9

Tolkien and Trees

Shelley Saguaro and Deborah Cogan Thacker

The forest and the fairy tale

Our sense of the forest derives as much from the depictions we encounter in stories heard or read in childhood as from actual encounters, and the expectation of enchantment or the sense of threat with which fictional forests are endowed animates our 'readings' of actual forests. At first, it might appear that the trees and forests of Tolkien's Middle-earth are used primarily to stand for the natural world, in opposition to the unstoppable forces of modernity, but they are a multi-layered portrayal, with subtle links to fairy tale and folklore, and complex psychological symbolism. As Richard Hayman observes: 'Trees are important in Tolkien's work because they stand for attitudes to nature in general ... woods for Tolkien therefore offer temporary respite from the modern world, whether they are actual lived experience or the stuff of myth.'[1] It is only by tracing the representation of trees and forests from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*, that it is possible to see that Tolkien's 'attitude to nature' is central to both his particular use of fantasy, and his belief in the power of fantasy to imbue lived experience with meaning. For Tolkien, fantasy does not signify escape, but a deepening of understanding. In *Tree and Leaf* he claims that, '[t]he magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations ... to hold communion with other living things'.

This sense of communion and 'the importance of imagined wonder'[2] is one of the factors that leads to the complex status of Tolkien's work in relation to children's literature, creating limits that Tolkien himself decries in *Smith of Wootton Major*, in which he attributes a sense of 'Faery' to imagination:

> This compound – of awareness of a limitless world outside our domestic parish; a love ... for the things in it; and a desire for wonder, marvels, both

> perceived and conceived – this 'Faery' is as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life.[3]

However, the roots of what we recognise as children's literature, and particularly the importance of folk and fairy tales to the Romantic sensibility, provide a connection to an apprehension of nature as imbued with 'quasi-historical depth'[4]. Forests, perhaps most powerfully, retain this mythic sensibility. Historians and commentators on fairy tales, including Tolkien, recognise the power and duality of the forest trope, and the extent to which its use demonstrates the interconnectedness of the fantasy world and the real world.

The forest is an important trope in fairy stories. In *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth*, his study of the links between German Romanticism and the British fantasy tradition, William Gray claims that Tolkien's particular use of fantasy set in an alternative world reflects the importance of its connection with the real world derived from the earlier fairy tale tradition, especially in *The Hobbit*.[5] Roger Sale sees the forest as a recurring motif in fairy tales and lists many stories that involve the passage of a central character through the forest:

> [F]orests in fairy tales are so frequent, and their associations so obvious, that they come to seem a given, not unlike the opening chord in a piece of music that can be played loudly or softly, by this or that instrument or the ensemble. It is, thus, important, because the story could not proceed without it, but the last thing one needs to do is to ponder what it means, because what it means will be what is made of it. After each other change in the story, especially in the character of the person in the wood, the wood itself will become tinged slightly, but it will never be anything in itself other than a forest, a place where one is liable to become lost, a place where princes never live but woodcutters often do and witches or wolves.

He sees Tolkien (along with Bruno Bettelheim) as one of the key commentators on fairy tales, and he cites Tolkien's comment on 'The Juniper Tree' in *Tree and Leaf*, that 'such stories have now a mythical or total (unanalysable) effect … we stand outside our time, outside Time itself maybe'.[6] As Tolkien put it in a letter:

> The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary. The essentials of that abiding place are all there ... so naturally it feels familiar even if a little glorified by the enchantment of distance in time.[7]

This quality, of being beyond interpretation, is found in the 'root stories' that influence Tolkien's work, particularly those of the Nordic

and Germanic traditions. There is also a resemblance to his English forebears, particularly George MacDonald, which Tolkien acknowledged;[8] there are direct similarities, for instance, in the personification of the forest in MacDonald's *The Golden Key*, where Tangle 'began to feel as if all the trees were waiting for him, and had something they could not go on with till he came to them', and Bilbo's first encounter with Mirkwood.[9]

