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Reunion with Nature; Tolkien's the Lord of the Rings  
by Jamie Mosel

In the Lord of the Rings, Tolkien upholds a deep and unique preoccupation with nature, especially revealed in the differing ways that characters and cultures of the Lord of the Rings venerate, or are estranged from nature. This is shown clearly by the way in which Elves perceive themselves and their surroundings, as well as how Men, Dwarves, Hobbits and other creatures -- whether good or evil -- react when confronted by nature. Tolkien seems to understand that all aspects of the world, whether mountain or stream, forest, plain, or beast, have some character or life of their own. The mountain of Caradhras is not mere stone; it possesses a will of its own, and as much personality as any living, breathing being. The stream Nimrodel has a voice and a memory, and the Old Forest is both seeing and hearing. Tolkien's attempts to communicate, and illustrate, the life within all things reveals an implicit desire -- a desire for the communion of all things. Ultimately, in addressing the relationships of his fictional cultures with nature, Tolkien is searching for a strategy to our own estrangement from the natural world.

This concept of communion has its source in the biblical story of Genesis, and specifically in the naming of creatures by Adam. While the passage may be interpreted a number of ways, two such interpretations -- that in naming, Man gains dominion over beasts,<sup>1</sup> and conversely, that in giving name to creatures, Man seeks a communion with them, as with all things, since ultimately all things have their source in God, and are all reflections of that One -- emerge in Lord of the

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison, Peter. "Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature." *The Journal of Religion*. 79. 1 (1999): 86-109. Harrison mediates what he believes to be an overly simple view that Christianity has resulted in the exploitation of nature, but also concedes that such an interpretation exists and can be argued. See also Maguire, Henry. "Adam and the Animals: Allegory and the Literal Sense in Early Christian Art." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*. 41: 363-373. for examples of how Genesis has been artistically interpreted, depicting variously dominion of man, and also communion.

Rings. For Tolkien, these two interpretations are at odds with one another, and the deep root wherefrom stem the conflicts within the world of the Lord of the Rings. It is in the latter interpretation that Tolkien finds virtue, and from it casts a perfect image of communion as embodied by such characters as Tom Bombadil, and the Ents.<sup>2</sup> The Elves, in the same vein, provide a near-perfect example of a way of life which achieves harmony with nature. For these are beings which, in accordance with the privation theory of evil, -- the belief in the goodness of all things -- let all things be, and if they alter, it is through positive sub-creation, and not through domination. It is a way of life which honors the living freewill of all creations, and so itself embraces a Christian theological practice. The attitudes of Men, such as those of Gondor and of Rohan, divulge that they have lost their communion with all things; and it is this new attitude which is waxing, as the way of the Elves wanes. Yet the true "evil" shows itself in those characters that seek only to dominate nature -- the despot,<sup>3</sup> who in giving name, seeks to subordinate. The great evil of Sauron is not that he himself is without a source in good but that he uses his own existence -- his own will -- to enslave the wills of others. Thus, he and his servants, the Orcs, and other dark creatures, not only reject a communion with nature, but also let no thing be. Sauron and his following destroy, and counterfeit.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, in his pantheon of characters, Tolkien provides an "ordering" of relationships: those who "let be", those who let be and sub-create, those who let be and dominate, and finally those who do *not* let be. His message is one that reacts poignantly, and profoundly, to the troubles facing the world both in his time, and more imminently in that of the present day. It is important,

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2 It is in the creation stories of the Silmarillion that Tolkien more fully explains the parallel of Genesis to his own Middle-earth. Treebeard explains that the trees can talk, and that "the Elves began it. . . Waking trees up and teaching them to speak and learning their tree-talk. They always wished to talk to everything." (Lord of the Rings 457) This is not without similarities to Adam, who in losing paradise loses the ability to understand animals (and plants), and thus desires to speak with them. The Elves have not lost their communion, and so can speak with the trees, and give names such as those in Treebeard's songs.

