers; but I would suggest that Legolas is introducing Gimli to the wonders of "the heart of Elvendom on earth" (II, vi, 352)—that they are learning together about the land and the stories it has to tell.

This explanation suggests itself to me because of the tenor the relationship of Legolas and Gimli develops as the narrative progresses. Specifically, it becomes dominated by talk of place and land, and they consistently connect, reconnect, and even disconnect over their reactions to the places in which they find themselves. The enduring mark of their friendship becomes the promised trips to Fangorn and the Caverns of Helms Deep. In this mutual promise is encapsulated the spirit of their relationship. Legolas, who half-jokingly says he would "'give gold to be excused'" a journey into the caverns and "'double to be let out, if [he] strayed in'" (III, viii, 547), is moved by Gimli's description of a Dwarvish paradise and agrees to voluntarily enter. Gimli, who literally cries out or reacts in terror during several encounters with trees and Huorns, vows to travel through dark, mysterious Fangorn. We aren't told, unfortunately, what Gimli thought of Fangorn, but we do get Legolas's reaction to the Glittering Caves, and in that response is a fitting tribute to his vision of the world: Legolas "was silent, and would say only that Gimli alone could find fit words to speak of them'" (VI, vi, 978). Here, as elsewhere, is Legolas's admission that communication with and about the earth requires a special relationship that shouldn't be presumed or taken advantage of. Here, Legolas puts into practice Gandalf's maxim: "'The wise speak only of what they know'" (III, vi, 514). Gimli's history and what he knows of rock and cave and Dwarf make him uniquely positioned to hear and respond fittingly to the voices of the Glittering Caves, whereas Legolas, who before openly admits that he would prefer not to visit such a place, has not the words to form an appropriate reply.

Take the Huorn forest as another, perhaps clearer example. Here Legolas's knowledge runs short and he is faced with what to him and most others is inexplicable (those others including even the critics, as the frustrations of Flieger and Cohen, in their attempts to comprehend the phenomenon, will attest). Legolas knows no stories, no songs, no rumors of the great power that now surrounds him, and in the face of this unknown he finds himself unable to make meaning or formulate an adequate response:

> But on either side the great aisles of the wood were already wrapped in dusk, stretching away into impenetrable shadows; and there they heard the creaking and groaning of boughs, and far cries, and a rumour of wordless voices, murmuring angrily. No Orc or other living creature could be seen.
>
> […]
>
> They rode on in silence for a while; but Legolas was ever glancing from side to side, and would often have halted to listen to the sounds of the wood, if Gimli had allowed it.
>
> "These are the strangest trees that ever I saw," he said; "and I have seen many an oak grow from acorn to ruinous age. I wish that there were leisure now to walk among them: they have voices, and in time I might come to understand their thought."
>
> "No, no!" said Gimli. "Let us leave them. I guess their thought already: hatred of all that go on two legs; and their speech is of crushing and strangling."
>
> "Not of all that go on two legs," said Legolas. "There I think you are wrong. It is Orcs that they hate. For they do not belong here and know little of Elves and Men. Far away are the valleys where they sprang. From the deep dales of Fangorn, Gimli, that is whence they come, I guess." (III, viii, 547).

The passage is long, even after my elision of a number of lines, but it makes a significant point all the same: without prior knowledge of each other, these trees and this elf cannot make sense of each other. Legolas, then, is confined to assessing the situation visually, by "glancing from side to side," rather than stopping to listen, as he wishes to do. Regardless, what the company *does* hear is nothing more than "a rumour of wordless voices"; the forest is "impenetrable" and, significantly, "[n]o Orc or other living creature could be seen." What of Legolas's general treatment of trees and grasses and rocks *as* living things, indeed, even as persons? Perhaps the narrator sees differently; Legolas at least is prepared to admit that there are some voices he cannot understand, some persons that he cannot quite see. And yet, he is able to immediately offer a rebuttal to Gimli's more cynical translation[58] simply given the fact that the wood comes

[58] A crucial difference between Legolas and Gimli is that the latter has absolutely no qualms about offering his opinion on even those things of which he knows nothing. Legolas, on the other hand, consistently defers. This is evident in the examples already discussed above, but also in the scene in which the two walk through Minas Tirith together. Gimli repeatedly insists that Men "fail of their promise" and their deeds "come to naught in the end but might-have-beens"; to which Legolas ultimately replies "'that the Elves know not the answer'" (V, ix, 873).

from a place that "know[s] little of Elves and Men." Despite the unusual predicament in which he finds himself, Legolas is wise enough to recognize that, for the same reasons he himself can say nothing of surety for the voices of the trees (save that they have them), the trees themselves cannot possibly harbor animosity for that which they do not know. (Note also that Legolas's claims are always qualified: "'I think you are wrong'"; "'that is whence they come, I guess.'") Thus, in his very refusal to render intelligible extra-human communication we find an acknowledgement of the Huorns' individuality and the importance of understanding their "roots" before presuming to know their thoughts.[59]

Both Cohen and Flieger attempt to unravel or open the mystery that is the Huorns, and Cohen even suggests that here the believability of Tolkien's world takes a major hit. But the point here is that not everything in Middle-earth can be known, as Legolas's reaction clearly illustrates. I read the Huorns' unanswered mystery as a type of agency, a refusal to be read or explained away. Ike Reeder similarly argues that Tolkien gives agency to trees and treeish creatures "by refusing to turn the trees into a narrative device to further the major plot, which is entirely anthropocentric" (113). Though Reeder focuses on Ents, the argument could just as well be extended to the Huorns in that they enact a very specific type of agency in their refusal to become knowable. Legolas is wise in that he does not attempt to interpret them.

This reading may help us understand yet another moment in which Legolas strangely fails to produce an adequate translation for his companions—only this time, the situation is all the more perplexing because the voices he refuses to translate are those of his own race: the voices of the Elves. Throughout their stay in Lothlórien, the members of the Fellowship are privy

[59] This is not wholly different from his reaction to Gandalf's comment when the company arrives in Hollin. There, as here, Legolas immediately shuts down any attempt to presume to speak for/of something that one has little prior notion of or experience with.

to several elvish songs which in general receive some sort of gloss or translation in the text. There is one song, however, or perhaps more accurately one body of songs, that not only remains untranslated, but is indeed missing from the text entirely. These are the laments for Gandalf, sung intermittently by the Galadhrim after learning of the wizard's encounter with the Balrog:

> Now as the companions sat or walked together they spoke of Gandalf, and all that each had known or seen of him came clear before their minds. As they were healed of hurt and weariness of body the grief of their loss grew more keen. Often they heard nearby Elvish voices singing, and knew that they were making songs of lamentation for his fall, for they caught his name among the sweet sad words that they could not understand.
>
> *Mithrandir, Mithrandir* sang the Elves, *O Pilgrim Grey!* For so they loved to call him. But if Legolas was with the Company, he would not interpret the songs for them, saying that he had not the skill, and that for him the grief was still too near, a matter for tears and not yet for song. (II, vii, 359)

Legolas's refusal to translate is mirrored by the text's refusal to transcript anything more than Gandalf's name, which ought to instantly tell us something about the nature of these lamentations. They are, as it were, ineffable, wordless expressions of a grief that moves beyond the grief of the solitary person, so "near," as Legolas says, that they cannot even appear on the page. This nearness is crucial. Without distance, without the gap, translation and inscription are as impossible as they are unnecessary: there is no need to re-state what one already feels keenly. To put it somewhat scientifically, Legolas recognizes his inability to be both the apparatus of observation and the thing observed. As an intercessor, his role is to stand in between, to inhabit that liminal space, that threshold between two worlds, as it were. But here the space is gone. Just as his song of Nimrodel fails when the grief becomes too great, and his voice falters, so the potential song of mourning for Mithrandir is deferred by the absence of a gap across which to translate. The grief is his own.

This reveals another significant aspect of Legolas's role in the text. He does not speak for himself. When a sorrow is "still too near," this means it is *his* sorrow, and of this he must needs be silent. Legolas stands in a threshold fraught with cycles of joy and lament; his voice has become fully intercessory. But an intercessor is one who stands within and speaks from the fractures, perhaps to the detriment of self, and where there is no space, no gap, there can be no intercession.[60] It is a sacrificial position. This is why Legolas is unable to translate the lamentations of the Elves and why his words upon leaving Lothlórien are words that give voice not to his own personal grief but to the cycles in which his voice finds its being, in an utterance that once again binds together that which stands on either side of the threshold: "'Alas for us all! And for all that walk the world in these after-days. For such is the way of it: to find and lose, as it seems to those whose boat is on the running stream'" (II, viii, 378).

Legolas's role in the text is thus far more complicated and significant than we might have imagined and has much to say about intercession and knowledge, and speaking for and of that which we know. For Legolas, to be an intercessor, especially between his companions (and by extension readers) and the world around them, is to understand the story of the ground beneath one's feet; the sky above one's head; the landscape in which one's body is physically present (but *not*, significantly, the space upon or within which one acts); the great story of which one's life is but a chapter, a page, a sentence, a word, an ineffable thought. But the story of the world is an ancient and thus long one, requiring the ability to be silent and listen before speaking. The hearing requires a communion that constantly hangs in the balance, as it were, between forgetfulness of self and the clear knowing of one's place in the universe. When Legolas mingles his own voice with that of Nimrodel, though it is "hardly to be heard amid the rustle of the leaves

[60] It is not insignificant that when Frodo is tempted to "put something of his sorrow into halting words," he fails utterly: "his thought took shape in a song that seemed far to him; yet when he tried to repeat it to Sam only snatches remained, faded as a handful of withered leaves" (II, vii, 359). The "shape" of his grief can be comprehended, but the moment it is forced into words, it loses all vitality and truthfulness and has no more voice than a pile of dead leaves. It attempts to step into a gap where none exists.

about them," it is heard and recognized by the Elves of Lothlórien and they allow the Fellowship safe passage (II, vi, 339). While Legolas sings, "the white stars [open] in the hard black vault above" (III, ii, 429). For the elf, the ability to speak with trees and rocks and animals is intricately related to—and perhaps one and the same with—his knowledge of songs and stories told about them because they are coexistent, but his speaking always and only springs from his silence. His ability to hear clearly what is never said marks him out from the rest of the Fellowship, but also signals that he is uniquely positioned *within* the Fellowship to provide just the thing it lacks.

As Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin, "'Elves began it, of course, waking trees up and teaching them to speak and learning their tree-talk. They always wished to talk to everything, the old Elves did'" (III, iv, 468). In these after-days it is Legolas who "always [wishes] to talk to everything," and he does it particularly well because he instantly recognizes that behind all things lies a story in wait, and until one becomes familiar with the story, silence in the face of the unknown is an ethical practice. Importantly, then, Legolas is the one to identify the significance of the old Ent's name: "'Treebeard; that is only a rendering of Fangorn into the Common Speech'" he observes to Gandalf; "'yet you seem to speak of a person. Who is this Treebeard?'" Gandalf replies that he cannot explain, for "'the little that [he knows] of his long slow story would make a tale for which [they] have no time now'" (III, v, 499). But, as Gandalf rightly assumes, Legolas has already understood that his question is not simply one of identity and place, but of *story*. Indeed, when Aragorn suggests that Gandalf "'knows Fangorn well,'" the wizard responds in a way that collapses Ent and forest (recalling Legolas's treatment of Nimrodel) in a clever play of words: "'that would be the study of many lives'" (III, v, 493). That is, both the study of the history of many life *forms* and a study lasting many life*times*. This collapse illustrates the close relationship the Ents in general have with the forest,[61] but also emphasizes once again the vibrant and ever-growing entanglement of life, person, story, place. Readers are not caught entirely off-guard by this odd exchange, however, because they have been with Merry and Pippin in the previous chapter, when Treebeard declares, "'my name is growing all the time, and I've lived a very long, long time; so *my* name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of things they belong to in my language'" (III, iv, 465, emphasis original). Treebeard is of course an entity distinct from the forest, but, as Legolas's relationship to his environment similarly illustrates, he is permanently associated with it by the many interwoven threads of silence, speech, and story: by his name, which belongs to them both, and by his ability to stand in for the voices of the trees that are so often now not listened to, even by the Elves. Treebeard himself is a conduit, an intercessor, not unlike Legolas, in the sense that his name and his story are one and the same with the forest with which he dwells, allowing him to stand in that ambiguous ground of in-betweenness, in the fractures, the gaps, the thresholds, and to speak for those whose voices have been silenced. Treebeard may assume that this feature is unique to his language, to his kind, but Legolas knows differently. His name, after all, is only a rendering of "green leaf" into Elvish.

[61] See Treebeard's comment that "Sheep get like shepherd, and shepherds like sheep, it is said […]. It is quicker and closer with trees and Ents, and they walk down the ages together" and that "Some of my kin look just like trees now; and they speak only in whispers. But some of my trees are limb-lithe, and many can talk to me" (III, iv, 468).

# IV

## Living a Little in the Complications

> Yet it is not our part to master all the ties of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.
>
> — J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

### Taking a Walk on the Dark Side

To say all that has now been said is not to deny that there are complications or contradictions to the model I have put forward for Middle-earth; but, neither do the contradictions mean that what has been said must be negated or proven false. Indeed, some of the most interesting and profitable conversations arise when seeming contradictions are held in tension, allowed to come up against one another and speak across that divide. This section functions accordingly. By addressing moments in Tolkien's work that push back against those I have already cited, I hope to wade further into the entanglements and mysteries that give Middle-earth its color and complexity.

With that in mind, this section begins by wrestling with the complicated and ever-changing narrative function of one of Tolkien's more tortured characters, Maedhros, the eldest son of Fëanor and Nerdanel, whose failing battle against his own doom frames the hunt for the Silmarils even more so than his father's did. I then ask how Tolkien's portrayals of evil and doom might speak to the concerns at hand. How are we to read figures like Orcs, Easterlings, and the Wild Men of the Woses, characters who are consistently sidelined and excluded on the path towards spiritual, interpersonal, and ecological recovery? This section also takes up Aragorn's activities as newly-crowned king, asking us to reconsider traditional, positive readings of his kingship by highlighting his tendency to re-establish ancient boundaries, ultimately reinforcing many of the gaps that his companions seek to bridge. Finally, we will move towards a more complex understanding of intercession and translation by taking up the problem of the Entwives. Why are all the songs about them written by the Elves? Treebeard notes that should the Ents choose to write songs, they would be entirely unlike the elvish ones, which he characterizes as "lighthearted, quickworded, and soon over" (I, iv, 478). But it is the elvish song which Treebeard still chooses to sing, and the elvish song which establishes a real hope of the Entwives' recovery—a hope that Treebeard never confirms, but that is present nonetheless. Why do the Ents continue to allow Elves to speak their lament for them? Is it problematic? Our answer to this question will also be turned towards Legolas's role as a translator of the environment: should we be concerned that "nature" only gets to speak through the mouth of another? This section seeks a more truthful and provocative understanding of Tolkien's world by acknowledging and staying with the many "tangles" in its narrative threads.

### MAEDHROS: A CASE STUDY

As noted above, Maedhros[62] is one of Tolkien's more tortured characters, and one whose importance should not be underestimated. He is the first and therefore archetypal figure to undergo the ecstatic experience: he is, as it were, Middle-earth's Prometheus. Before we delve into details, let me first lay out his character arc with broad strokes.

[62] Throughout the many drafts of "The Silmarillion," Tolkien changes the spelling of this name multiple times. For clarity and simplicity's sakes I will use the latest form, "Maedhros," indiscriminately, except when quoting from a text with one of the older forms.

While the Noldor are still in Valinor, living among the gods, Maedhros is practically anonymous, at least in the scope of *The Silmarillion* (minor variations will be addressed later on). He is simply one of Fëanor's seven sons. Of them as a unit, as the children of Fëanor, we know only that some have the temper of their mother, Nerdanel, and some of their father, but we are never specifically told which takes after which.[63] When Fëanor swears his blasphemous Oath, his sons are there by his side; they are not distinguished from each other here, either, and we are not told that any of them hesitated in swearing the Oath after their father: in fact, they did so "straightway" (*S* 83). Neither do they stand out during the first Kinslaying, which involved the murder of the Teleri by the Sea and the rape of their white ships. It is not until the company is preparing to cross over to Middle-earth that Tolkien begins to add depth and color to his characterization of the Sons of Fëanor. Thus Maedhros is first notable in *The Silmarillion* for the fact that he "stood apart" during the burning of the ships at Losgar, refusing to betray his friends despite the Oath and in disregard for his father's anger. This is also the moment in which we first learn that Maedhros and Fingon had been dear friends before Fëanor's rash words came between their families.[64]

After Fëanor's death, Maedhros, as the eldest son, becomes in effect the high king of all the Noldor, but he appears ambivalent towards the position and is instead focused on assaulting Morgoth. He is quite clearly accepted as a military leader and strategist, but the idea of Maedhros as high king is never really developed by Tolkien and is left to fitfully haunt the background of his narrative. During his campaign against Morgoth, the axis of his character arc shifts radically:

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[63] In one early moment, Tolkien claimed that all but Curufin had the temperament of Nerdanel, but given the stories we're given afterwards, it seems he changed his mind.

[64] Interestingly enough, and for what reasons I cannot posit here, fanfiction writers adore Maedhros—and specifically his friendship with Fingon. As a quick perusal will confirm, this fraught, David-and-Jonathan friendship has been a gold mine for these writers, many of whom also tend to read the relationship as explicitly homosexual.

he is captured by Morgoth and kept a prisoner in Angband. When his brothers, fearing Morgoth's treachery, refuse to treat for his release, Maedhros is chained by the wrist to the peak of Thangorodrim and left there to suffer, becoming Middle-earth's original Promethean archetype and a sort of primitive or early imagining of the shaman undergoing initiation. After an untold number of tortuous days, he is saved by Fingon[65] and a great eagle sent from Manwë, though he loses his hand in the process (the chains cannot be cut). According to the markers discussed in great detail above, this experience is a key ecstatic moment in the text. Maedhros finds himself stuck in an impossible situation, experiences suffering beyond the effable, and finally transcends the situation—implied symbolically by the appearance of the eagle in the exact moment that all seems lost. The experience prompts him to give up his claim to the high kingship, making his family the Dispossessed, but, incidentally, restoring some semblance of friendship between the House of Fëanor and that of Fingolfin (Fingon's father).

Maedhros's story continues as he becomes Morgoth's greatest adversary—despite only having one hand—and attempts to redress his father's wrongs; however, the Oath still holds and, as a doomed man, he is forced to make war on his kindred, which leads to the third Kinslaying, and even to threaten war against the Valar when the latter recover the Silmarils. It is at this point in the narrative that we see the true extent of Maedhros's torment. He has lost his mother, his father, his kingdom, and all but one brother, Maglor; together they mourn the terrible doom that has driven them to such ends. Finally, in possession of a single Silmaril and tormented by it and his Oath, Maedhros casts himself into a fiery chasm, where he and the Jewel are devoured.

There are a few variations from other and earlier drafts, however, that deserve our attention. First of all, in his abandoned alliterative verse poem, *The Flight of the Noldoli from*

[65] Again, a gold mine for the fanfictionists.