The characteristic that Tolkien appears to take from MacDonald and from the epic, myth and folklore to which he continually alludes, is the nature of the forest *as* forest – endowed with the qualities of the forest as it is experienced. The forest itself is not magical, and although it can take on allegorical readings, that is not its significance in relation to the story. Rather, it is the nature of forests themselves, for those familiar with them and the potential danger inherent in them (particularly for children), that is emphasised. Descriptions, brief though they are, do not portray the forest as enchanted. The darkness *is* the 'suffocating and uncanny darkness' that Bilbo experiences, the 'tangled boughs' that allow 'a slender beam of light' to 'slip through an opening in the leaves far above' and the 'eerie' sounds in the beech trees *are* all realistic portrayals of ancient woodlands of England – woodlands with which Tolkien was very familiar.[10]

Although many recent interpreters of fairy tales reject psychoanalytic readings in favour of a more materialist approach, Bruno Bettelheim's influence on our attempts to explain their effects cannot be ignored. For Bettelheim, the passage into the forest signifies a psychoanalytic space – a place separated from everyday experience in which to be lost is to be found. The uncanny sense of the forest waiting to do its work invites a reading that suggests the inevitability of such a journey:

> Since ancient times the near impenetrable forest in which we get lost has symbolised the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world of our unconscious. If we have lost the framework which gave structure to our past life and must now find our way to become ourselves, and have entered this wilderness with an as yet undeveloped personality, when we succeed in finding our way out we shall emerge with a much more highly developed humanity.[11]

Jack Zipes, in his study of the Brothers Grimm, develops an alternative analysis of the distinctive quality of fictional forests in order to explain the importance of the forest in the Grimms' tales, in ways that echo Tolkien's own concerns for the loss of human apprehension of

the natural world. Zipes suggests that in the Grimm Brothers' tales, 'the forest is rarely enchanted though enchantment takes place there. The forest *allows* for enchantment, for it is the place where society's conventions no longer hold true.'[12] This description is similar to Tolkien's depiction of Mirkwood in *The Hobbit*: it is the Wood-elves, who 'wandered in the great forests that grew tall in lands that are now lost',[13] who contribute the enchantment rather than the forest itself. Though elves are of the past and Tolkien appears to instruct his readers not to look for them any longer, his forest is indebted to those of earlier fairy tales, as an environment where enchantment and transformation can take place. Attributing the imaginative power of ancient forests to the sustenance of national identity and a memory of past unity, he quotes Wilhelm H. Riehl (1852): 'In the opinion of the German people the forest is the only great possession that has yet to be completely given away.'[14] This is a concern similar to Tolkien's own position. Paul Kocher emphasises the point that Middle-earth is supposed to be 'our own green and solid Earth at some quite remote epoch in the past'.[15] The world Tolkien portrays in *The Hobbit* and in *The Lord of the Rings* is a world in which the old forests remain, but have since been lost to us, as in the tales of the Brothers Grimm. This loss is a loss of wholeness that, Tolkien claims, once existed.

For Tolkien, the enchantment is already part of the nature of forests and trees, and in *The Hobbit*, it is quite clear that he has derived this sense from the history of fairy tales. In *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien refers to his own childhood reading and throughout his letters he emphasises that the power of fantasy to stir the imagination is not an end in itself, but a way of accessing an earlier, primeval understanding of 'communion with other living things'. According to Kocher, for Tolkien, 'only fantasy can provide a recovery of knowledge of ourselves and the world around us'.[16]

'In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies'[17]

Readers of Tolkien's work would know well, and by the fiction alone, that Tolkien was a lover of trees, for they abound. Further, many book covers on texts by or about Tolkien bear pictures of Tolkien himself, with trees: sitting against a tree or sitting among the twisted roots of an ancient tree-trunk.[18] The last photo taken of Tolkien, included in Humphrey Carpenter's biography, is of him standing companionably, next to one of his favourite trees (*Pinus nigra*) in the Botanic Gardens,

Oxford,[19] with his right hand pressed flat against the surface of its gnarled bark. The HarperCollins edition of *Tree and Leaf* has on its cover a drawing by Tolkien of an elaborate, fanciful tree, 'The Tree of Amallion'. From *The Hobbit* through 'Leaf by Niggle' and *The Lord of the Rings* to *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien represents extraordinary trees and creates tree-related beings, such as the tree-herder Ents, or the even more tree-like but still mobile former Ents, the Huorns. As Tolkien himself explains in a letter of June 1955 to his American publisher, Houghton Mifflin, 'I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees and always have been; and find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill treatment of animals.'[20] His son Michael acknowledged a related personal legacy and the inspiration for an artistic one:

> From my father I inherited an almost obsessive love for trees: as a small boy I witnessed mass tree-felling for the convenience of the internal combustion engine. I regarded this as the wanton murder of living beings … My father listened seriously to my angry comments and when I asked him to make up a tale in which the trees took revenge on the machine-lovers, he said, I will write you one.[21]

As a lover of trees, Tolkien could also offer detailed and obviously closely observed descriptions of them in all his writings. His letters, particularly to his son Christopher, contain descriptions such as:

> The poplars are now leafless except for one top spray; but it is still a green and leafy October-end down here. At no time do birches look so beautiful; their skin snow-white in the pale yellow sun, and their remaining leaves shining fallow-gold.

or

> … the silver light of spring on flower and leaf. Leaves are out: the white-grey of the quince, the grey-green of young apple, the full green of hawthorn, the tassels of flower even on the sluggard poplars.

and

> The rime was yesterday even thicker and more fantastic … breathtakingly beautiful: trees like motionless fountains of white branching spray against a golden light and, high overhead, a pale translucent blue.[22]

These find their fictive and fantastical correlatives in *The Lord of the Rings*; there is a close relation between the fantasy elements and the

vividness of Tolkien's apprehension of the trees he encountered daily. Thus, the trees of magical Lothlorien are described as scintillatingly as the trees Tolkien observed outside his window.[23]

The mythical *mallorn*, whose seed like a 'little silver nut', a gift from Galadriel, is carried by Sam back to the Shire,[24] where he plants it in the Party Field, where once stood the tree that had witnessed so much Hobbit history, including Bilbo's farewell speech. As it grows, a symbol of recovery after great tribulation, it is resplendent with silver and gold: 'the only *mallorn* west of the Mountains and east of the Sea, and one of the finest in the world'.[25] Tolkien sees *all* trees in ways that are out-of-the ordinary; a short-hand term might be 'magical', and so the transposition to fairy stories and fantasy is not a huge leap.

Tolkien also 'deploys' trees for their symbolic value, signifiers, when healthy, of hope and regeneration (and in this he is not alone, drawing as he does on a long tradition of legendary trees). Tolkien's 'Introductory Note' to *Tree and Leaf*, first published in 1964 and at the time bringing together, 'On Fairy-Stories' and 'Leaf by Niggle', states: 'though one is an "essay" and the other "a story", they are related: by the symbols of Tree and Leaf' and by both touching in different ways on what is called, in the essay, 'sub-creation'.[26] Paul Kocher further addresses the figurative aspects of 'tree' and 'leaf' and finds that Tolkien's 'tree' stands sometimes for that same whole body of Tolkien writing, but more often for the living, growing tradition of fairy stories in general, which the essay 'On Fairy-Stories' calls the 'Tree of Tales'.[27]

Tolkien refers to his short story 'Leaf by Niggle' in a letter to his aunt Jane Neave, refuting that it should be seen as an 'allegory', and preferring that it should be seen as 'mythical', because its main character, Niggle, 'is meant to be a real mixed-quality *person* and not an 'allegory' of any single vice or virtue'.[28] (Tolkien insists on the same complexity for trees.) The tale is about an artist, whose topic is 'tree' and 'leaf', and whose life work *is*, and is *emblemised by*, a Tree. Although he is a painter, Niggle's favoured subject has much in common with Tolkien's, as do the vistas his work generates, evocative as they are of landscapes in the long narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*:

> He was the sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees … Yet he wanted to paint a whole tree, with all of its leaves in the same style, and all of them different … Then all around the Tree, and behind it, through the gaps in the leaves and boughs, a country began to open out; and there were glimpses of a forest marching over a land, and of mountains tipped with snow.[29]

