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Representations of Nature in Middle-earth (2016), edited by Martin Simonson

Deidre A. Dawson
deidredawson@aol.com

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Representations of Nature in Middle-earth, edited by Martin Simonson. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2015. [8], iv, 236 pp. \$24.30 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703344.

Aside from the fact that they were all first published in 2015, what could the titles *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*¹ and *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*² have in common with the volume under review, a collection of essays on the natural world in Tolkien's literary sub-creation? On the surface, perhaps not much. The casual reader perusing these titles might assume that they fall into three quite separate categories: natural history, theology, and literary criticism. In fact what authors J.R.R. Tolkien, Pope Francis, and German forester Peter Wohlleben all have in common is that they argue, albeit from different perspectives, for both responsible stewardship of the earth and its resources and the intrinsic value of the natural world, independent of its usefulness to humans (and by extension, in Tolkien's work, Elves, Dwarves or Hobbits). The fact that the rich and varied essays in *Representations of Nature in Middle-earth* can bring to mind both Wohlleben's demonstration that trees communicate and interact with each other independently and Pope Francis's emphasis on "the interrelation between ecosystems and between the various spheres of social interaction" (Francis, 96) underscores the timeliness of this volume and the continuing complexity and relevance of what Dickerson and Evans called Tolkien's "environmental vision."³

As editor Martin Simonson states in his introduction, Tolkien's tales "show an ongoing and intensive dialogue between nature and culture" while at the same presenting nature from the perspective of non-human beings "affected by conditions alien to the human race" (ii). Given Tolkien's personal love and reverence for trees, and the important roles played by trees and forests in his legendarium, it is hardly surprising that roughly half of the essays in the volume deal with the non-human beings of trees and their shepherds, the Ents. In "On Trees of Middle-earth: J.R.R. Tolkien's Mythical Creation" Magdalena Mączyńska reminds us that in the *Quenta Silmarillion*, the sacred trees Telperion and Laurelin, created by the Vala Yavanna, participate "in the very process of shaping the structure of the universe," as "the sole source of life-giving light in Eä that had existed even before the firmament was adorned with the Sun and the Moon (120-121)." In *The Lord of the Rings*, "trees have feelings just like any another sentient beings" (125) and "trees are their own masters, having their own

¹ Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* (2016). First published in German in 2015 as *Das geheime Leben der Bäume*.

² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (2015).

³ Matthew T. Dickerson and Jonathan D. Evans, *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2011).

agenda and forming their own alliances” (127). For these reasons, Mączyńska finds that trees in Middle-earth “resemble animals more than plants” (125). Twenty years of working with trees in Germany have led forester Peter Wohlleben to claim in *The Hidden Life of Trees*: “Sometimes I suspect we would pay more attention to trees and other vegetation if we could establish beyond a doubt just how similar they are to animals” (Wohlleben, 84). Recent scientific findings have shown that trees “communicate by means of olfactory, visual and electrical signals” (Wohlleben, 12), and yet many researchers are still reluctant to liken plant behavior to animal behavior, a comparison which Tolkien would have found perfectly natural, in Mączyńska’s analysis. Wohlleben posits that this could be because of the length of time it takes for plants to translate information into action, and he could very well be writing about Ents when he asks philosophically, “Does that mean that beings that live life in the slow lane are automatically worth less than ones in the fast track?” (Wohlleben, 84) Tolkien’s response to this question would have been a resounding “No!” The slow-moving, slow-talking Ents, as Mączyńska notes, grew from Tolkien’s love of trees, and are “a race that is unique to Middle-earth and has no counterparts in European mythologies” (127). Her essay, read in the light of Wohlleben’s study of trees (which I have referenced here for the sake of comparison) demonstrates that Tolkien was a step ahead of science in his attribution of agency and communication to trees.