*Valinor*, Tolkien's conception of Maedhros (here spelled "Maidros") is more detailed: he is explicitly set apart during the Oathtaking by the following lines, in which he is (parenthetically, granted) described as

> Maidros tall,
> (the eldest, whose ardour yet more eager burnt
> than his father's flame, than Fëanor's wrath;
> him fate awaited with fell purpose)
> (*FoG* 35-36)

This is arguably the most interesting and complicated direct description of Fëanor's heir that we are ever given. What is "ardour," and why is it "yet more eager […] than his father's flame"? We know that "Fëanor" means "spirit of fire," and that he is quick to anger and slow to forget, so it is easy to explain the reference to Fëanor. But "ardour" is such a broad or generic word that it is nearly impossible to tell exactly how we are supposed to read the character. Is it a positive description of Maedhros? Negative? Perhaps it is simply neutral, and we are to understand that Maedhros is even more passionate in his actions than his father is wrathful. The final line is hardly more clear. What "fell purpose" does fate have in store for Maedhros? He experiences many dark days, but it hardly seems that he can be thus singled out from the rest of his brothers, most of whom experience similar trials; and his doom certainly does not approach that of, say, Túrin, cursed of Morgoth. Maedhros will eventually commit suicide, but is this the "fell purpose"? This explanation is unlikely, given that at this early stage, Maedhros's ultimate role in the narrative is still unfixed, or even positive (more on this below). Is Tolkien referring to Maedhros's imprisonment by Morgoth? Perhaps; but really the paucity of the information impedes our speculations. It seems that this path will lead us nowhere. Indeed, the only thing we can say certainly about Maedhros from this description is that he was tall.

Fortunately, those obscure lines are not the only sketch of Maedhros's character that we are given, though others will have to be extrapolated from his actions. I turn now to early drafts of "The Silmarillion," in which Maedhros (there spelled either Maidros or Maedros) is given a significant role in the later course of history. In these early drafts it is *Maedhros* (rather than Fëanor in later versions) who becomes an intercessor at the end of time, during the last battle against Morgoth: it is "Maidros" who rises again and breaks the Silmarils before Yavanna so that the world can be remade and the hurts caused by Morgoth (and the Oath) healed. What we do with this depends on our reading of Maedhros as a whole, so let us postpone this significant alteration for just a moment.

First, Maedhros's relationship with his father must be addressed, particularly because it fails to conform to what might be considered a pattern of father/son relationships in Tolkien's work. Broadly speaking, there appear to be three major categories of these relationships. In the first, the father and son have a good relationship, one that in many ways resembles a friendship of peers. Examples of Type 1 could be, perhaps ironically, Fëanor and his father Finwë. Granted, this later becomes poisoned by Fëanor's obsessive possessiveness, but we understand that they are close: Finwë abandons his other two children to be with Fëanor when the latter is exiled by the Valar. Other examples might include the father/son pairs of *The Lost Road* and, potentially, Samwise Gamgee and his father Hamfast. Types 2 and 3 are closely related, and probably could be considered variations of the same type. Type 2 is characterized by the fact that the father is physically (and thus emotionally) absent, and is either remembered fondly or not remembered/referenced by the son (and in one case daughter) at all.[66] Examples of this type are plentiful: we might briefly point to Frodo, Bilbo, Eärendil, Túrin, Beren, Elendil, Éowyn and

[66] This type resembles Tolkien's own relationship with his father, who died in South Africa when Tolkien was four years old and in England.

Éomer, Elrond, etc. Finally, in Type 3, the father is physically present but emotionally absent. This type is less common but no less significant: the Faramir/Denethor relationship is representative of this type.

The Fëanor/Maedhros dynamic does not appear to fit any of these. From the information available to us, we can surmise they have a relatively good relationship in the beginning. Maedhros is completely willing, even eager, to stand behind his father in defying the gods and swearing the unbreakable Oath (though he later attributes this rashness to immaturity and passion stirred by his father's words). But after the burning of the ships at Alqualondë, there seems to be a change: for the first time, Maedhros stands aside and is overtly singled out from the rest of the House of Fëanor. "Maedhros alone [stands] aside" while his friends and kinsfolk are betrayed by his father and brothers (90). After Fëanor is killed, Maedhros is constantly battling the force of the Oath, which is apparently directly opposed to his own wishes. He never speaks of his father apart from the Oath and he consistently seeks to repair the damage his father caused. It seems that at least in the beginning, Tolkien had some idea that Maedhros would become a key figure in the mythology, and that his role is directly opposed to that of his father's: indeed, this might help us read the lines from *The Flight of the Noldoli from Valinor* quoted above. Perhaps rather than reading the description as a literal description of the character, we are meant simply to observe the contrast or comparison made between the two elves and therefore be prepared to see them (and their intentions) come head-to-head.

Maedhros's abdication of high kingship is another interesting aspect of his character, one that arises directly out of this opposition to Fëanor, specifically in this case Fëanor's extreme possessiveness, arrogance, and selfishness. In a purely practical sense, Maedhros's decision falls in line with ancient Celtic conceptions of kingship despite the fact we are never truthfully told *why* he decides to make this move; he claims it is because the kingship is not rightfully his, but this assertion makes little logical sense:

> Maedhros begged forgiveness for the desertion in Araman [Losgar]; and he waived his claim to kingship over all the Noldor, saying to Fingolfin: "If there lay no grievance between us, lord, still the kingship would rightly come to you, the eldest here of the house of Finwë, and not the least wise." But to this his brothers did not all in their hearts agree.
>
> Therefore even as Mandos foretold the House of Fëanor were called the Dispossessed, because the overlordship passed from it, the elder, to the house of Fingolfin, both in Elendë and in Beleriand, and because also of the loss of the Silmarils. (*S* 111)

Maedhros's explanation is strange. Fingolfin is not the eldest of Finwë's House: Fëanor was, though he is already dead at this point in the narrative. One would thus assume that "the kingship would rightly come" to Maedhros as the eldest son of the eldest son of Finwë, and in this even the narrator agrees ("the overlordship passed from it, the elder"). Instead, his words imply that, first, he is renouncing the kingship as reparation for Fëanor's betrayal; and second, that it belongs to Fingolfin *regardless*. But the claims are paradoxical. If the kingship rightly belongs to Fingolfin anyway, Maedhros's renunciation means nothing and therefore is worthless as a gesture of contrition. One might argue that his waiver is purely a political formality; but even so, the force of his apology is mitigated and becomes almost an arrogant insult. Granted, one might read something of a veiled or sarcastic abuse in Maedhros's last words ("not the least wise"), but this hardly makes his explanation easier to understand, and such caustic arrogance is more characteristic of Fëanor than of the Maedhros we have seen thus far. So what is happening?

Turning to ancient Celtic literary conventions of kingship might provide us with an answer and help clarify Maedhros's apparent unwillingness to give a logical reason for his abdication. In so doing we will find that his maiming directly affects his understanding of his ability to rule. According to *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, "the idea that the king must be unblemished is widespread and is used, for example, to account for the way in which

[…] Nuadu […] forfeits the kingship of the supernatural race, the Tuath Dé, after losing his arm in battle, even though he is fitted with a perfectly functioning prosthetic arm" (1061). It further notes that "[p]hysical perfection is probably integral to the general idea that the tribal king figures as a virtual linchpin of the cosmic order, assuring the beneficial harmony between the natural universe and his people" (1061). The narrator of *The Silmarillion* tells us that Maedhros's "body recovered from his torment and became hale, but the shadow of his pain was in his heart; and he lived to wield his sword with left hand more deadly than his right had been" (111). Despite this, he like Nuadu is "blemished" according to conventions of ancient kingship laws. It is probable, then, that Maedhros's refusal of the "overlordship" is a refiguring of this Celtic concept. Recognizing that he will never be fully "healed," Maedhros essentially bargains his own honor for the wellbeing of his people as a matter of principle; and though his words are colored by a covert edge of bitterness, the political maneuver accomplishes its aim in that "the hatred between the houses of Fingolfin and Fëanor was assuaged" for a time and the Noldor are reunited against Morgoth (111).

This is the first indication we get that Maedhros might be becoming an intercessor. It is not insignificant that the first thing he accomplishes after his Promethean "ecstasy" is the socio-political reunion of the Noldor. In this movement we see Maedhros coming into his own, again set against the example of his father (in that Fëanor was the direct cause of the breach between the houses). Of course, his decision is not supported by all of his brothers, and this is a shadow over a largely optimistic moment in the text, evidence of the Oath's overpowering hold on the House of Fëanor. But there is, unfortunately, another dark side to this moment. As *Celtic Culture* notes, "the tribal king figures as a virtual linchpin of the cosmic order, assuring the beneficial *harmony between the natural universe and his people*" (1061, my emphasis). Rightful kingship, then, can be directly associated with the restoration of the balance of proper *ecological* relationships, as well as political ones. While Maedhros succeeds (with a small exception) through his ecstatic experience to restore the interpersonal relationships of his house and the house of Fingolfin, his amputation ultimately denies him the opportunity to act as an ecological intercessor.

It is difficult to know what to do with this fact. We might be tempted—and perhaps rightly so—to read this as a blatant rejection of a person with a disability, which would clearly make the text problematic in that regard. But who is to blame? The ancient Celts, for propagating an idea of kingship that understood the king as an avatar for the kingdom and thus required him to be "whole"? Tolkien, for (characteristically) recognizing and employing a trope from ancient literature? Or, conversely, is Tolkien to be praised for his consistent rehabilitation of characters with disabilities, which also might be a refiguring of a mythological tendency? After all, as Kevin J. Wanner and others have observed, in Germanic mythology "injuries and losses suffered by the *æsir* [the high gods and goddesses] tend not to signal or result, in human experience, in disability, but rather in some added or augmented ability or benefit" (1-2). Is Tolkien playing with this pattern? My answer is unfortunately noncommittal: while the problem is significant—not to mention one that has yet to be adequately addressed in Tolkien Studies—there is not space here to do it justice.[67] In this moment I must be content with simply noting that the "symbolic dismemberment" of shamanic rituals here becomes literal, affecting the character in real and dramatic ways and pushing the texts further into their own tensions and entanglements.