Tolkien explained that the story related to a time when 'I was anxious about my own internal Tree, *The Lord of the Rings*. It was growing out of hand, and revealing endless new vistas – and I wanted to finish it, but the world was threatening.'[30] Niggle's own artistic labours always fall short, not least because of the interruptions and irritation caused by his neighbour, Parish. After illness, and a strange period of interrogation and journeying, he arrives in a place where he is confronted by 'the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive.'[31] The estimation that 'the Tree was finished, though not finished with' is a reflection of Niggle's understanding that the Tree is not his project alone. At this stage, Niggle also realises that Parish, the philistine neighbour he has only seen as disruptive, has had a contribution to make to the style he considers most distinctively his own. The conclusion of the story shows how simultaneously important and insignificant is Niggle's own contribution to the Great Tree; most important of all is that the Tree lives and continues to put forth 'leaves'. The remnant of Niggle's picture is eventually lost to view 'in his old country', stored in a dusty museum and then forgotten. Such individual obscurity, however, belies the ongoing life of 'the Tree' to which an important contribution has nevertheless been made. Of his own Tree, Tolkien acknowledged that it 'grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf mould of the mind: out of all that has been seen or thought or read, that has long ago been forgotten, descending into the deeps'.[32] In *Tree and Leaf* he encouraged overcoming the depressed and depressing view: 'Who can design a new leaf?' His answer, couched, of course, in arboreal terms, is also a plea for the 'recovery fairy stories help us to make':

> Each leaf, of oak and ash and thorn, is a unique embodiment of the pattern, and for some *eye*, this very year may be *the* embodiment, the first ever seen and recognised, though oaks have put forth leaves for countless generations …[33]

The Hobbit

While trees and forests are central to Tolkien's own conception of living in the world, it is in the act of creation that they signify most profoundly and it is in his fictional world that he most effectively 'passes on' this apprehension. Through fantasy, Tolkien can be seen to attempt to awaken his readers to the powerful and emblematic significance of trees and forests – to *see* them as he does. The quality of forests as 'tinged', but only ever a forest, is certainly familiar to a

reading of the forest in *The Hobbit*, and in part explains the workings of Tolkien's use of fantasy. By alluding to this 'unanalysable' effect in a book for children, Tolkien relies on a recognition of forests encountered earlier in both fictional and actual terms, but also embeds a sense of them that can be taken to later reading, and perhaps, particularly, to *The Lord of the Rings*.

The importance of 'imagined wonder'[34] is embedded in Tolkien's treatment of the forest in *The Hobbit*, most often classified, because of its straightforward plotting and narrative voice, as a book for children. Tolkien himself looked back critically on its tone, but, for those who read *The Hobbit* as an introduction to the story of Middle-earth, this ability to engage with the 'imagined wonder' of his world is central to Tolkien's lasting attraction. Not only does his method of blending the mythic with actual experience use the forest as a site of enchantment and adventure, but he also portrays the forest in such a way as to embody *real* forests rather than to translate them into something fantastical.

In fact, there are few forests in *The Hobbit* and very few mentions of individual trees – certainly nothing that matches those in *The Lord of the Rings* – but they are crucial to the functioning of what could be considered a classical quest narrative, and provide an intimation of encounters in Tolkien's later work. We are in the same world: Middle-earth, at once a land of mythic status and a reminder of a possible primeval past of our own world. So that, while Tolkien's representations of the forest serve a narrative function similar to those in fairy tales, they also recall the qualities of forest-ness that are familiar and realistic. Mirkwood, in particular, serves as a testing ground for the central character and provides the place for a rite of passage. It is in the forest that Bilbo discovers his 'true' character and recognises the role he will need to perform. His passage from innocence, particularly in terms of self-knowledge, to awareness, is played out through his adventure in Mirkwood, made more significant by the fact that once he has performed his function as the burglar, he no longer has to pass through the forest, but can travel around it during his journey home. However, on the outward journey, as is the case with many fairy tales, there is little choice for him but to go through the forest, for going round it would take too long – they must, according to Gandalf, go through 'if you want to get to the other side'. It might be possible to consider his encounter with Mirkwood, this 'dark', 'forbidding' and 'uncanny' forest, in Bettelheim's terms, for even Gandalf's remarks: 'keep your spirits up, hope for the best, and with a tremendous slice of luck you *may* come out one day ...' seem to be echoed in *The Uses*

of Enchantment,[35] at once recognising the need to confront one's fears in order to allow the ego to come into being and teasing the reader with the possibility of failure.