The question of agency in the non-human natural world is also treated by Christopher Roman, who argues that “in Tolkien’s work the environment is best described as an acting agent: very real landscapes that can manipulate and be manipulated; something that transforms and changes” (97). In his essay “Thinking with the Elements: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Ecology and Object-Oriented Ontology,” Roman explores the ways that Tolkien “rejects an easy relationality with the environment” (101) by founding his environmental vision on an object-oriented ontology, which Roman defines as “a flat ontology, one that proposes a non-hierarchical world between objects” (97). In Roman’s view, the crisis that afflicts Middle-earth is not just a result of conflict between the major peoples, “but can be linked, as well, to the lack of an ethical thinking-through with the non-human agents” (98). Object-oriented ontology proposes a non-anthropocentric ethic in which beings and objects are not viewed primarily from the perspective of their usefulness to humans. Thus all elements of the natural world—animal, vegetable, and even mineral—interact with their surroundings in ways that are given equal weight in terms of the environmental ontology of Middle-earth. In a brief passage in *The Fellowship of the Rings* in which a fox, coming across Sam, Frodo and Pippin curled up under a fir tree remarks to himself: “ ‘Well, what next? I have heard of strange doings in this land, but I have seldom heard of a hobbit sleeping out of doors under a tree’ . . . Tolkien is experimenting with being inside the head

of a non-human being” (103). In *The Hobbit*, the were-bear Beorn’s “domestic life reveals an ecology that is enmeshed with the non-human” (104). Beorn’s bees are large and healthy, thanks to his care of the fields, he is able to speak a language which is understood by horses and dogs, and his dwelling is designed to accommodate animals. Another example of Tolkien’s “flat ontology” is the scene in which Gandalf introduces Shadowfax to Gimli and Legolas as a lord of horses, who has come of his own volition to find him: “Tolkien changes our perspective on horse-experience by characterizing the horse as being on equal terms with the other members of the Fellowship” (105). However for Roman, “the most poignant meditation on enmeshment . . . concerns the relationship between Elves and forests” (107). The Elves, it is important to recall, gave every living thing in Middle-earth a name. Alone among the peoples of Middle-earth (with a few notable individual exceptions such as Gandalf and Aragorn), the Elves can understand the language of horses, trees and other non-human beings. However, Roman makes an interesting point about the Elves’ desire to control and preserve nature for their enjoyment (they regulate the seasons in Lothórien, for example): “their aesthetics does not account for the ways objects may interact with each other without the Elves’ intervention. The Elves suffer from an excessive elf-*pomorphis*” (108). In Roman’s view, this is part of the Elves’ undoing: “Their need to master the ecology, though benevolent, proves also to be unsustainable; the world’s change is ultimately forcing them to leave” (108). Might there be some lessons for our own age here?

In her essay “‘Transform stalwart trees’: Sylvan Biocentrism in *The Lord of the Rings*,” Andrea Denekamp also tackles the issue of environmental sustainability. Denekamp argues that the Ents, trees and forests represent Tolkien’s “ethic of forest stewardship” (1), but this ethic is in Denekamp’s view a platonic one, which Tolkien presents as unattainable in a anthropocentric world: “The stewardship ethic of the Ents, which is to allow wilderness to develop chaotically, according to its own laws, is not sustainable in a world also inhabited by human-(like) cultures which seek to shape nature” (2). On this point Denekamp concurs with Verlyn Flieger’s observation that the coexistence between human society and wild nature as represented by Tolkien is always tenuous, if not impossible. (24; Flieger 150)⁴ Denekamp finds that Tolkien’s environmental ethics support ecological diversity, including biocentrism, “the view that the rights and needs of humans are not more important than those of other living things . . .” (2). This concept is quite similar to Roman’s definition of object-oriented-ontology, and indeed, Denekamp and Roman come to similar

⁴ Verlyn Flieger, “Taking the Part of the Trees: Eco-Conflict in Middle-earth.” *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-earth*. Eds. George Clark and Daniel Timmons. Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2000, 145-158.

conclusions about the consequences for the environment when it is meddled with by humans or Elves. By contrast, as the oldest self-sustaining culture in Middle-earth, the Ents protect the rights of the forests as intrinsic, not based on its utility for other beings. However, the Ents are depicted as “a culture on the brink of extinction” (3), and by end of *The Lord of the Rings*, as the coming of the Fourth Age—the Age of Men—is proclaimed, the dominant world-view is anthropocentric. For Denekamp, this does not augur well for the biodiversity of Middle-earth. While Tolkien admitted that he did not give much thought to what would become of the Ents in the Fourth Age,⁵ he would surely have agreed with Pope Francis’s warning about the dangers of anthropocentrism: “Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since the ‘technological mind’ sees nature as an object of utility . . .” (Francis, 78).