[67] Todd A. Comer's "The Disabled Hero: Being and Ethics in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*" is an outlying exception though, as the title suggests, it foregrounds the films. The collection *The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium*, for instance, does not include a single piece focused on disability.

One distinctly positive thing does come from the torment of Thangorodrim, however. Though Maedhros relinquishes his rights to the kingship and thus fails to permanently unite the Noldor, he enters the company of the aforementioned intercessors in an interesting way. During the Dagor Bragollach, the Battle of Sudden Flame, "Maedhros did deeds of surpassing valour, and the Orcs fled before his face; for since his torment upon Thangorodrim his spirit burned like a white fire within, and he was as one that returns from the dead" (*S* 152). Here Maedhros can be identified with Gandalf, who dons garments of white upon his return; Glorfindel, who transfigures into a "shining figure of white light" as he faces the Nazgûl (I, xii, 214); and Frodo, who is compared multiple times to a clear glass filled with light—not unlike the phial of Galadriel, which is in turn directly related to Eärendil. Maedhros's transfiguration thus marks him as one who has passed through fire and ecstasy, but it also sets him apart "as one that returns from the dead" (152). Curious. Why not say "as one that had returned," or "as one that returned"? The tense shift into the present highlights the *process* of returning rather than the *result* of returning, a small but significant change that prompts us to read this transfiguration as a continual rising from the dead rather than a one-time escape from torment: Maedhros's death(s) and resurrection(s) are cyclical and unending, not in the past but always ongoing in the present. The sentence's construction also signals a future event: i.e., Maedhros is here characterized by the fact that he does not, as it were, stay dead. He is always in between, always experience rebirth.

Thus we come to the final moment in Maedhros's narrative that must be addressed, namely his role, in early drafts, in the final battle against Morgoth. The movement situates us firmly back within the Fëanor/Maedhros opposition. As mentioned previously, in the earliest drafts of "The Silmarillion," Tolkien writes of a prophecy concerning the Last Battle against

Morgoth that will take place at the end of time, the Dagor Dagorath. Apart from relatively minor changes (such as exactly who will kill the dragon Ancalagon), these drafts present a relatively stable picture of the events leading up to and following the Dagor Dagorath. One significant detail that does fluctuate, however, is the identity of the person who will finally yield the Silmarils to Yavanna so that the world can be remade. Fëanor shows up the most often, naturally. This choice probably makes the most narrative sense: after all, it is Fëanor who initially refuses to give up the Jewels and thus instigates the worst disasters of Middle-earth's early ages. Tolkien likely recognized that a full redemption narrative—one that includes the restoration of Arda and the rehabilitation of characters like Túrin the hapless—would ultimately be incomplete without the parallel redemption of Fëanor, especially since he is the Jewels' craftsman. But Tolkien apparently did not think so in the beginning. The first draft of the Dagor Dagorath prophecy states that Maedhros, and not Fëanor, will be responsible for breaking the Silmarils, thus releasing their light, and returning it to Yavanna (*SoMe* 249-250). It is only after this that the world can be remade.

Why Maedhros? I would suggest that Tolkien's original impulse is a significant one, both moving and satisfying—if not logically, then at least instinctively. Maedhros, as we have said, longs to restore what his father destroyed and his hesitancy in pursuing the Oath's fulfillment is marked and emphasized by Tolkien in the texts (though its intensity varies throughout the drafts). Maedhros also serves as a stark contrast to the actions and attitude of Fëanor; he is Fëanor's revision, as it were. The idea of Maedhros at last being able to fully make amends by willingly giving up the Silmarils to Yavanna (for the good of all) must have appealed to Tolkien, even though he eventually decided it must be otherwise. And indeed, as much as we might have liked to see Maedhros finally rise to the level of spiritual intercessor for all of Arda, it is his *absence* from the later drafts that tells us even more about Tolkien's conception of the character.

Maedhros plays the role of the tragic hero. We know enough about his actions to suspect he has the potential to be a hero of the order of Beren or Eärendil had he not been doomed from the beginning by a single rash act. That is his prison. He is, as the Anglo-Saxons might have said, a *faege* man, one who consistently fails to succeed even when he does all the right things with the appropriate courage.[68] Like Túrin Turambar, Maedhros is subjected to a curse that actually transforms the way the world works: where *unfaege* men like Beren are consistently rewarded for their valor, and in honor/shame cultures this is just the way the world is supposed to work, Maedhros and Túrin find themselves outside of these proper workings as a result of their *faege* status. This means that Maedhros, specifically, cannot remain in the role of intercessor even though he has survived the ecstatic experience. He is *faege*. Honor is not for him. The unflagging despair with which Maedhros approaches the oathkeeping, especially as his life nears its end, reflects the impossible situation in which he finds himself. And what can be done? There are few options open to the Fëanorians, and none are particularly hopeful. Indeed, even an appeal to the all-father himself is pointless, and would be even if he would deign to listen:

> Yet Maglor still held back, saying: "If Manwë and Varda themselves deny the fulfillment of an oath to which we named them in witness, is it not made void?"
>
> And Maedhros answered: "But how shall our voices reach to Ilúvatar beyond the Circles of the World? And by Ilúvatar we swore in our madness, and called the Everlasting Darkness upon us, if we kept not our word. Who shall release us?"
>
> "If none can release us," said Maglor, "then indeed the Everlasting Darkness shall be our lot, whether we keep our oath or break it; but less evil shall we do in the breaking." (*S* 253)

[68] In a much-debated passage in *Beowulf*, Beowulf asserts that "Fate [or, simply, in my reading, the way things happen] oft saveth a man not doomed [*unfaege*] to die, when his valour fails not" (29).

Maedhros's reminder is born of a deep-seated and insurmountable depression that prompts him to regard with bitterness the absolute inflexibility of the Oath, rendering each and every choice effectually null and void in that breaking and keeping lead equally to madness and the ruin of whatever they set their hands to. The Fëanorian touch is the touch of death. As Maglor rightly recognizes, there will be no escape from the darkness that overtakes them.

In my reading, doom—or even more particularly the machinations of evil—becomes a complication for the recovery project. How can progress be made when there are forces in the world working against healing and breaking down those who would step into the gap as intercessors? Maedhros appears to me to be Tolkien's admission that all does not go well: you cannot necessarily predict when an intercession will work and when it will fail; these things are part of a more complex entanglement that acknowledges that the way the world *should* work is not always the way it *does*. The picture Maedhros gives us is bleak. Unlike many of Tolkien's tales, this one ends in hopelessness and despair. Maedhros finds himself condemned by the Silmaril and its holy, spiritual light for his wrongdoings and unable to endure the torment of his exile, he accepts the weight of his own and his father's misdeeds and enters the fires of the earth's heart. But this is no longer the purifying flame of ecstasy. Despite Tolkien's promise that he is "as one that returns from the dead," Maedhros does not return.

### Exclusion and Rejection: Orcs, Easterlings, Wild Men, and Aragorn

Just as Maedhros ultimately finds himself excluded at all turns from the role of intercessor because of his own fate, so others are excluded, whether intentionally or by virtue of their unsavory natures, from the results of spiritual and ecological (and thus interpersonal) intercession. It is not that they are in any actuality cut off from the great network of being, the webs of becoming-with that make the world. Rather, their contribution to that network either remains unaccounted for or is marked as explicitly evil—or both. This last is particularly true for Orcs, that troubled and troubling race that consistently tangled Tolkien in an inescapable morass of existential, moral, and ethical questioning. What were Orcs? Where did they come from?[69] They are certainly demonized in Tolkien's work, a tactic which, as Robert T. Tally, Jr. observes of this tendency in the primary world, "makes for a pragmatic shortcut for overcoming the genuine apprehension of confusion and complexity by offering a simplistic, straightforward identity, which in turn serves as its own justification for action and reaction" ("Demonizing" 3). Are the Orcs therefore irredeemable, or simply fallen to a level more obviously, visibly corrupt than most and their identities boxed in and oversimplified because of it? These and other questions plagued Tolkien and his critics and even today continue to generate conversation and contention. Orcs (and goblins, their *Hobbit* predecessors) are clearly cast as evil in all of Tolkien's major texts and, as many scholars have noted, are often racially marked in troubling and racist ways;[70] but the story doesn't end there.

Later in his life, while wrestling through the many questions that his legendarium had engendered, Tolkien wrote at least two essays on the origin and nature of the Orcs. Here we see him desperately seeking to untangle the gordian knot his stories had tied. Questions about redemption, salvation, and absolute evil had thus far remained unanswered, and they were especially pressing with regards to the Orcs, not least because, as Tally observes, "Tolkien's heroes, without the least pang of conscience, dispatch Orcs by the thousands" ("Praise" 17). At

[69] This is yet one more question that has never been answered. Tolkien never settled on a single origin story. Sometimes they are descended from corrupted Elves, sometimes Men, sometimes a result of monstrous inter-breeding. The most that can be said for certain is that they were not *created*, as from nothing, life coming from nonlife. Of this we know the Enemy is not capable. More on this momentarily.

