THE EVERLASTING HOBBIT

Perspectives on the Human in Tolkien's Mythos

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". . . What seest thou else
In the dark backward and abysm of time?"

-- Prospero

If you are not yet sufficiently awed by the profound depths of which the human mind is capable through the mystery of human creativity, ponder the fact that you have just successfully read this sentence. It has quite a complex structure, with an independent clause and three subordinate clauses, plus four prepositional phrases. It contains thirty different words used thirty-seven times. (We won't even try to think about the phonemes and morphemes!) Five of the thirty words get multiple uses: the personal pronoun *you*, the preposition *of*, forms of the verb *to be*, and the adjective *human* appear twice each, the article *the* four times; twenty-five words are used once each. The odds that you have ever seen them before combined in precisely that order are, for all practical purposes, zero. I could spend a whole chapter just analyzing that one sentence without taxing my own patience (yours is another matter). Yet I created the sentence effortlessly, and most of you probably understood it with little or no conscious effort. Both of those facts are just plain stupefying. And usually we do not even waste the adjective *creative* on expository prose of the kind I am writing now! But without this almost indescribable human capacity for creativity, language could not work. Without consciously doing any of the formal analysis (until after the fact), I spontaneously created a structure that allowed you to recreate with some accuracy in your mind the fairly complex and sophisticated meaning I was attending to in mine.

Christians—including Tolkien—believe that Man's creation in the image of God is the source of the difference between us and the rest of the animal creation. But what is

this image, the *imago Dei*? Is it our amphibious nature combining matter and spirit, our rationality, our moral (or immoral) nature, our capacity for relationship with God, or is it simply the position we occupy as His regents, representing Him as stewards and governors of creation? None of these attributes is irrelevant to the *imago*, but neither is any of them its essence. Theologians (see Berkouwer, for example; contrast Hughes, who does better) can spend interminable pages debating the details to no purpose, because they have never bothered to read Genesis for its narrative flow in context. When we do, the answer is very plain.

The first statement that God intends to create Man in His own image occurs very early, in Genesis 1:26. We are in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. So let us start from scratch. So far we have only seen two attributes of God in action; they are all that has been revealed to this point, hence all we know of Him. First, He is creative; second, He is articulate. And these two facts are related: He uses language as the means of His creativity, first declaring things into existence and then giving them both form (separating light and darkness, water and land, etc.) and value (it was very good). So if we are then told that Man is going to be "like" God, one would think that this likeness must refer to the only attributes that have so far been introduced into the narrative. Man too will be creative and articulate. And this reasonable assumption is confirmed by the story. Adam is the first creature to be *personally* addressed by God's speech; after a long string of third-person "let there be's" he is called "thou." And he immediately starts talking back. His first official act is to *create* the first human *language*: God brings the animals before him, and whatever Adam calls each one is its name. God accepts these names Adam has created and will graciously use them Himself. So Man, like God, is creative because he is articulate. The core of the *imago Dei* is language.

This view of the *imago* is also confirmed by what we know of language itself. It is a uniquely human creation, the one that makes all the others possible. Scientists debate whether chimps can be taught to use true language, either using Ameslan (as with Washoe) or computers (at the Yerkes Primate Center at Emory University in Atlanta). But the forms of communication these apes are observed to use in the wild do not have the open-endedness, the deep structure, or the creativity required of a true human language. If they can speak, it is only after Man has been messing around with their

minds. We are still the only creature who creates language spontaneously. The uniqueness of language as a human characteristic is therefore not ultimately threatened by these experiments.

Language allows us to contemplate things not immediately present in the physical environment and then to manipulate them in our heads. It is therefore the foundation of our capacity for abstract thinking and reason. Language allows us to render an account to God of our stewardship of His creation. It is therefore the foundation of the fact that, in a manner not true of the other animals, we are *accountable* for our actions, i.e., have a moral nature. That accountability allows us to function as His regents, the stewards of creation. We see then that all the major facets of our uniqueness that have traditionally been related to the image of God find their unity in language; it is the characteristic we share with Him that makes all the others possible. Like Him, we are creative and articulate, articulately creative and creatively articulate. We are language users because we are language makers, made in the image of the Word (Williams, Inklings chp. 1).