Another culture that will eventually become extinct in Middle-earth is the sylvan culture of the Elves. Elves also have a unique relationship with trees stretching back to the First Age, when, according to Treebeard, the Elves taught the trees to talk, but in contrast to the Ents and Tom Bombadil, whom Gabriel Ertsgaard considers to be “the purest manifestations of the preservationist ideal” (209), the Elves have an “imperialist history” which has linked their fate with the fate of Sauron. In his essay “‘Leaves of Gold There Grew’: Lothlórien, Postcolonialism, and Ecology,” Gabriel Ertsgaard applies the theoretical approach of “postcolonial Tolkien ecocriticism” to examine the link between the Elves’ own internecine wars, rebellions and colonialist ventures and the fate of the forest of Lothlórien. As Ertsgaard’s analysis shows, conservationism can coexist with colonialism, although this unhealthy pairing proves to be unsustainable in the long-run: “Although the Elves’ reverence for nature never lapses, they do get caught up in feuds, power struggles, and political wars that have global consequences” (215). These consequences include the rise of Sauron and his clandestine forging of the One Ring, with which he attempts to conquer all of Middle-earth, as he tricks the Elf smith Celebrimbor into forging other rings of power which the One will be able to control. But Celebrimbor secretly forges three rings of power for the Elves and hides them away as soon as he realizes their link to Sauron’s evil purposes. Galadriel possesses one of these three, Narya, and through it has been able to preserve Lothlórien, but she is faced with a painful choice: “Although the inevitable fading of Lothlórien is both a personal and ecological tragedy for Galadriel, the consequences of a victory for Sauron would be far worse for both her people and her land. The Elves must conspire to destroy the One Ring, dooming their green utopias, to hold back Sauron’s complete tide

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1981), edited by Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, 104.

of ecological destruction” (220). Once Sauron and the Ring are destroyed, the Elves prepare to leave Middle-earth for their sacred homeland, Valinor. What lessons does the fate of Lothlórien offer our 21st-century? Ertsgaard sees the choices before us as quite different: “in this era of globalization we have no exact parallel to the Elves’ withdrawal from Middle-earth . . . We are thus entangled with a Ring of Power, consumerism, and cannot simply retreat to Valinor” (225). Not surprisingly, Ertsgaard finds the wisest and humblest approach in Gandalf, whose words he adapts for our era in his conclusion: “Rather let us strive to clear fields, to negotiate truces, to bring some things green and lively through the night, and in all of these to see even our limits as blessings” (226).

At the beginning of her essay “In Living Memory: Tolkien’s Trees and Sylvan Landscapes as Metaphors of Cultural Memory,” Doris McGonagill highlights the importance of trees and forests as metaphors in not only in the legendarium, but in other writings of Tolkien, such as the story “Leaf by Niggle,” and the essay “On Fairy-stories” from the collection *Tree and Leaf*. In these works, according to McGonagill, we see “the ways in which, for Tolkien, arboreal imagery comes to emblematically represent creative imagination itself” (140). Drawing upon Hans Blumenberg’s *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (2010), Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory* (1996) and Robert Pogue Harrison’s *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992), McGonagill proposes a deeper function of metaphor in her interpretation of trees and forests in Tolkien’s work as “constructions, expressions, and repositories of the cultural imagination” (139). McGonagill notes that “forests, more than any other topological setting, preserve the knowledge of the past, good and evil” (141). Thus the fact that the sapling discovered in Gondor as the Fourth Age is about to begin is “a descendant of the White Tree, Nimloth the fair, whose line can be traced back to Telperion, Eldest of Trees, created early in the First Age” illustrates “how Tolkien uses trees to imagistically tie together past, present, and future” (143). Forests are also spaces of “transition and initiation,” that “bring into focus questions of memory and identity. Characters who enter are in danger of losing their sense of time, purpose, self (The Old Forest, Mirkwood). Or they gain a clearer (re)cognition of where, who, and how they are (Lothlórien)” (142) McGonagill also invokes Tolkien scholar Michael Brisbois’s notion of Essential, Independent, Ambient, and Wrathful Nature⁶ in her discussion of the agency of trees: “trees and forests do stand out in the way many have independent life” (151). McGonagill observes pertinently that the runes used in *The Lord of the Rings* are associated with tree branches, and concludes that “Tress and forests resemble runes in the way they possess dual properties, one immediate/practical (on the level of the narrative) and