[70] This is a less pressing concern for me here, but other scholars have addressed the issue. See especially the work of Dimitra Fimi and Robert T. Tally, Jr. Another piece that attempts to deal with this question is Anderson Rearick III's "Why is the Only Good Orc a Dead Orc?", but it unfortunately ends up suggesting that the apparent racism of Tolkien's stories doesn't matter because we ought to be "looking at the overall message of the work rather than at particular battles or physical descriptions" (872).

the time of the shorter essay (which is in many ways more like a series of thoughts jotted down), Tolkien had come to the conclusion that Orcs were very specifically *not* Elvish, but since they already existed before Men awoke in Middle-earth, he was somewhat at a loss to explain how they had entered the world and, perhaps more importantly, how it came about that they were independent, reasoning creatures who could, it seemed, rebel against the powers that controlled them. At one point he even played with the idea that they were fallen Maiar of a much lesser state than, say, Gandalf or Sauron, but that they became "earthbound" by reproducing in an incarnate state (*MR* 410). Ultimately, though, Tolkien decided that "Orcs were *beasts* of humanized shape (to mock Men and Elves) deliberately perverted/converted into a more close resemblance to Men. […T]hey had just as much independence as have, say, dogs or horses of their human masters." He also suggests that it is "terribly possible that there was an Elvish strain in Orcs" (*MR* 411, emphasis original), but this is never confirmed. A final note appended to the end of this text asserts that "the *wills* of Orcs and Balrogs etc. are part of Melkor's power 'dispersed.' […] Only Eru can give *love and independence*. If a finite sub-creator tries to do this he really wants absolute loving obedience, but it turns into robotic servitude and becomes evil" (*MR* 411, emphasis original).[71]

In the later, more complex and complete essay, however, Tolkien had decided the Orcs existed "by the malice of Melkor" and as "a mockery of the Children of Eru, being bred to be wholly subservient to his will and filled with unappeasable hatred of Elves and Men" (*MR* 416). He declares that Orcs as corrupted men was "the most probable" theory, despite difficulties in chronology, and that the Orcs were, at most, simply "capable of acting on their own, doing evil

[71] This is, of course, why Aulë's creation of the Dwarves was so problematic at first. They would have been little more than puppets under his constant control. Coercion, even in a good cause, is always evil, Tolkien believed (*JRRT*).

deeds unbidden" (*MR* 418). However, he also notes that "the Orcs were not 'made' by Melkor, and therefore were not in their origin evil. They might have become irredeemable (at least by Elves and Men), but they remained within the Law. That is, that though of necessity, being the fingers of the hand of Morgoth, they must be fought with the utmost severity, they must not be dealt with in their own terms of cruelty and treachery" (*MR* 419). The final verdict then seems to be that Orcs are in fact not absolutely evil, that they could in fact be redeemed, whatever that might look like—though quite explicitly *not* by Elves or Men. It would, the implication is, take a greater power. This caveat seems to be Tolkien's "pragmatic shortcut" ("Demonizing" 3), as he uses it to explain why his heroes attack and kill orcs mercilessly: "they must be fought with the utmost severity." The lines are drawn again, however, in the clause and sentence that follow, which once again delimit the boundaries between Orcs and the Children of Eru. Orcs apparently deal "on their own terms," and these must never be entertained as a legitimate form of action by Elves or Men, even when information about the movements of the enemy is desperately needed. "Indeed," Tally observes, "no Orcs are taken prisoner at all, even for the purposes of learning of enemy plans. They are killed unceremoniously and without remorse. Simply recall Legolas and Gimil's Orc-killing game, and imagine how ghastly it would be if the heads of non-demonized enemies were the goal tallied upon the scorecard" ("Praise" 25). In this way, Tolkien is able to keep the distinctions between Orcs, Elves, and Men intact despite the conclusion that Orcs were, somehow, corrupted Men.[72]

The Easterlings or Southrons are in a similar position, though it is slightly adjusted because they are, in fact, human, and thus apparently deserve a greater degree of mercy and must

[72] It's interesting, in this context, that Treebeard mistakes Merry and Pippin for "little Orcs," but is alerted to his mistake by their voices and Pippin's momentary positive reaction to Fangorn (III, iv, 463-464). The voice, as we saw with Legolas, is an important marker in *The Lord of the Rings.*

be killed more conscientiously even when they are the enemy. (Yet, here again, lines are drawn.) Many scholars, in fact, point to the guerilla battle between Faramir's band and the Southrons, as moment in which Tolkien's true thoughts about war are most clearly expressed. During the battle, a young Southron warrior is killed and his body comes to rest just before the face of the horrified Sam. In typical Samwise fashion, the hobbit wonders about the man's origins and nature:

> It was Sam's first view of a battle of Men against Men, and he did not like it much. He was glad that he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he were really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace—all in a flash of thought which was quickly driven from his mind. (IV, iv, 661)

Now, Sam's reaction is laudable, and it makes an important point: how often in war are people driven to be *worse* than they would otherwise be? Surely, as Sam—and Tolkien—realized, a great many soldiers would rather not have had to fight and kill. The greater forces at work around them are really the ones to blame. But of course, this suggestion hints at trouble. Isn't the same true of the armies commanded by the heroes?[73] Wouldn't many of Aragorn's men rather have lived in peace?[74] Perhaps Aragorn does not use lies or threats, but he does manipulate, rhetorically speaking, and that says a great deal about the nature of war and the place of humanity in it.

Another observation that must be made is that this beautiful expression of sympathy (and it is beautiful, though it reinforces an anthropocentrism that once again leaves Orcs out in the cold) is only a thought that flashes through Sam's mind. Even as it materializes it is quickly driven away by the appearance of the Mûmak, or Oliphaunt, as Sam colloquially terms it. For all

[73] Tally hints briefly at this point in his article "Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs" (21).
[74] Of course, Aragorn does give his men the opportunity to go back and not face the terror of the Black Gate, but that does not necessarily mean that all who remained with him preferred war over peace—and anyway, he sends even the ones who wish to return to another battle all their own, and they fall out of the story.

Sam's insight, his attention does not rest on the man: the flash of sympathy that comes to him in that moment is little more than a momentary impression. Of course, it is to Sam's credit that he felt it at all. What is missing, however, is any lasting effect. The fallen soldier is never mentioned again, nor does his death in any way dampen Sam's immediate excitement at seeing an Oliphaunt. We might have forgiven Sam this lapse, if it had made a lasting impression, or if Tolkien had not insisted that we noticed how quickly Sam forgot the body lying warm and bloody at his feet. As it is, the text forces a recognition of how attention refuses to linger: how it lapses and does not account for that which is directly before our eyes. As Shippey noted, the attention of both characters and readers is often caught by some shiny distraction, such that we forget or fail to fully acknowledge the network of which we and all those around us are an integral part. We forget with morbid haste those who have, in a sense, fallen out of it.

The fact that Sam's questions are not given more space, more thought (they're even confined to a single sentence), that they are so immediately forgotten and never returned to, much less answered, emphasizes the fact that the Southrons are not given space in the narrative to be perceived as part of the world's becoming-with. Here, they are simply tools, objects that Sauron has, by lies or coercion, moved on his board as though he were playing a game of strategy with inanimate, unconscious pieces. The same is true of the Easterlings. Later, in the aftermath of the War of the Ring, we read that Aragorn "pardoned the Easterlings that had given themselves up, and sent them away free, and he made peace with the peoples of Harad; and the slaves of Mordor he released and gave to them all the lands about Lake Núrnen to be their own" (VI, v, 968). At first gloss this seems reasonable, even praiseworthy, and it seems that Aragorn is a merciful and kind ruler. But consider this. Aragorn, as the King of Gondor and Arnor newly ascended, is not welcoming these oppressed peoples into the wealth and joy of his new kingdom.

He is not extending to them the results of intercession. He is not opening to them the gates of fellowship and drawing them into the only vibrant network truly acknowledged by the text. Rather, he is shutting them out. The Easterlings are "sent away," free, yes, but excluded, as are the people of Harad, with whom Aragorn simply "makes peace." Sauron's slaves (it is to be assumed this catch-all phrase does not include Orcs) are released but specifically cordoned off and resettled in the lands of Lake Núrnen. On one level, then, Aragorn is certainly merciful for a king who just conquered a significant portion of Middle-earth: he could, by the rights of ancient combat, have slaughtered them all or made them slaves.

What he does do, however, while not as blatantly violent as execution, still works as a method of exclusion which clearly defines who is inside and who outside the purview of his realm and thus who could, conceivably, be subject to a very specific form of violence. Giorgio Agamben argues in *Homo Sacer* that the law of the state (in our case Aragorn's kingdom) will always involve the death of the Other, always include one population simply by virtue of excluding another, which in turn is included (made subject to Law) by virtue of its own exclusion; it will always produce life through and over against the ordering of death. This means that the excluded group will always (already) be sought out as the recipient of state-mandated violence as a substitute or scape-goat for—or, alternatively, in order to secure the presumed safety of—the included population. By his explicit setting-apart, Aragorn thus designates these excluded populations, the Easterlings, Southrons, Haradrim, slaves of Mordor, as appropriate bodies against which his kingdom can justly act for the supposed protection of his subjects. Ultimately, this exclusion places these populations in the same position as the Orcs; the difference is that the Orcs are inherently *sought out* as targets of state-mandated violence, while the others mentioned above exist in a place of unbearable liminality: at any moment, they could conceivably become the thing that is killed to keep Aragorn's subjects safe.