Yet it is not enough to interpret this 'unanalysable' aspect of the forest as merely a fairy-tale motif representing a symbolic space, although its place in Bilbo's adventures suggests a symbolic function. Mirkwood, like many such places in children's books and fairy tales, is significant because it is a place which differentiates between those who *know* it and those who do not. An innocent here, Bilbo is warned about the dangers of the forest by those who are familiar with its codes, such as Gandalf and Beorn. Like Mole, in *The Wind in the Willows*, overcome by a sense of being watched and later admonished by Ratty, who explains that it is necessary to 'know' the codes of the Wild Wood, Bilbo is endangered precisely because he ignores the rules and warnings, although his endangerment is required for the acquisition of the necessary self-knowledge to succeed in his task. Bilbo's innocence in relation to the dangers of the forest is emphasised by his childlike stature, while those who issue the warnings, Beorn and Gandalf, are represented as adult and knowledgeable. As Bilbo approaches the woods where Beorn lives, his size, and therefore his position in relation to the forest, is emphasised: 'At times they were pushing through a sea of bracken with tall fronds rising right above the Hobbit's head, at times they were marching along quiet as quiet over a floor of pine needles, and all the while the forest-gloom got heavier and the forest-silence deeper.'[36]

Bilbo's reluctance to enter Mirkwood is due in large part to the warnings of Beorn, who is *of* the forest. His home reflects his sense of belonging to that world and even his stature is described in striking contrast to the Hobbit's childlike smallness. This helps to emphasise the knowledge of, and power over, whatever the forest signifies, for Beorn's home resembles a forest, though a controlled version of it: 'the pillars of the house standing tall behind them and dark at the top like the trees of the forest'. Whereas the darkness at the top of Beorn's hall is compared to the forest, the company are surrounded by 'the light of dancing flames', suggesting warmth and safety in contrast to the encounters yet to come. It is only as Bilbo approaches Mirkwood that the foreboding caused by Beorn's warnings, like those of Little Red Riding Hood's mother – not to stray from the path – come into force. The reliance on his child readers' familiarity with fairy-tale forests imbues Tolkien's version with an uncanny quality, and as the party approaches Mirkwood, the personification of the forest serves to accentuate both a sense

of enchantment and its malign presence: 'They could see the forest coming to see them, or waiting for them like a black and frowning wall before them.' In particular, when Bilbo steps alone into the forest, it seems 'very secret'; 'a sort of "watching and waiting feeling", he said to himself'.[37] His own 'reading' of the forest echoes the anthropomorphic quality of not only fictional forests already known to readers of fairy tales, and, as suggested, George MacDonald's *The Golden Key*, but an experience of actual encounters with forests as beings, as living entities, creating a feeling that is full of foreboding. In this way, Tolkien can already be seen to pull away from the kind of anthropomorphism he rejected in others, just as he later resists confining the meaning of the forest to allegory or symbolism.

Bilbo's foray into Mirkwood, like those of characters who enter the forests of the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, changes him and, more importantly, allows him to recognise that transformation. His experiences in Mirkwood – being led off the path by the Wood-elves, and battling the spiders in the treetops – allow him to discover his inherent bravery and cleverness. He has faced a test of character and redefined himself, by passing through the forest.

The Lord of the Rings

Whereas, in *The Hobbit*, 'the forest' is predominantly typological and, perhaps, rather functional in terms of its symbolic resonance, forests and trees in *The Lord of the Rings* are much more complex. Although children 'from about 10 onwards' do read and become caught up in the trilogy, Tolkien expressed the view that it was 'rather a pity, really' as it 'was not written for them'. Rather, his aim was to write for 'any one who enjoyed a long exciting story', the kind of narrative he himself enjoyed, addressed expressly and directly to those who could 'understand adult language'.[38] Tolkien objected to fairy stories that are 'carefully pruned' in a false and romantic estimation of what is suitable for children: 'if a fairy story as a kind is worth reading at all it is worthy to be written for and read by adults'.[39]

Trees in the later narrative are not anthropomorphised, neither are they static but rather, carefully differentiated: 'as different from one another as trees from trees … as different as one tree is from another of the same name but quite different growth and history; as different as one tree-kind from another, as birch from beech, oak from fir'.[40] Rather than passive objects, they are seen as complex living subjects, who respond to other subjects living in a particular environment. In

The Lord of the Rings, we see trees and forests which have, largely, fallen out of positive inter-relationship with other living beings:

> Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees are loved; elsewhere forests are represented as awakening to consciousness of *themselves*. The Old Forest was hostile to two-legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries. Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful, but at the time of the story tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-loving enemy. Mirkwood had fallen under the dominion of a Power that hated all living things but was restored to beauty and became Greenwood the Great before the end of the story.[41]

The restoration of relationship is one of the themes of the long saga.