It is therefore no accident that the greatest story teller of the Twentieth Century, who propounded as well as practiced the theory of Secondary Creation ("Essay on Faerie Stories"), began the creation of the most believable, consistent, and compelling imaginary world ever known with the ultimate act of human creativity: the endeavor to create a language (see Shippey, "Creation" for analysis of some of the details of that process). An actual language can be defined as a living and growing system which is the sum total of the creative input of each of its speakers, tempered by the creative input of all the others, to produce a shared set of dynamic conventions they can use for real communication. So Tolkien discovered that in order for Elvish to have a convincing sense of reality *as a language*, it required a people to speak it, a world for them to live in, a history and a mythology for them to remember, and other languages (spoken by neighboring peoples, who would have all the same requirements) to be related to. And that is both how we got Middle Earth and one reason why it is so convincing. "Golly, what a book!" said Warren Lewis. "The inexhaustible fertility of the man's imagination amazes me" (259). Thus Tolkien's fiction exemplifies one of the central characteristics of human nature simply by existing. And then there is also what it says. "J. R. R. Tolkien in his Ring trilogy sums

up more powerfully than any realist could do the darkness of total war and the essential opposition of evil and good" (Gardner 194).

Tolkien's fiction is not, like C. S. Lewis's, overtly Christian and even evangelistic. One of the expressed purposes for The Chronicles of Narnia is that by coming to know Aslan there we should learn to know Christ in our own world as well (TVDT 270). Narnia is full of symbolism that borders on allegory; Middle Earth is full of plain history that is not without symbolic import (Brewer, Dowie). There is nothing like the Stone Table East of the Sundering Sea. Nevertheless, Tolkien's book is in its own way as profoundly Christian as was the man himself. The Christian world view of The Lord of the Rings is buried much deeper, below the surface, but its roots go down to the very foundations of that world in the reflected Logos that drove the language-making mind of its maker. As Shippey puts it, "Tolkien has succeeded in blending suggestions from the optimistic Christian mythology and the tragic Northern one, without impiety to the former or dishonour to the latter" ("Creation" 315). Or, again, he was, like the Gawain-poet and the Beowulf-poet he had studied so closely, "someone deeply embedded in a Christian and Catholic tradition, but nonetheless . . . ready to make use of the lost, popular, monster-creating 'fairy-tale' traditions which we can infer from his very vocabulary" (Shippey, "Tolkien and the Gawain Poet," 216).

One could write whole chapters each on the biblical motifs of Creation, Fall, Redemption, Sacrifice, and Grace as they permeate the structure, the plot, the very texture and flavor of Tolkien's tale. Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn are not portraits of Christ the way Aslan is, but they represent the Prophet, the Suffering Servant, and the Coming King in ways that are not accidental. Tolkien did not set out to create Christ figures. But his heroes reflect The Hero in many respects because of the profound ways their maker had absorbed the ways of the Maker in the biblical text.

Tolkien spent his whole life working on the languages and connected mythos out of which The Lord of the Rings grew. He left behind volume upon volume of notes, fragments, and false starts that have since been edited and published for readers hungry for every word of his they can lay their eyes on--thankfully so. But for simplicity's sake, we will limit ourselves in this study to those works that we know he wanted to be published: The Silmarillion, The Hobbit, and The Lord of the Rings.

Hobbits get no separate mention in The Silmarillion, but they should be considered a sub-species of Man, one which perhaps has simply not yet been differentiated at that point. "It is plain indeed that in spite of later estrangement Hobbits are relatives of ours: far nearer to us than Elves or even than Dwarves. Of old they spoke the languages of Men, after their own fashion, and liked and disliked much the same things as Men did. But what exactly our relationship is can no longer be discovered" (Fellowship 20). Man contrasts in many ways with elves and dwarves. But while differing from us in size, hairiness of feet, and adeptness at disappearing, Hobbits share our essential nature and hence undoubtedly our destiny (cf. Flieger, "Fantasy and Reality" 9). Therefore, for our purposes here, what is said of Man applies to Hobbit and vice versa.

The Silmarillion gives the background for the mythology and history that lie behind The Lord of the Rings. Though The Silmarillion in general is not as polished or well developed as Tolkien's other fiction, it opens with a creation story that is as moving and beautiful as anything he ever wrote. It is also one of the most profound theodicies (explanations of evil and defenses of God's wisdom and goodness in the light of it) ever written. Eru Iluvatar, the One, propounds to the Ainur (roughly equivalent to angels) a theme of music. They enter into it and adumbrate it with harmonies and themes of their own. But Melkor introduces discord into the symphony, trying to wrest the music to his own bombastic purposes. Thus there is war in heaven, until Eru introduces further themes which have the effect of overcoming Melkor's cacophony and actually dovetailing it back into the main composition, so that the whole piece ends in a satisfying harmony once again.