3 Harrison, 87.

4 Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Houghton Mifflin Company. 2003 edition. 474. Treebeard states: "Maybe you have heard of Trolls? They are mighty strong. But Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy. . . In mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves."]

however, that Tolkien's examples of "pure" communion, like the character of Tom Bombadil and to some degree the wizard Radagast the Brown are in fact unable to address these troubles. They embrace wholly and completely the Christian more "to let be." In so doing, they are undoubtedly benevolent, and good forces in Tolkien's world. Yet, precisely because they are pure, they cannot provide Art in a way that addresses the human -- in a way that addresses sub-creation.<sup>5</sup> And so, they are unable to address the troubles of the world, because they do not *act*, but rather *are*. When Frodo inquires "who is Tom Bombadil?", Goldberry responds simply that "He is." Moreover, when Tom holds the Ring, he makes light of its weight, and is unconcerned by its power. Radagast, meanwhile, has strayed from his *creative* purposes in Middle-earth, and given himself up fully to communion with the birds and beasts -- unlike Gandalf who pursues both communion and action.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it is in such peoples as the Elves, and the Wild Woses, that Tolkien is able to address the troubles, and the creative life, of this world and of the secondary.<sup>7</sup> For the primary world is one of progress and creation, though it need not be destructive, subordinating, or sundering. The lifestyle of the Elves, then, demonstrates the beauty and wonder which is achieved through an *active* communion with nature, wherein the Elves participate in the sub-creation of their world. They create works of beauty, even as they are un-estranged from nature, and have no division from it. As Treebeard points out, they are not perfect in this, precisely because they sub-create. They may not destroy, but they transform, and as a steward of trees, he feels that this transformation is not always by the choice of those materials doomed to be transformed, like his friends, the trees. Nevertheless, these are creations of beauty, in whom the spirit or goodness of that material is preserved and enhanced in a new form. This is also so with the Woses, renowned

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5 Tolkien, J.R.R. *Tales from the Perilous Realm*. "On Fairy Stories." Houghton Mifflin Company. 2008. 368

6 Hammond, Wayne G. and Scull, Christina. *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*. Houghton Mifflin Company. 2005. 245 "He [Gandalf] differed from Radagast and Saruman in that he never turned aside from his appointed mission."

7 Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories", 389.

for their skill in woodcraft. The Dwarves, too, adorn and admire nature, but it is the stuff of the earth, the rock and stone and mineral, which occupies them. Their harmony is more subtle, and more easily disrupted by the temptation to “delve too greedily and too deep”<sup>8</sup>; yet Gimli unveils this relationship in his words to Legolas, who misunderstands the mining of Dwarves for destructive, when in its truest form it is creative. He advises Gimli “to say little” of the Glittering Caves to his kin, for “one family of busy dwarves with hammer and chisel might mar more than they made.”<sup>9</sup> Gimli’s riposte is skillful: “Do you cut down groves of blossoming trees in the springtime for firewood?” he asks. Instead, he suggests that the Dwarves would rather tend “these glades of flowering stone,”<sup>10</sup> and in so doing enhance that beauty which exists already. Lastly, according to Treebeard, the Ents are a curious combination of both the good aspects of Elves and of Men. “For Ents are more like Elves,” he says, “less interested in themselves than Men are, and better at getting inside other things. And yet again Ents are more like Men, more changeable than Elves, and quicker at taking the colour of the outside.”<sup>11</sup> Just as Tom Bombadil, they do not take any side, except the side against their felling. It takes much to move them into action; but they have lost the most precious aspect of their own sub-creation -- they have lost the Ent-wives, and there will be no more Entings.

It is clear, then, why Sauron, Orcs, and eventually Saruman stand thus in opposition to other races. As Treebeard explains, the Orcs hack trees without thought. When Sam and Frodo journey through Ithilien, they find “trees hewn down wantonly and left to die, with evil runes or the fell sign of the Eye cut in rude strokes on their bark.”<sup>12</sup> Saruman, likewise, takes without giving, and uses his power to dominate the wills of others. When the Hobbits return to the Shire to find it in chaos, among the gravest horrors is the destruction and uprooting of growing things, without purpose, just as the Orcs cut down trees needlessly. “There’s no longer even any sense in it,”

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8 Lord of the Rings, 309.