And this is not an unusual action on Aragorn's part. He similarly removes Faramir and Éowyn to Ithilien and "exiles" Beregond to serve there in their guard as punishment for his treason. Later, Aragorn institutes boundaries around the Wild Men of the Woses: "Then Aragorn let the trumpets be blown; and heralds cried: 'Behold, the King Elessar is come! The Forest of Drúadan he gives to Ghân-buri-Ghân and to his folk, to be their own for ever; and hereafter let no man enter it without their leave!'" (VI, vi, 976). Similarly, he "give[s] to Ents all this valley to do with as they will, so long as they keep a watch upon Orthanc and see that none enter it" (VI, vi, 980). Finally, in Appendix B we learn that in S.R. 1427, "King Elessar issues an edict that Men are not to enter the Shire, and he makes it a Free Land under the protection of the Northern Sceptre" (1097). These examples illustrate, to some degree, the proper ordering of Aragorn's kingdom, the actions a wise king might be expected to take to secure his realm, but they also demonstrate how eager Aragorn is to partition off his subjects, to keep them contained in well-defined, manageable areas that can be easily surveilled and that resist a fluid exchange with the rest of the kingdom. And we know that Aragorn *will* surveil them: "'the Palantir of Orthanc the King will keep, to see what is passing in his realm, and what his servants are doing,'" he tells Pippin. "'For do not forget, Peregrin Took, that you are a knight of Gondor, and I do not release you from your service'" (VI, vi, 982). Aragorn's ability to surveil his subjects, to keep them well-contained in the guise of keeping them safe and happy, is directly opposed to the ethic of the intercessor; despite his apparent mercy and justice, his actions establish unmoving, state-mandated boundaries that keep his subjects relentlessly divided from each other. Because of Aragorn's ordering, they all labor under the illusion of individuality, as self-contained populations who neither need nor exist within a larger world (even if some do travel abroad a little, like Merry and Pippin, they do so only as servants of Rohan and Gondor). The "Northern Sceptre" maintains that illusion with both surveillance and the written or spoken Law.

Again, this is a politics that comes up against the ethic of the intercessor and defies it. Aragorn's proclamations, his laws, his mandates, are implicit denials of the interrelation of the world: it resists intra-action; it disappears the world's complex becoming-with; it refuses to account for the ways in which all things participate in a network of mutuality and co-dependence. What it is *not* is surprising. Remember that Aragorn is a man who reads the earth as a text and sees the actions of the "human" as actions that write upon the world as on a book or make furrows in the world as testament to progress and forward movement. It is hardly surprising, then, that he would also be the one to entirely overlook the subtle webs and networks of vibrant relationality. Aragorn is also marked as explicitly imperialist by his own words as he accepts the crown of Gondor: "*Et Eärello Endorenna utúlien. Sinome maruvan ar Hildinyar tenn' Ambar-metta!* […] And those were the words that Elendil spoke when he came up out of the Sea on the wings of the wind: 'Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth I am come. In this place I will abide, and my heirs, unto the ending of the world'" (VI, v, 967). The difficulty of course arises because Aragorn is presented as one of the book's heroes even as the text celebrates and proliferates these networks as beautiful, essential, ubiquitous aspects of life that are all-too-often overlooked.

In many ways, this paradox can be chalked up to the deep transformation that is in that moment shaking Middle-earth to its core. The Elves, the ones who seem to recognize connectivity and relationality most clearly, are leaving. Gandalf, the great spiritual intercessor sent to Middle-earth in its time of need, has finished his work and also seeks other shores. With him go people like Elrond, Galadriel, Glorfindel, and others whose lives redirected our attention towards the points of life that mattered (in every sense of that word) and that throve in their intra-active becoming. It is not magic that sails away in grey ships, but rather a full perception of and accounting for the entangled network of which we are all of us a natural and significant part. When Legolas finally sails away with Gimli to find the Lost Road and the white shores of Valinor, Middle-earth slides into its new age with a quiet sigh for all that is quickly becoming invisible.

### I Speak for the Trees

While I have foregrounded the Elves here as particularly practiced at identifying and recognizing entanglement, they are not faultless in their relationships with other living things. They, too, often engage in practices which fall short of the ideal we discovered in Legolas's relationships. This problem first emerges in one of Treebeard's conversations with Merry and Pippin. He explains,

> Some of my kin look just like trees now, and need something great to rouse them; and they speak only in whispers. But some of my trees are limb-lithe, and many can talk to me. Elves began it, of course, waking trees up and teaching them to speak and learning their tree-talk. They always wished to talk to everything, the old Elves did. But then the Great Darkness came, and they passed away over the Sea, or fled into far valleys, and hid themselves, and made songs about days that would never come again. (III, iv, 468)

Later, he adds to the story: "'nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves nowadays. Still, I take more kindly to Elves than to others: it was the Elves that cured us of dumbness long ago, and that was a great gift that cannot be forgotten, though our ways have parted since'" (III, iv, 472). In the beginning of the first telling of this tale, all seems more or less well. The Elves act as we might expect based on our reading of Legolas: they wish to talk to things, and they take the time to come to know that with which they wish to speak; and not only do they "[teach] the trees to speak," they also "[learn] their tree-talk." It is a mutual exchange.

Each party in the relationship acts in full participation and neither one is privileged over the other. But hints of a failure in communion and relationship have insinuated themselves into the narrative by the time Treebeard finishes. The Ent falls into past tense; it was “the old Elves” who lived this way; in the shadow of the Great Darkness, the Elves “passed away,” “fled,” or “hid themselves,” and it is from this subject position that their laments for the old days are made.

By the time Treebeard returns to explicate the past further, the connotations of his words have shifted to take on a decidedly negative hue. This time, “not even Elves” care for the trees as Treebeard does, which is to say, they don’t share that same intimate, co-dependent, becoming-with relationship that once characterized their being-in-the-world.[75] Then, Treebeard’s description of what happened between Elves, trees, and Ents radically changes. No longer does he speak of a mutual exchange. Before, Elves were “teaching [trees] to speak and learning their tree-talk”; now, the Elves “cured” a “dumbness.” But Tolkien’s trees and their protectors, the Ents, *aren’t* dumb or voiceless, and there’s no indication that they ever were. As Ike Reeder recognizes, “Tolkien places the trees in a position of communication and of power. His text […] pays attention to the ethical ramifications” of a vibrant, sentient ecology (107).[76] Trees have their tree-talk and the Ents have an intricate, evolved language that is itself a growth: its words tell the stories of the things they describe, such that the language continues to grow and expand as time passes, accumulating a vast store of meaning and history. That’s why it takes so terribly long to say anything worth saying in Entish. To speak a word is to speak an entire history. And yet, suddenly, here is Treebeard speaking of dumbness, placing the Elves in a position of power, implying a hierarchy that didn’t exist in his earlier comments. What’s going on?

[75] Legolas seems to be an important exception, one that Treebeard later notices and appreciates.
[76] Unfortunately, Reeder later states that trees are “living things without voice” and perforce require an advocate who will speak for them (108).

First of all, it's important to note that the idea of giving a person language is pretty consistently marked as negative in Tolkien's texts.[77] Among the Elves, language develops naturally: it's an inherent knowledge that develops, evolves, and grows as the people do; their first response to the world around them is to begin naming things. In fact, the name they give themselves—"Quendi"—means "those that speak with voices" (*S* 49). On the other hand, to give someone language is to establish a hierarchy of power through knowledge that is usually attributed to either the Enemy or to improper relationships between persons. For example, Sauron devises the Black Speech for his servants. The Orcs originally "had no language of their own, but took what they could of other tongues and perverted it to their own liking; yet they made only brutal jargons, scarcely sufficient even for their own needs, unless it were for curses and abuse" (Appendix F, 1131).[78] The inability of the Orcs to develop a language of their own is yet another marker of their presumed inferiority in Tolkien's legendarium. They must, like Caliban, be given language if they are to speak. Similarly, Aulë must devise a language for his creations, the Dwarves. Now, obviously Aulë isn't the Enemy, like Sauron or Morgoth, but his creation of the Dwarves is an explicitly condemned activity, and the Dwarves are only allowed to exist as living, independent beings because the Vala agrees to turn over ultimate control of his work to Ilúvatar. Thus, the relationships between Ilúvatar, Aulë, and the Dwarves is hierarchical; and that reality trickles down, as it were: the fact that the Dwarves were created not by the All-Father but by one of his servants prejudices the Elves against them from the start. The Dwarves, like the Orcs, are marked as lesser by the fact that they do not come "naturally" or instinctively into their possession of language. So, again, Treebeard is interpreting the relationship between

[77] Also, as Dimitra Fimi explains in *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits*, the beauty and perfection of a language directly corresponds to the intellectual and spiritual perfection or profundity of those who speak it (146).
[78] Pippin notes that Orcs' use of the Common Speech makes it nearly as horrible as Orkish (III, iii, 444).

the Elves, trees, and Ents as similarly hierarchical because of the "great gift" of speech and language—a cure for dumbness.

Now, this leads into a more significant issue that suggests a less-than-equal relationship between Ents and Elves. Not that Elves haven't already been marked as more-than those around them. As Dimitra Fimi observes, "The Elves' supremacy over the other anthropomorphic Middle-earth beings is taken for granted. Their awe-inspiring and even supernatural presence is constantly underlined" (142). Yet, something more subtle is happening here. Again, not long after he has credited the Elves with curing them of dumbness, Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin the story of the Entwives, a deeply personal and painful narrative that, for someone so intensely resistant to all things hasty, seems rather like too much information too soon. "'The Elves made many songs concerning the Search of the Ents [for the Entwives],'" he explains, "'and some of the songs passed into the tongues of Men. But we made no songs about it, being content to chant their beautiful names when we thought of the Entwives'" (III, iii, 476). He shares that the Ents believe they will one day meet again, and then adds, "'There was an Elvish song that spoke of this, or at least so I understand it. It used to be sung up and down the Great River. It was never an Entish song, mark you: it would have been a very long song in Entish! But we know it by heart, and hum it now and again'" (III, iii, 477). The more one considers these remarks, the less comfortable one becomes. Why have the Elves coopted the Ents' lament? Treebeard contrasts the Elves' "many songs" with the Ents' "no songs," and further insists that these Elvish songs never became Entish songs, though they sometimes "hum" it. Note that Treebeard does not claim they *sing* it. Humming implies a lack of words, of language: it allows for voice, but no speech; and when Treebeard sings the song for the Hobbits, he sings it in the Common Tongue. The Ents' resistance to translating the song into Entish suggests an unwillingness to adopt the songs as adequate expressions of their own grief. It's not just that the songs would be terribly long in Entish—Ents clearly have no problem with verbosity—but rather that they simply don't *belong* in Entish. "'It is Elvish, of course,'" Treebeard quips: "'lighthearted, quickworded, and soon over. I daresay it is fair enough. But the Ents could say more on their side, if they had time!'" (III, iii, 478). The irony here is that they *have* had time—centuries, in fact, and yet, no songs. So the existence of these Elvish laments for the Entwives is problematic on two fronts, first in that the Elves have presumed to speak for the incredibly personal heartbreak of the Ents, and second in that the Ents are strangely content to express their grief in a foreign tongue, in words that Treebeard almost flippantly characterizes as "lighthearted, quickworded, and soon over." He gives no reason for this. His next remark is that he is sleepy.