> Then Iluvatar spoke, and he said: "Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor; but that he may know, and all the Ainur, that I am Iluvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine

> instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined." (17)

The symphony is then given reality, and becomes the history of the world, Ea. The Ainur enter into it according to their contributions to the music. They have great power and can foresee much because they remember the music, but none sees all, and there are surprises that Iluvatar has reserved for himself. Chief among these, and, because they are related to the later themes of Iluvatar somehow bound up with the redemption of Ea, are the "children of Iluvatar," elves and men.

> And [the Ainur] saw with amazement the coming of the Children of Iluvatar, and the habitation that was prepared for them; and they perceived that they themselves in the labour of their music had been busy with the preparation of this dwelling, and yet knew not that it had any purpose beyond its own beauty. For the Children of Iluvatar were conceived by him alone; and they came with the third theme, and were not in the theme which Iluvatar propounded at the beginning, and none of the Ainur had part in their making. Therefore when they beheld them, the more did they love them, being things other than themselves, strange and free, wherein they saw the mind of Iluvatar reflected anew, and learned yet a little more of his wisdom, which otherwise had been hidden even from the Ainur.
>
> Now the Children of Iluvatar are Elves and Men, the Firstborn and the Followers. And amid all the splendours of the World, its vast halls and spaces, and its wheeling fires, Iluvatar chose a place for their habitation in the Deeps of Time and in the midst of the innumerable stars. (18)

The biblical matrix behind Tolkien's world is as essential as it is unobtrusive. The Gospel of the salvation of men is something the angels long to look into (1 Pet. 1:12); the manifold wisdom of God will be made known through the Church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10). So in Tolkien's secondary world as well

as in God's primary world, one of the functions of Man is to reveal something of the wisdom and glory of God to angelic beings. We do this partly because we were unpredictable, a product of His creativity that was not entailed in the laws of physical nature alone. The Ainur are on one level personifications of natural forces: wind, water, fertility, etc. So to say that we came from Iluvatar alone and that they had no part in our making is a symbolic way of repudiating any kind of naturalistic reductionism as an explanation for us.

If we are a mystery to the Ainur, reflecting to them something of the mind of Iluvatar that they would otherwise not have known, we are an even greater mystery to ourselves, wanderers in a world that can tell us clearly only that neither it nor we are self-explanatory. The very structure of Tolkien's stories emphasizes the fact that the children of Iluvatar are people on a quest. Whether it is to recover the Silmarils or to destroy the Ring or to find the Entwives or just to become the master of Bag End, the children of Iluvatar are always searching for something. And this is especially true of mortal men, by design the ones who are least at home in the world. Tolkien's works are permeated with images that reinforce this view. In one of the most memorable of the songs, we learn that

> The Road goes ever on and on
> Down from the door where it began.
> Now far away the Road has gone
> And I must follow if I can,
> Pursuing it with weary feet
> Until it joins some larger way
> Where many paths and errands meet.
> And whither then? I cannot say. (Fellowship 102)

We see the fires and hear the feasting and revelry in the distance, but we stumble toward them and they disappear. And the sounds of wind and water speak to us in voices we cannot quite hear. "It is said by the Eldar that in water there lives yet the echo of the Music of the Ainur more than in any substance else that is in this Earth; and many of the

Children of Iluvatar hearken still unsated to the voices of the Sea, and yet know not for what they listen" (Silmarillion 19).

This is not a Post-Modern seeking for its own sake, with no hope of ever finding. But the journey is long and there are many false trails and by-ways, and no way to make it easy. For it is bound up with the strange nature of our relationship with the physical/temporal world, in it but (unlike the elves) not quite of it. Therefore, Iluvatar

> willed that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else; and of their operation everything should be, in form and deed, completed, and the world fulfilled unto the last and smallest. (Silmarillion 41)

There is more to Man, in other words, than the laws of physics and biochemistry can describe; human beings' emergence into the story had not been predicted in the Music of the Ainur, so human beings will never therefore be quite predictable. And our unpredictability is tied to our irreducibility, being made in the image of Iluvatar.