⁶ Michael J. Brisbois, “Tolkien’s Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth,” *Tolkien Studies* 2 (2005), 203-204.

the other representational/metaphorical (on the level of extra-textual references activating the readers' collective and individual memory) (166).

It is refreshing to find an entire essay devoted to the Dwarves, who sometimes get short shrift in discussions of nature in Tolkien's work. As stonemasons, miners and builders, they are often associated more with alteration of the environment than with its appreciation. Furthermore, as Jessica Seymour explains in her essay " 'As we draw near mountains': Nature and Beauty in the Hearts of Dwarves," "by limiting the definition of 'nature' to growing things, Tolkien scholars and ecocritics create a situation where it is almost impossible to analyse how Dwarves interact with the natural world in a positive manner" (31). It doesn't help that, as Seymour observes, "Dwarves remain one of the few races in Middle-earth to be constructed as almost universally unworthy by other characters" (30). Dwarves, it could be argued, are the most misunderstood of the free peoples of Middle-earth, and this is partly because their relationship with nature is misunderstood. Far from disrespecting the natural world, Seymour argues, "Dwarves connect with their geological roots as something living and vulnerable, but also useful and strong. They approach the natural world as a foundation; the stone and earth being the backbone upon which a great fortification can be built" (30). Unlike the Trolls or the dragon Smaug from *The Hobbit*, Seymour points out, the Dwarves do not hoard riches, but rather "tend to collect beautiful things and to make use of them; for pleasure, development of craft, or to use in trade" (43). Seymour draws on a study by Danièle Barberis, a legal specialist in mineral law and policy,⁷ to argue that the Dwarves' mining instinct is not driven by primarily by greed, but by the love of craftsmanship and the need for a secure, safe place in which to pursue their craft. Seymour concurs with Barberis that the Dwarves, unlike humans, don't view a mine as a place to be exploited until all its riches are depleted, but are also concerned about "the preservation of the beauty of a mine for future generations" (33). Indeed, love of stone is part of the Dwarves' heritage and is inextricably linked with their mythology—their creation by Aulë, the smith and craftsman of the Vala—and so their mining and craftsmanship is a way of honoring their maker, as Gabriela Silva Rivera also points out in her essay: "Created underground, Dwarves still carve their kingdoms under the mountains (51-52). Seymour concludes that Dwarves are unique among the other peoples of Middle-earth, for they "occupy the hazy philosophical gap between preservationism and exploitation; between nostalgia and progress" (45).

Peter Hodder's essay "A New Zealand Perspective on the Tectonics of Middle-earth," also deals with geology and the mineral world. What Hodder finds

⁷ Danièle Barberis, "Tolkien: The Lord of the Mines—Or A Comparative Study Between Mining During the Third Age of Middle-earth by Dwarves and Mining During Our Age by Men (or Big People)," *Minerals & Energy* 20.3-4 (2006): 60-68.