In Tolkien's view, fairy stories are able to represent 'profounder wishes: such as the desire to converse with other living things … and the magical understanding of their proper speech'.[42] This is not, however, simply to represent humanised attributes in an anthropocentric setting. Michael Perlman notes in *The Power of Trees: The Reforesting of the Soul*, the frequent and 'myriad forms of human–tree parallels', but such 'analogy never implies a full and literal identity of humans and trees'. Rather, 'neither the parallels or differences … can be consistently avoided or reconciled'. This is 'a tension … basic to the world's tree stories'.[43] Where there is a tendency to anthropomorphise trees, it is due to a lack of thorough understanding and intimacy. Perlman also cites Michael Pollan, who claims in *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, that a gardener's familiarity with trees would highlight the differences between species, and would mitigate against Romantic and naïve identification. Pollan further differentiates between 'a humanised tree' and an 'ensouled' one, adding that someone who prunes trees, removing limbs and lopping growth for the tree's sake, would certainly develop 'a more complicated and less anthropomorphic understanding of how, and where, a tree lives'.[44] In all his descriptions of trees, one would be hard-pressed to find Tolkien privileging human characteristics, although they are certainly represented as having 'emotional' responses and survival strategies.

Fundamentally, for good or ill, trees change (as do Ents and Entwives, Huorns, Hobbits, humans and all other beings). The Ents, once 'asleep' and silent, were 'woken up by Elves'. Ents and Entwives separate because their 'hearts did not go on growing in the same way', and the Huorns, once Ents, have grown more tree-like, and angry and 'queer'.[45] 'Trees may 'go bad' as in the Old Forest; Elves may turn into Orcs, noted Tolkien in a long explanatory letter.[46] At

times and in some cases, trees and forests are welcoming and benign, actively helping the Hobbits, providing bowers of safety and fuelling camp-fires with off-cast limbs. At other times, however, woods such as the Old Forest are malign, or have become so. The Old Forest is terrifying by reputation and, once entered, actively unwelcoming. It is in the Old Forest and by the active malevolence of Old Man Willow that the travellers are variously nearly drowned or nearly consumed by and suffocated in the rotten heart of a tree. Tragedy is only averted by Tom Bombadil's intervention, and he later offers an explanation for the behaviour of Old Man Willow, but it is also important to note that trees are not without their own inherent peculiarities, prejudices and flaws:

> Tom's words laid bare the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were often dark and strange and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroyers and usurpers. … The countless years had filled them with pride and rooted wisdom, and with malice. But none was more dangerous than the Great Willow: his heart was rotten, but his strength was green; and he was cunning, and a master of winds, and his song and thought ran through the woods on both sides of the river. His grey thirsty spirit drew power out of the earth and spread like fine root-threads in the ground, and invisible twig fingers in the air, till it had under its dominion nearly all the trees of the Forest from the Hedge to the Downs.[47]

Critics have puzzled over the meaning of Tolkien's depiction of such a malevolent tree as Old Man Willow. It sits uneasily with the view of Tolkien as a 'tree-hugging' environmentalist and *The Lord of the Rings* as an iconic book for the Green Movement. Old Man Willow can be seen as rare and aberrant, but Tolkien refuses to patronise trees (or any creature) by making them one-dimensional, or less subject to the post-Fall corruption and conflict that threatens all living beings. Tolkien also makes clear that when trees suffer injury, they can become hostile. Contrary to simplistic expectations, hobbits are among those who have harmed trees. The skirmish over the planting of the Hedge involved trees moving nearer to it; in retaliation and to secure their boundary, the Hobbits 'cut down hundreds of trees' and made 'a great bonfire in the Forest'.[48] Eventually, Hobbits and trees negotiate a wide boundary and an uneasy peace, with mutual fear and resentment. Perhaps it is Tom Bombadil who is the exemplar of a right relation to trees and the living world; he has an acceptance of their variety and rightful co-existence. Bombadil is the polar opposite of those who, like Saruman, cannot resist 'plotting to become a