It's difficult to know precisely how to explain this situation. For all their willingness to listen and exchange and grow together, the Elves have here quite consciously presumed to speak for that which they do not intimately know. To give them some credit, they likely didn't expect that the Ents would adopt their songs with no attempt to make their own. All the same, we could say something similar of even Legolas's guarded "translations" of the tree-voices. Isn't he speaking for the trees? Isn't he coopting their ability to speak for themselves by establishing himself as their translator? These are tensions that can't be simply resolved, not least because there is no easy answer. It would be relatively simple to explain away Legolas's difficulty by pointing out that the trees would not be heard at all, by the Fellowship or by the reader, if he were not there to fill the role of environmental intercessor and provide second-hand access to the thoughts and feelings of the world around him. But this claim does not guarantee that Legolas is translating accurately, or that the earth's thoughts can be translated, or that the earth *wants* to be heard by "humans" at all. Furthermore, because we don't get to hear the trees and rocks and horses themselves, Legolas's intercessory position puts him in a position of power over the environment because he becomes its voice and has full control over its representation.[79] Part of the problem, too, is that the Ents in particular have *allowed* others to act and speak for them for quite some time. Treebeard knows this; he talks about how they've become sleepy, tree-ish, content to recede into the background and let others fight their wars. But also, beneath his assumed deference to the Elves runs an undercurrent of discontent or even bitterness that shows its face, if only briefly, in his description of the Elvish laments as trivial and shallow.

### STAYING WITH THE TROUBLE[80]

Each of the sections in this chapter is getting at a single, important point: intercession is not without its complications and it often fails because it depends so entirely on relationships of knowledge sharing and processes of exchange, both of which, in the fallen world of which Tolkien writes, easily slide into hierarchical or even unethical modes of interaction. The intercessor is an important figure in the becoming-with of the world, but it is a dangerous position to fill. The intercessor inhabits that liminal space between full- and half-participation, as Shippey says, and this space is fraught with the potential for misused power. The best intercessors recognize this and attempt to account for it in their dealings with others. Gandalf, for example, refuses the power of the Ring for these very reasons.[81] "'With that power I should have power too great and terrible,'" he tells Frodo. "'And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly'" (I, ii, 61). Similarly, Legolas defers and refuses his role when he senses that to do so would be to misrepresent those for/of whom he speaks, and he lapses into

[79] Middle-earth of course can and does respond to the characters in its own language, but they only tend to notice when it is reacting in a way that is destructive, violent, or out-of-the-ordinary, and even then many of them tend to attribute those reactions to some other governing force, as with Caradhras.
[80] I'm borrowing this phrase from Donna Haraway.
[81] Ironically, the Ring seeks to "bind" together in a way that seems to be a perversion of the interconnectivity that the intercessors endeavor to promote.

silence when he needs to listen or when his own person would threaten to efface those he represents.

This doesn't mean that our understanding of intercession is no longer troubled; rather, it means that we must always be on guard against those embodiments of intercession that are less than ethical, less than equitable, less than hospitable and generous. Tolkien's portrayal of intercession isn't innocent or even ideal. Maedhros's story might be a genuine, thoughtful recognition of the ways in which the evil at work in a fallen world twist our efforts, but the demands of the story explicitly reject and exclude others, like Orcs, Easterlings, the Wild Men, and eventually even the Hobbits, to some extent. The heroes we've been taught to trust fail us and break down the networks by refusing to acknowledge the vibrancy of the world's becoming-with and instead establishing boundaries, setting apart populations, and designating certain bodies as appropriate recipients of sanctioned violence. Moments of compassion are effaced by distraction. Voices are coopted and silenced. Songs remain unsung. The Elves forget their forests. Communion fades away.

Intercession just doesn't always succeed.

# Epilogue

> Well, here at last, dear friends, on the shores of the Sea comes the end of our fellowship in Middle-earth. Go in Peace! I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil.
>
> — J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

## A Light when All Other Lights Go Out

It would be terribly unfaithful to the spirit of Tolkien's work if we ended our journey on the notes of darkness and despair acknowledged above. Thus, this brief epilogue brings us into the company of two final characters who draws together the many aspects of intercession and communion into a picture of a life well-lived, and one of whom seems to have surprised even Tolkien himself. "A new character has come on the scene," he wrote to Christopher in 1944:

> (I am sure I did not invent him, I did not even want him, though I like him, but there he came walking into the woods of Ithilien): Faramir, the brother of Boromir—and he is holding up the "catastrophe" by a lot of stuff about the history of Gondor and Rohan (with some very sound reflections no doubt on martial glory and true glory): but if he goes on much more a lot of him will have to be removed to the appendices. (79)

This introduction to Faramir is firstly amusing for its rambling nature and for Tolkien's accusation that the captain of Gondor is "holding up" the narrative and apparently running his mouth without end (all of which information we get packed into a single sentence with numerous interjections). A gentle exasperation colors Tolkien's words. Later, however, he came to think better of Faramir's "sound reflections […] on martial glory and true glory," for he commented that – despite his assertion that he was “in fact a Hobbit” – Faramir was more “like” him than any of his other characters (*Letters* 232).

It is Faramir who becomes, for Frodo, the light in a time of darkness, the unexpected friend along the way. In Faramir, too, the many different types of intercessor combine to offer a more comprehensive and livable ethics of intercession. When he first comes “walking into the woods of Ithilien,” the young captain is represented in ambiguous but subtly threatening terms that are slowly softened by the character’s graciousness and grave wisdom. He questions Frodo and Sam harshly, enforces a radical political binary,[82] and sternly resists an easy acceptance of what he sees. Instead of instantly passing judgment on the situation, he devotes precious hours to developing a deeper understanding of the two hobbits who have fallen into his hands: he says that he will “‘spare a brief time, in order to judge right justly in a hard matter’” (IV, v, 665). We learn later that he has been a student of Gandalf’s and that in peaceful days he was more inclined toward learning and lore than war. When Sam asks him why he doesn’t talk about Elves, his response is reminiscent of Legolas’s unspoken rule: “‘I am not learned in Elven-lore,’” he explains. “‘[I]n Middle-earth Men and Elves became estranged in the days of darkness, by the arts of the Enemy, and by the slow changes of time in which each kind walked further down their sundered roads’” (IV, v, 679). Already, Faramir is signaling that he understands the distance that has materialized between peoples, attributing it to the “darkness,” a lack of light that implies the obstruction of visibility or perception, a disappearing of vital connections.[83]

[82] “‘There are no travellers in this land,’” he says: “‘only the servants of the Dark Tower, or of the White’” (IV, iv, 657). Frodo’s response, “‘But we are neither,’” resists this simplification imposed by the laws of the Steward of Gondor (presumably Denethor) and holds that space open for one who is something else entirely, someone who is in-between.

[83] Remember the constant obsession with clarity in “The Flight to the Ford,” in which Glorfindel brings light and new vision (revelation).

Later, Faramir takes up the staff of the steward, acting as a sort of political intercessor between Aragorn, the returning king, and the people of Gondor. The steward is one who acts as a marker for another who is not currently present or visible. Faramir, in his capacity as steward, directs the attention of the people of Gondor towards their relationship with King Elessar: he is a constant reminder that they are part of something larger than themselves. Indeed, it is Faramir who announces Aragorn's assumption to the people, who asks the people, "'Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?'" (VI, v, 967). But his duties do not end there, even when the king is physical present as a visible reminder of the relationship between sovereign and subjects. When he asks leave of Aragorn to abandon his office since the king has come again, Aragorn responds with a slightly strange declaration. "Aragorn took the [steward's] rod and gave it back, saying, 'That office is not ended, and it shall be thine and thy heirs' as long as my line shall last. Do now thy office!'" (VI, v, 967). Here, Aragorn uncharacteristically recognizes and values the work of intercession and keeps Faramir in place as one who draws attention to a relationship that, theoretically, could slip into the state Shippey described as "half-perception." The fact that Faramir—and his heirs—must remain stewards emphasizes the ongoing need for our attention to be refocused, our relationships to be reaffirmed, our networks to be accounted for, even when the parties in those relationships and networks are right in front of us.[84]

But Faramir plays another role. He is more than a political intercessor who reminds the king and the people of their commitments to each other. He also becomes a spiritual intercessor who has the power to overcome the darkness and offer healing to those who suffer, those who are unable or unwilling to see where the "light" of the spiritual realm is always piercing the shadows of the material world. Sam notices this potential in Faramir early on, in fact. In the cave

[84] Remember Sam's distraction even as the body of the young Southron lay before him.

behind the waterfall in Ithilien, he and the captain share a brief moment of sudden clarity in which each is illuminated by the particular worth and virtue of the other:

> 'Good night, Captain, my lord,' [Sam] said. 'You took the chance, sir.'
> 'Did I so?' said Faramir.
> 'Yes sir, and showed your quality: the very highest.'
> Faramir smiled. 'A pert servant, Master Samwise. But nay: the praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards. Yet there was naught in this to praise. I had no lure or desire to do other than I have done.'
> 'Ah well, sir,' said Sam, 'you said my master had an Elvish air; and that was good and true. But I can say this: you have an air too, sir, that reminds me of, of—well, Gandalf, of wizards.'
> 'Maybe,' said Faramir. 'Maybe you discern from far away the air of Númenor.' (IV, v, 682)

First of all, it's important to notice that Faramir first falls into the attitude one might expect from a lordly man of Gondor: he criticizes Sam, in a subtle way, for his outspoken nature, calling him a "pert servant," a phrase which highlights the hobbit's class, his role, and how he fails to live up to those expectations. But immediately he draws back, and negates his previous statement, and in a flash of insight which at this point is unwarranted (he knows very little about Sam apart from his tendency to speak out of turn), calls him "praiseworthy." This claim runs far deeper than his previous interpretation of Sam as an insubordinate servant and takes on a prophetic quality as the reader comes to realize that Sam is, in fact, the hero of the "there and back again" narrative. But, in a fascinating turn, Sam's comments about Faramir do the same thing. First, Sam acknowledges that he was mistaken in his initial expectation (which is what the "chance" refers to), revises his judgment, and issues a prophetic description of Faramir: he reminds him of Gandalf and wizards.