intriguing is that even though the theory of plate tectonics was developed after Tolkien had completed his legendarium, the presence of “episodes of volcanism, submergence of landscapes, the raising of mountains and the movements of islands . . .” in Tolkien’s writings “is highly suggestive of Middle-earth being a region that geologists would describe as ‘tectonically active.’” In this context, “Tolkien’s portrayal in text of a dynamic geology for Middle-earth seems both unusual and prescient” (175). Even more intriguing, in Hodder’s view, is the similarity between the tectonics of Middle-earth and the “dynamic geological history of New Zealand” (201). To illustrate this, Hodder provides illustrations charting the tectonic history of Middle-earth, such as maps from Karen Wynn Fonstad’s *Atlas of Middle-earth* (1991), as well as maps and charts illustrating the volcanic centers and fault lines of New Zealand. Drawing upon his expertise as a scientist specializing in geochemistry and tectonics of volcanic landscapes, and upon his detailed analysis of the cosmogony of Arda and the geography of Middle-earth, Hodder has created two most impressive comparative tables which he includes in his essay: the “Correlation of tectonics of Middle-earth and New Zealand for the last 500 million years” and “Correlation of tectonics of Middle-earth and New Zealand for the last 65 million years” (194-195). The wealth of scientific evidence presented by Hodder “provides a geological justification—if it was needed—for the choice of New Zealand as the landscape setting for *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy and for the succeeding films of *The Hobbit*” (201), but perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates once again that although Tolkien was not a scientist, he conceived his sub-created world with scientific precision.

As an author who paid great attention to environmental and topographical details in his creative work, Tolkien did not neglect the role of water. From Belegaer, the “Great Sea” which separates Middle-earth from the Blessed Realm of Aman, to mighty rivers such as the Anduin, with its impressive Falls of Rauros, down to the smaller but not less significant rivers, streams, lakes and pools, Middle-earth abounds with bodies of water. As Gabriela Silva Rivero notes at the beginning of her essay “‘Behind a grey rain-curtain’: Water, Melancholy and Healing in *The Lord of the Rings*,” water has been associated throughout the ages and across cultures with rebirth, cleansing, and healing. Rivero finds that in Tolkien’s mythology, “water represents both the loss and melancholy that is prevalent in Middle-earth” (50) and thus “serves more as a vehicle towards healing, not of the body but of the world-weariness that affects many of his characters” (49). Water sustains life, but also helps one prepare for death. Crossing over the “Great Sea” to Aman is “not to achieve immortality or escape time, but a chance to heal before death” (51). The journey of Boromir’s body, which has been placed in a boat by his comrades and sent down the Anduin river “both transports and sanctifies” Boromir, preserves his body, and “delivers Boromir, untouched, to the land of his brother” (54). Faramir is protected in a

different way by water; his refuge Henneth Annûn is hidden by a waterfall and a tunnel leading to a pool. The most dramatic instance of water acting as a protective agent is the episode when Elrond, with some help from Gandalf, commands the river Bruinen to sweep away the Ringwraiths who are pursuing Frodo. Gandalf is afraid that the river might engulf Frodo as well as the Ringwraiths, which suggests to Rivero that the Bruinen has a will of its own. Water, Rivero argues, “takes on the properties of the land that it crosses” (59). The river Nimrodel, in which the Company bathe their feet before crossing into Lothlórien, “makes memory come alive,” (59) as Legolas sings the song of the Elvish maiden Nimrodel; the still water in Galadriel’s mirror reflects the stars and thus recalls Cuiviénen, the lake in Middle-earth next to which the first Elves awoke to see the stars; water in Tom Bombadil’s abode represents both completeness (after all, “he is married to the embodiment of a river!” Rivero notes), and purity because the Ring has no effect on Bombadil (63); and the draught offered to Merry and Pippin by Treebeard renews their strength and heals the wounds inflicted on them by the Uruk-hai. A place without water is a place devoid of healing, of new life, of hope: such as place is Mordor.