Power', who have 'mind[s] of metal and wheels' and who care not 'for growing things, except as far as they serve him for a moment'.[49]

'The suffering tree is the epitome of universal pain'[50]

In 1953, Tolkien wrote to his long-term friend Father Robert Murray (who had presciently noted that critics might have difficulty evaluating *The Lord of the Rings*: 'they will not have a pigeon-hole neatly labelled for it'), affirming the book's positive religious aspect: '*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like religion, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.'[51] There is a passage in another letter, where Tolkien uses a familiar image to represent his particular faith: a tree. In a long letter to his son Michael in 1967/8, Tolkien contrasted the 'protestant' 'search backwards' with the dynamism ('likened to a plant') of the Catholic church, and the arboricultural skill and familiarity required of those who tend it:

> 'my church' was not intended by Our Lord to be static or remain in perpetual childhood; but to be a living organism (likened to a plant), which develops and changes in externals by the interaction of its bequeathed divine life and history – the particular circumstances of the world into which it is set. There is no resemblance between 'the mustard seed' and the full-grown tree. For those living in the days of its branching growth, the Tree is the thing, for the history of a living thing is part of its life, and the history of a divine thing is sacred. The wise know it began with a seed, but it is vain to try and dig it up, for it no longer exists, and the virtues and powers that it had now reside in the Tree. Very good: but in husbandry the authorities, the keepers of the Tree, must look after it according to such wisdom as they suggest, prune it, remove cankers, get rid of parasites and so forth. (With trepidation knowing how little their knowledge of growth is!) But they will certainly do harm if they are obsessed with going back to the seed or even the first youth of the plant when it was (they imagine) pretty and unafflicted by evils.[52]

Explicit mention of his faith is made by Tolkien in the Notes to the essay 'On Fairy-Stories' – a somewhat surprising turn. Having claimed, more familiarly, that 'successful Fantasy can … be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying truth or reality', he continues: 'The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories,' and introduces his own

neologism: 'Eucatastrophe' or 'good destruction'; 'among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe … The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history: … the story begins and ends in joy.'[53] In his own 'sub-creation', *The Lord of the Rings*, a similar restoration of joy is accomplished, and represented, in deliberately religious language and imagery, by 'a scion of the Eldest of Trees', which will replace the withered White Tree in the courtyard of MinisTirith. In this passage, all the features already discussed in this essay come together: trees, creation (art), fairy stories, and religion:

> Then Aragorn turned … out of the very edge of the snow here sprang a sapling tree no more than three foot high. Already it had put forth young leaves long and shapely, dark above and silver beneath, and upon its slender crown it bore a small cluster of flowers whose white petals shone like the sunlit snow. ...
>
> And Gandalf coming looked at it, and said: 'Verily this is a sapling of the line of Nimloth the fair, and that was a seedling of Galathilion, and that a fruit of Telperion of many names, Eldest of Trees. Who shall say how it comes here in the appointed hour? But this is an ancient hallow, and ere the kings failed or the Tree withered in the court, a fruit must have been set here. For it is said that, although the fruit of the Tree comes seldom to ripeness, yet the life within may then lie sleeping through many long years, and none can foretell the time when it will awake. ...
>
> And Aragorn planted the new tree in the court by the fountain, and swiftly and gladly it began to grow, and when the month of June entered it was laden with blossom.
>
> 'The sign has been given,' said Aragorn, 'and the day is not far off.' And he set watchmen upon the walls.[54]

Tolkien concludes his essay 'On Fairy-Stories' with the claim that 'Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on' and that the Christian 'may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation'.[55] The now-familiar metaphor of effoliation (producing leaves) combines with the metonym of 'the Tree' standing for all creation. The biblical and religious connotations of Tolkien's work – and, in particular, his late work – are explicit only intermittently: in his letters and in the coda to the essay on fantasy, sub-creation and fairy stories. Throughout all of his work, and with increasing complexity, Tolkien attempts to express the profound meaning of trees as expressed variously in religious traditions, myth, saga and legend. Verging on the pagan, and identified with by those who would identify themselves as more pagan than religious, Tolkien's tree- and forest-love seems at

first to stand in opposition to the Church, which was suspicious of the pagan vestiges that continued 'to haunt the conservative woodlands' with their 'age-old demons, fairies, and nature spirits'. Robert Pogue Harrison notes both the various enjoinders in the Old Testament to destroy the gentile's ritualised sacred groves with prohibitions, such as 'Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of trees near unto the altar of the Lord our God' (Deuteronomy 16:21), and yet the persistence of 'certain elements of pagan culture':