Tolkien interestingly also ties our transcendence of the natural order to that feature of our nature which paradoxically seems most subject to Nature: our mortality. "It is one with this gift of freedom that the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive, and are not bound to it, and depart soon whither the Elves know not" (41). Though Dwarves also have a natural life span, it is we who are explicitly known by the epithet "mortal men." The rhyme of the Rings lists nine for "*Mortal* Men doomed to die" (Fellowship 7). Similar is the old list of creatures kept by the Ents:

> *Learn now the lore of Living Creatures!*
> *First name the four, the free peoples:*
> *Eldest of all, the elf-children;*
> *Dwarf the delver, dark are his houses;*
> *Ent the earthborn, old as mountains;*

Man the mortal, master of horses. (Two Towers 77)

Curiously, Tolkien couples our mortality here with one of the features that Chesterton saw as a primary image of our transcendence of the merely natural: the taming of horses (Everlasting Man xviii-xix). Why this connection? It turns out to be a crucial question, central to the mystery of Man indeed. Why are we the only creature able to create non-instinctual relationships with other creatures, and also the only one who feels its own mortality to be a mystery?

The elves are immortal within the life of the world. But what might seem a kind of freedom--it certainly seemed so to the Numenoreans, whose envy of it led to their downfall--might turn out in the long run to be rather a limitation.

> But the sons of Men die indeed, and leave the world; wherefore they are called the Guests, or the Strangers. Death is their fate, the gift of Iluvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy. But Melkor has cast his shadow upon it, and confounded it with darkness, and brought forth evil out of good, and fear out of hope. Yet of old the Valar declared to the Elves in Valinor that Men shall join in the Second Music of the Ainur; whereas Iluvatar has not revealed what he purposes for the Elves after the World's end, and Melkor has not discovered it. (Silmarillion 42)

Tolkien does not treat our mortality as a result of the Fall so much as a simple datum, a given about us. This is not a departure from the biblical picture. We do not see mankind in The Silmarillion in terms of an original pair or a state of innocence, for our origins are hidden in darkness and we emerge already a race, with an unexplained shadow on us from Melkor, when the Firstborn, the Elves, first meet us. If we assume that something like the biblical Fall has already happened, then mortality can be seen as a kind of gift, a tourniquet on our spiritual wound or a limit to our slide toward evil. But for Tolkien it is more than that. It is not just that we die; it is that we die *and leave the world*. We are not bound to its circles forever, and he ties this fact to our freedom, our unboundedness, *within* those circles now. We shape our ends beyond the music of the

Ainur which is fate to all things else; it is one with this gift of freedom that we live short lives and depart. So in Tolkien's world human mortality becomes a symbol for human irreducibility, for the special relationship that being children of Iluvatar with the Gift (or Doom) of Men gives us to the world. It is the paradoxical limitation that makes freedom possible, for good and for ill (see Evans 42 for a discussion of a similar idea in Chesterton). This is shown in many ways.

For one thing, the Gift of Men becomes the occasion for a kind of "second fall" of man. As a reward for their aid in the wars against Melkor, the *Edain*, the most noble of the races of men, are granted a kingdom on the island of Numenor West of the Sea, near to the Blessed Realm where the *eldar* (elves) live with the Valar, and removed from the strife of Middle Earth.

> Thence the Eldar came to the Edain and enriched them with knowledge and many gifts; but one command had been laid upon the Numemoreans, the "Ban of the Valar": they were forbidden to sail west out of sight of their own shores or to attempt to set foot on the Undying Lands. For though a long span of life had been granted to them, in the beginning thrice that of lesser Men, they must remain mortal, since the Valar were not permitted to take from them the Gift of Men (or the Doom of Men, as it was afterwards called). (Return 352)

Sauron corrupts their hearts, causing them to envy the immortality in this world enjoyed by the elves. Eventually Ar Pharazon the Golden breaks the Ban and assails the Blessed Realm with a great fleet in an attempt to wrest immortality from the Valar (those Ainur who have entered the world as its guardians) by force. They call upon the One, who destroys the fleet in a great upheaval that drowns Numenor and changes the shape of the world, so that no "straight road" to the West remains except for those Elves still wandering in Middle Earth who wish to depart. A faithful remnant of the Edain, faithful to the Valar, flee the wreck of Numenor in nine ships led by Elendil and, washing up on the shores of Middle Earth, found Gondor and Arnor, the Numenorean realms in exile.