But there is hope for the healing of Arda and the “renewed natural environment,” a concept theologians call ‘eschatological hope’, as Yannick Imbert explains. Imbert’s essay “Eru will enter Æa: The Creational-Eschatological Hope of J.R.R. Tolkien,” seeks to demonstrate that “Tolkien’s hope for a future restoration of nature rests upon a fundamentally Catholic understanding of nature and history, and more precisely Thomistic” (73). By this Imbert means first, that Tolkien’s love of nature stems above all from his love of the Creator and creation: “Tolkien’s love of the environment arises from metaphysics . . . Because things *are* (they exist) and because they have an *origin*, they can be loved for themselves” (74), and second, that Tolkien’s faith gave him “hope for the restoration of the natural world” (76). Imbert, who is a professor of theology, supports an interpretation of Tolkien based on Thomist metaphysics versus Neoplatonic metaphysics, and backs up his thesis with his impressive command of both the writings of Thomas Aquinas and the relevant Tolkien criticism. Imbert rejects the Neoplatonic reading of Tolkien’s creation myth as laid out in Flieger’s *Splintered Light* because it is based on the concept of emanation or diminution: “The crucial implication is this: with every stage of created reality, we move a step away from the perfect One” (79). This adherence to a Neoplatonic, emanationist reading of Tolkien has led some scholars to view the Ainur, who sing Arda into being, as the “true creators of Arda,” according to Imbert, relegating Eru to a distant divinity “clearly not characteristic of the Biblical God” (79). In Imbert’s view, a Thomistic interpretation is more in keeping with Tolkien’s Catholic beliefs because “For Thomas, what we call secondary causes never erase or replace primary causes. In other words, ‘Ainur-causality’ will

never replace or affect ‘Iluvatar-causality’” (80). Imbert notes further that “Thomism, starkly contrasted with Neoplatonism, stresses the importance and value of creation (85). This is perhaps Imbert’s strongest argument in favor of a Thomistic reading of the legendarium, for creation and sub-creation, which Tolkien views as the manifestation of man’s desire to emulate the Creator, are major themes of his essay ‘On Fairy Stories,’ which curiously, Imbert does not mention: “we make in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”⁸ More relevant to Imbert’s main thesis of a Thomist eschatological hope in Tolkien’s legendarium is “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth” (The Debate of Finrod and Andreth) : from *Morgoth’s Ring* , volume 10 of *The History of Middle-earth*. During this discussion about mortality between a male Elf and a woman, which Imbert interprets as an “eschatological essay” (88), Finrod has a vision in which Men help bring about both the unmarring and remaking of Arda . For Imbert, this is reminiscent of “one of the distinctive features of Christian eschatology . . . that nature that has been ‘marred’ will one day be healed, be made new through God’s grace” (90).

Early in his essay, Imbert makes the claim that “Tolkien . . . is more profound than most modern environmentalists” because “Tolkien’s love of the environment arises from metaphysics” (74) Imbert refers to Dickerson and Evans, who, Imbert posits, “ are certainly right in concluding that Tolkien is not an environmentalist but that he has definitely brought forth an environmental *vision*” (Dickerson and Evans xvi-xvii; 74).The statement Imbert is referring to is in the introduction to *Ents and Eriador*; he overlooks authors’ conclusion, which reverses their earlier claim: “In the introduction to this book, we stated that in the strictest sense of the word, J.R.R. Tolkien was not an environmentalist . . . But we are now convinced that these ideas were expressed far more consciously on his part—and perhaps even deliberately—than we had initially suspected. It now appears to us that even the narrowest definitions of environmentalism and environmental literature would have to include Tolkien and his works” (Dickerson and Evans, 259).

By way of conclusion to my discussion of *Representations of Nature in Middle-earth*, I would agree with Imbert that Tolkien’s Catholic beliefs had a profound effect on his reverence for nature, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that these beliefs weighed more heavily on Tolkien’s concept of nature than his empirical observations of the natural world. As most of the essays in this volume demonstrate, Tolkien’s depiction of nature reveals that the Professor had a deep understanding of both the ecologies of specific species (such as communication between trees) and the environmental impact that humans have on non-human species. In other words, Tolkien the devout Catholic and Tolkien the

⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories* (2008), 66.

environmentalist do not have to be at odds with each other. In the words of Pope Francis, “science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both” (Francis,45).

Deidre A. Dawson
Temple, Texas