> If certain elements of pagan culture survived the Christian revolution in covert forms ... it was thanks in part to the fact that Christian imperialism did not take it upon itself to burn down the forests in a frenzy of religious fervour ... Fortunately for the forests, and for the ancient folklore they fostered and perpetuated, the Christians did not organize crusades … which serves to remind us that, when forests are destroyed … a preserve of cultural memory also disappears.[56]

Of course, the Old and New Testaments both contain their tree references, from the Old Testament Tree of Knowledge to the Tree of Life in Revelation 22: 'and the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations' (22:2). In the Christian tradition, Christ is crucified on a tree of death (dead tree) and then, eucatastrophically, becomes the Tree of Life.

Tolkien brings all these elements together, including his very personal view that a tree is a beautiful, albeit fallen, aspect of creation, and his knowledge of legend, saga and fairy story, of which, he claims, the Christian Gospel is a prime example. Perhaps this is why Tolkien insisted that *The Lord of the Rings* was not written for children, for the eucatastrophic stories he tells contain both the most dreadful possibilities (death) and the most joyful elements: creation; sub-creation; re-creation.

Notes

1. Richard Hayman, *Trees: Woodlands and Western Civilization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 202.
2. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (1964; London: HarperCollins, 2001): 13, 19.
3. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major* (1967; London: HarperCollins, 2005): 10.
4. William Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2009): 68.
5. Ibid.: 69.

6. Roger Sale, 'Fairy Tales', *The Hudson Review*, 30(3) (Autumn 1977): 372–94, at 382, and see Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 32–3.
7. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (1981; London: HarperCollins, 2006): 318.
8. See 'Tolkien's Green Time: Environmental Themes in *The Lord of the Rings*', in G. Bassham and E. Bronson (eds), *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2003): 150–64.
9. George MacDonald, *The Golden Key and Other Stories* (1867; Tring: Lion, 1980): 2.
10. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937; London: Houghton Mifflin, 1984): 130.
11. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Penguin, 1991): 94.
12. Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1988): 45.
13. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*: 154.
14. Zipes: 60.
15. Paul Kocher, *Master of Middle-earth: The achievement of J. R. R. Tolkien* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972): 3.
16. Ibid.: 11.
17. Tolkien, *Letters*: 419.
18. Kocher; photograph by Snowdon.
19. Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
20. Tolkien, *Letters*: 220.
21. Cited in Michael Perlman, *The Power of Trees: The Reforesting of the Soul* (London: Spring Publications, 1994): 175.
22. Tolkien, *Letters*: 63, 73, 107.
23. See, for example, J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966): 434.
24. Ibid.: 374.
25. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966): 375.
26. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: v.
27. Kocher: 162.
28. Tolkien, *Letters*: 297, 321, 321.
29. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 94.
30. Tolkien, *Letters*: 321.
31. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 109.
32. Cited in Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*: 126.
33. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 56, 57.
34. Ibid.: 19.
35. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*: 127, and see Bettelheim: 94.
36. Ibid.: 91.
37. Ibid.: 117, 124, 126.
38. Tolkien, *Letters*: 429, 297.

39. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 45.
40. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966): 83.
41. Tolkien, *Letters*: 419–20.
42. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 66.
43. Perlman: 3.
44. Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (London: Grove Press, 1991): 88.
45. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*: 109, 287.
46. To Rhona Beare, unsent draft continuation of a letter; Tolkien, *Letters*: 277.
47. Ibid.: 180–81.
48. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*: 156.
49. Ibid.: 77.
50. Gaston Bachelard, cited in Perlman: 127.
51. Tolkien, *Letters*: 172.
52. Ibid.: 394.
53. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 71, 72.
54. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (London: HarperCollins, [1981], 2006): 72.
55. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 73.
56. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 62.