This is not insignificant, though neither Faramir nor Sam—nor the reader, for that matter—realize it in the moment. Sam's words are "fulfilled" (filled up to the brim with meaning, that is) almost 200 pages later, when Faramir, like Gandalf, undergoes a fiery initiation. Having been returned to Minas Tirith on the brink of death, Faramir is brought by his mad father to Rath Dínen and the House of Stewards, the burial place of the kings and stewards of Gondor. It is Denethor's intention that they burn to death together, like "the heathen kings, under the domination of the Dark Power," to use Gandalf's words (V, vii, 853).[85] Faramir is saved from the fire by the quick thinking of Pippin, the timely arrival of Gandalf, and Beregond's "betrayal" of his oath to his lord, but, significantly, he still experiences the flame of purification or initiation. Denethor cries out that he is "burning, already burning. They have set a fire in his flesh" (V, vii, 852). Shortly thereafter, Denethor sacrifices himself on the pyre, but Faramir is taken to the Houses of Healing, where he is subsequently healed by Aragorn, who, as king, has healing hands and power over the Darkness.[86] He remains in the care of the healers for some time, and while there, begins to develop a relationship with Éowyn of Rohan, who also was wounded and saved from near-death by Aragorn.

Faramir's relationship with Éowyn is significant here because it is first of all evidence of the former's growth as an intercessor. It is Faramir, not Aragorn, who is able to guide Éowyn's spirit out of the shadows of the Black Breath.[87] Now, Éowyn's healing and her acceptance of Faramir's proposal has been problematized by numerous feminist readings of the text, and rightly so: I don't wish to undermine those readings and indeed agree that in some respect, Éowyn's own will and choices are overshadowed by Faramir's. However, it is also important to recognize that Éowyn's healing is a *type*—a representative of the shaman's ability to act as

[85] What exactly is meant by "heathen" here has been oft and long debated by Tolkien scholars. Thus far, no consensus has been reached.
[86] The fact that Aragorn has the power to dispel the darkness—to restore perception, in other words—is yet another reason that complicates his decision to divide and obscure and separate. Yvette Kisor, in "Totemic Reflexes in Tolkien's Middle-earth," seems to attribute Aragorn's ability to some kind of shamanic power of his own, but I would push back against this notion. The text insists that he heals because he is king, and there does not appear to exist a point at which Aragorn could be said to have undergone a shamanic initiation. His healing powers do mirror the shaman's in interesting ways, but it does not (it seems to me) follow that he is presented as shamanic.
[87] The fact that Aragorn is unable to fully heal Éowyn appears to be yet another reason why he can't truly be read as a shamanic figure. He heals her physically—but not spiritually/psychically.

guardian of the soul wandering and imprisoned by dark forces. True, Éowyn’s sudden “conversion,” as it were, makes little sense logically, and no reason beyond the emotional is given for it; but it is also epiphanic. It stands in for the moment in which the soul is literally enlightened by the salvific light of the spiritual. Faramir’s “proposal” thus becomes a metaphor for an ecstatic union (remembering that sex is often equated with both ecstasy and death). Not insignificantly, they stand in a high tower, named after the greatest of Arda’s lights, when this “conversion” takes place: “‘I stand in Minas Anor, the Tower of the Sun,’ [Éowyn] said; ‘and behold! the Shadow has departed! I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, no vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren’” (VI, v, 964-965). Critics have further taken issue with the seeming illogical nature of Éowyn’s decision to give up her inclination towards war (see especially Janet Brennan Croft’s *War in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*), but I would encourage us to read this as the appropriate and even expected response of a soul that has been brought out of darkness: who has experienced the gift of spiritual intercession. Faramir, significantly, makes the same decision along with her: *together* they turn their backs on war—a specific form of violence which desecrates and even denies connections and communion with others and with the earth by its demonization of the enemy, among other things—and dedicate their lives to cultivating a healthy and evolving relationship with their environment.

Éowyn’s journey is one of revelation, a growing awareness to the quotidian entanglements that make life at once supernatural, beautiful, transformative, and earthy. Her desire to be queen was, as Faramir recognizes, a desire “‘to be lifted far above the mean things that crawl on the earth’” (VI, v, 964).[88] It was a misguided understanding, in other words, of

[88] Her other wish, “‘a brave death in battle’” (VI, v, 964), is also just another expression of the desire for the soul’s ecstasy. A valiant death in battle would mean the permanent exaltation of the spirit.

exactly what ecstasy and the soul's ascent meant: her desire was appropriate and even good, but it found expression in an unethical relationship with the world and those around her, influenced by the ordering of the society she had always known. When Faramir explains to the Warden of the Houses of Healing that "'now [Éowyn] is healed'" (VI, v, 965), then, he is referring to a healing that is profoundly both spiritual and material, a healing that takes the form of a revelation of ethical communion with the world. Once Éowyn desired "'to be lifted far above the mean things that crawl on the earth,'" a natural expression of her culture's values and social structure; now, healed, she chooses to become a gardener and a pacifist, working *among* the things of the earth, loving them and caring for them and living with them in a way that is all her own.

Even Faramir's response to her declaration supports this notion. "'I will wed with the White Lady of Rohan,'" he says, "'if it be her will. And if she will, then let us cross the River and in happier days let us dwell in fair Ithilien and there make a garden. All things will grow with joy there'" (VI, v, 965). Crossing a river or bridge or other such boundary is, as we saw above with Gandalf and others, symbolic of the ascent of the soul, but notice too that Faramir's description of the life they will create together is notably prelapsarian. They are going to make a garden. This obviously recalls the biblical Garden of Eden, and thus a state of perfect and uninterrupted communion with both the spiritual and the physical; as Faramir and Éowyn become equals, partners, in the work of intercession, they are going to create a community that is marked by its ethical entanglement, its ability to account for, respect, and allow the participation of the entirety of its members. Significantly, one of our other intercessors joins them in this project: Legolas brings both plants and Elves with which to populate Ithilien, and it eventually "became once again the fairest country in all the westlands" (Appendix A 1080). It is from Ithilien that Legolas will set forth on his own journey to the Undying Lands across the Sea.

### A Far Green Country under a Swift Sunrise

We have come at last to the end of a long journey that has led us through thousands of years, a vast sea of vibrant entanglements, confusions, intra-active becomings, and revelations. We have seen the strands of the world web burgeon and develop and produce powerful nodes of connectivity and communion, and we have seen where those connections are dropped, lost, excluded, and rejected. After all this time, it is the image of Ithilien that stays with me, gently and unobtrusively suggesting that even in a world that has been divided and partitioned, that has endured the delimiting of boundaries and the ruthless slaughter of those who have been, for various reasons, designated as outsiders and unworthies, a recovery of our co-dependence and our lapsed attention, is indeed possible. Ithilien is at once spiritual, material, and personal: it revels in its relation to the ever-green shores beyond the Sea, flourishes in its communal commitment, and opens up new possibilities for interpersonal acknowledgement and respect. Faramir, the man who claimed he knew little of Elves, comes to live among them and maintains his role as steward-intercessor. Éowyn, the woman who desired glory, fame, and violence, embraces peace and an investment in the ground beneath her feet. Legolas, the elf who in spite of his ability to foster communion with the world around him was caught in some of his own prejudices and misguided assumptions, helps to create a community of diversity and beauty and even develops into a spiritual intercessor as he escorts Gimli, a person marked by exclusion, to the Undying Lands of the Elves.

Ithilien is thus, I think, a place of radical hope and hospitality, juxtaposed even with Gondor, the kingdom of the righteous returning king. It is not divided, cordoned off, open only to one race, one politics, one way of living in the world. Rather, it is a community that chooses, in the face of a powerful and compelling opposite example, to cultivate the talents and goals of its intercessors. Those who come to Ithilien are far from perfect, and despite its prelapsarian associations there isn't any indication that the garden is a utopia, but its membership remains aware of the ways in which each life intersects with the world of which they are all a part at a thousand vibrant intersections. It's no mistake that these three intercessors in particular—Éowyn, Faramir, and Legolas—end up together at the end of the narrative. The other intercessors, like Gandalf and Glorfindel, have passed over the Sea (as Legolas will eventually), but these three encapsulate and suggest more ethical, thoughtful, and intentional ways of being-in-the-world. And, as they grow and learn together, they take on aspects of intercessorship that they did not have before. In this respect, we might imagine Ithilien itself becoming an intercessor as it accounts for those moments in which our attention has lapsed, or in which we have acted less than ethically. It draws together those of various backgrounds, races, persuasions, and abilities into a space of commitment and generosity. Ithilien, like the intercessor who come to it, stands at the crossings of threads, bearing witness to a higher way. And so all our intercessors stand in the gaps, acting as bridges to a better world, making us better than we are—which is, in the last analysis, the final true purpose of the intercessor.

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