9 Lord of the Rings, 535.

10 Ibid.

11 Lord of the Rings, 457.

12 Lord of the Rings, 637.

informs Farmer Cotton. “They cut down trees and let ‘em die; they burn houses and build no more.”<sup>13</sup> Not only are Saruman and the ruffians destructive, they are also not constructive.

So, Tolkien concludes, it is upon Men, those peoples doomed to “outlast all other races”<sup>14</sup> that “the burden must lie.”<sup>15</sup> In his portrayal of these Men, however, he addresses the estrangement into which they have fallen with nature. Boromir, the man of Gondor and foil to his lore-loving brother Faramir who can move stealthily through the woods of Ithilien, must trudge and struggle through the snow upon Caradhras. This contrasts to Legolas the Elf, who can walk lightly across it. Likewise, Eomer and the men of Rohan are suspicious of Fangorn forest and do not enter it. They recognize neither the vast beauty of the Glittering Caves beneath Helm’s Deep, able only to see its usefulness as a fortress, nor the age and tangled wonder of Fangorn Forest -- and as Gimli laments, this is indeed “strange,”<sup>16</sup> in fact, estranged. More unfortunate still, the words of Ghan-buri-Ghan, the chief of the Druedain or Wild Woses, imply that the men of Rohan have at some time estranged themselves so far as to become aggressors to their harmonious way of life. Ghan-buri-Ghan asks Theoden in repayment for his guidance to “leave the Wild Men alone in the woods” and not to “hunt them like beasts any more.”<sup>17</sup> Still, as hinted by the friendship of the men of old, between the people of Numenor and the Elves, men were not always apart from nature. Their growing distrust of the Elves and their ‘magic’, however, descry their discordant relationship with the natural world. This is made evident by the observations, Legolas and Gimli, representatives of outside races. As they stroll through the streets of Minas Tirith, Legolas notes that there are too few gardens -- the Men of Gondor are isolated from growing things. Yet it is also a fortress sculpted from the very bones of the mountains and in this regard parallels to a lesser degree the homes of the Elves in Lothlorien, which are constructed symbiotically with the

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13 Lord of the Rings, 989.

14 Lord of the Rings, 855. Legolas states: “The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli.”

15 Lord of the Rings, 950. Gandalf tells Aragorn: “the burden must lie now upon you and your kindred.”

16 Lord of the Rings, 534. Gimli exclaims: “Strange are the ways of men. . . Here they have one of the marvels of the Northern World, and what do they say of it? Caves, they say!”

17 Lord of the Rings, 815.

forest. Gimli suggests Gondor's past ability to work harmoniously with nature when he points out that "there is some good stone-work here, but also some that is less good. . . And doubtless the good stone-work is the older."<sup>18</sup>

With Tolkien's closing of the Third Age, he also closes the age of full communion with nature. The Elves leave Middle-earth for an unknown paradise, and other creatures -- such as Ents, Dwarves, Hobbits, and indeed Orcs -- diminish or disappear in the many years of the Fourth Age. The division between good and evil becomes less clear, and so too does the division between those who understand nature, and those who reject it. Despite the ending of Elves, and with them true harmony with nature, the Lord of the Rings nevertheless provides a message of consolation, to mend an environmental estrangement. Hope for the fate of the natural is encapsulated by the gifts of the Lady Galadriel to members of the Fellowship. Her gifts contain values that must be upheld in order to pass on the legacy of the Elves. To Samwise, thus, she bestows the blessed soil and a mallorn seed, the gift to stewardship of the land and the protection and nurturing of growing things; her gift to Gimli, of three golden locks of hair, bequeaths the adoration and admiration of the purest beauties of the world. Although both Hobbits and Dwarves are fated to diminish as the race of Men increase, neither wholly disappears from the world, and their gifts might still be found, if carefully sought. Still, the most hopeful gift of all is that which is given to Aragorn, the King of Men. In his marriage to Arwen Undomiel, he realizes true and literal communion with the Elvish harmony of nature. It is this communion that is the inheritance of Men. By it, Tolkien suggests a method of reconciling the creative nature of human beings with the natural world of which it is a part. His writing and theological underpinnings, therefore, are not merely fiction, but as the secondary world draws from the primary, it too offers solutions to the problems of today.

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18 Lord of the Rings, 854.

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