An age later, their descendants are still the most noble and advanced of Men and the most implacable foes of Sauron. But many of them still wrestle with the temptation to become too enamored of this life and hence of trying too hard to prolong it. They build elaborate tombs while the watch on Mordor falters. Ironically, their life span wanes as a result until it is hardly more than that of other men. Mortality is part of human identity, though death is not the final word about us. By seeking the wrong kind of immortality in the wrong way, the Numenoreans compromise their very humanity, losing that freedom which allows Pippin to cast away his elven brooch in hopes it will help Aragorn to track the orcs who hold him captive. Aragorn approves: he is a slave, he says, who cannot part with a treasure at need (Two Towers 199). But those who cling too hard to this world and its beauties are destined to see them slip through their fingers anyway. They too will possess only for a time; but they will possess joylessly.

The Music of the Ainur is not fate to us because we come from something larger, the Third Theme of Iluvatar. But the identity of this larger thing is kept mostly in the background, vague and mysterious--even as it is in life. It remains something of a mystery even when we yield to the temptation to over-explain it. Nevertheless, it is there, and it gives the life of Man or Hobbit who becomes aware of it a sense of purpose. Life is a continuous interaction between the forces of Nature, our free and creative selves, influenced but not bound by those forces, and something even larger than either. When those forces of Nature seem inevitable or tragic, we call them Fate. When they seem rational we call them the Laws of Science. When they seem fortuitous we call them Luck or Chance. They are all really the same thing, and in none of these forms is that thing finally determinative for the children of Iluvatar, ultimately because it is subject to Him. That is why prophecies can come true and why our very smallness can seem a comfort:

> "Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!"

> "Thank goodness!" said Bilbo laughing, and handed him the tobacco jar. (Hobbit 303)

Life has a meaning because there is Someone big enough to mean it. There is a Purpose at work other than our own. Gandalf tells Frodo, "Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought" (Fellowship 81).

This larger Purpose creates the opportunity for our lives to find meaning in response to it. It is so large that it can easily be confused with Fate, but they are not the same, for Fate is impersonal and it makes no difference how we respond to it. The essence of human freedom within the powers of the world, by contrast, is illustrated in Frodo's struggle on Amon Hen. His will seems overpowered both by the call of the Eye of Sauron wanting to find him and a Voice commanding him to take off the Ring so that Sauron will fail to do so. "The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger" (Fellowship 472). We find the essence of our humanity, our identity as children of Iluvatar, in those moments when, neither Voice nor Eye, we show our freedom within the bounds of the world by choosing the right.

Many of us do not make that choice, of course. Gollums and Bill Fernys and Ted Sandymans abound in life. But the choice is always there for us. We are sometimes enabled to make it partly because our creation in God's image makes us irreducible to the forces of mere nature, and partly also because it makes us able to grasp something very like Lewis's *Tao* (see Abolition of Man). Eomer complains of the difficulty of the times:

> "It is hard to be sure of anything among so many marvels. The world is all grown strange. Elf and Dwarf in company walk in our daily fields; and folk speak with the Lady of the Wood and yet live; and the

> Sword comes back to war that was broken in the long ages ere the fathers of our fathers rode into the Mark! How shall a man judge what to do in such times?"
>
> "As he ever has judged," said Aragorn. "Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men." (Two Towers 48)

Good and evil are eternal principles valid across lines of culture and even species because ultimately they are rooted in the character of One who does not change. Tolkien does not give a running apology for the *Tao* as Lewis does. In a story set in pre-modern times, he is able simply to assume it. But it is clearly the same conception, equally essential in each of their worlds as part of the definition of who we are.

If life has meaning that flows from choices made with reference to the *Tao*, it must be lived with understanding. One way that understanding comes to us is through stories and legends. We are frequently reminded of the wisdom that is to be found in old tales often known only to old wives, in ways that remind us of Tolkien's defense of Fairy Story in his famous essay. Eomer asks,

> "Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?"
>
> "A man may do both," said Aragorn. "For not we but those who come after will make the legends of our time. The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day!" (Two Towers 43-44)

Our access to that meaning comes from our rootedness in those stories that tell us who we are. This is something that has to be kept alive deliberately. Ritual is one way of doing that, as we see in a passage that comes as close as Tolkien allows himself to get to portraying the role of Religion in Middle Earth.

> Before they ate, Faramir and all his men turned and faced west in a moment of silence. Faramir signed to Frodo and Sam that they should do likewise.
>
> "So we always do," he said, as they sat down: "we look towards Numenor that was, and beyond to Elvenhome that is, and to that which is beyond Elvenhome and will ever be. Have you no such custom at meat?"
>
> "No," said Frodo, feeling strangely rustic and untutored. "But if we are guests, we bow to our host, and after we have eaten we rise and thank him."
>
> "That we do also," said Faramir. (Two Towers 336)

Man's irreducibility to the natural world gives his life its meaning; it also means that there is always the potential for hope. The Music of the Ainur is not fate. There can always be surprises, even eucatastrophes, no matter how strong and seemingly irresistible the forces constraining us toward failure or evil may be. After trying to take the Ring, Boromir makes amends and dies at peace, having given his life to defend the hobbits. Even Gollum comes close to repenting on the very verge of his betrayal of Frodo and Sam to Shelob, almost caressing Frodo's knee before he is tragically interrupted by Sam. One of Aragorn's names is Estel, Hope. He is the broken sword reforged, the lost king returning. But perhaps the most moving embodiment of hope is Theoden, who shakes off the poisoned words of Wormtongue dragging him down to a dotard old age and rises to the occasion of the War in a way that brings a lump into the throat:

> *Out of doubt, out of dark, to the day's rising*
> *he rode singing in the sun, sword unsheathing,*
> *Hope he rekindled, and in hope ended;*
> *over death, over dread, over doom lifted*
> *out of loss, out of life, unto long glory.* (Return 284)

Hope will not die because Man is related to the Eternal. As Sam sings in his very darkest hour,

Though here at journey's end I lie
In darkness buried deep,
Beyond all towers strong and high,
Beyond all mountains steep,

Above all shadows rides the Sun
And Stars forever dwell:
I will not say the day is done,
Nor bid the stars farewell. (Return 204-5)

To be human is to live in hope. Brewer is right to call this "a true and deep perception" (158). But to be human is also to live with the fact that there is no final fruition of that hope in this world, for our destiny lies beyond it. In the tension between those two truths lies the temporal paradox of the works of Man, always beginning, always marring, always failing, only to begin again, never achieving for long the greatness that always seems promised, but never finally failing at the last or losing sight of that promise, either. We live our lives in the shadow of Shelley's Statue of Ozymandias:

. . . "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away. (Noyes 981)

A conversation between Legolas and Gimli thus summarizes our history nicely:

> "That is a fair lord and a great captain of men," said Legolas. "If Gondor has such men still in these days of fading, great must have been its glory in the days of its rising."

> "And doubtless the good stone-work is the older and was wrought in the first building," said Gimli. "It is ever so with the things that Men begin: there is a frost in Spring, or a blight in Summer, and they fail of their promise."
>
> "Yet seldom do they fail of their seed," said Legolas. "And that will lie in the dust and rot to spring up again in times and places unlooked-for. The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli."
>
> "And yet come to naught in the end but might-have-beens, I guess," said the Dwarf.
>
> "To that the Elves know not the answer," said Legolas. (Return 164)

The brevity of human life, and hence the bittersweet quality of all that Man accomplishes in this life, is brought into sharp relief by the contrast between mortal man and immortal elf. Legolas promises, "In days to come, if my Elven-lord allows, some of our folk shall remove hither; and when we come [Gondor] shall be blessed, for a while. For a while: a month, a life, a hundred years of Men" (Return 261). Our lives in this world are short because this life is not our ultimate end. Nevertheless, we are to love this world for the sake of our Father who made it, not despise it. That is the difficulty of the human condition. We are tempted to take one of the two easier paths: to try to love this life as if it were our final end (like the Numenoreans), that is, to fall into idolatry; or to reject this world and turn from it as cynics always doomed to be disappointed by it. But our true calling is much more difficult: to love it and then to let it go (cf. Flieger, "Question" 8).

Little lettings go, little deaths like Pippin's casting away of the brooch, are practice for the larger one that awaits us all. Frodo's loss of the ability to enjoy the Shire he worked so hard to save is perhaps the most poignant image of this truth. Because it is the preparation for something higher, the letting go is necessary and ultimately blessed when not rejected (Brewer 261). But it is seldom easy.

No one understands better the meaning of this doom of men than Aragorn and Arwen, his elvish bride. As the daughter of Elrond Halfelven she must make an

irrevocable choice of which kindred she will belong to. She chooses humanity and mortality for love of Aragorn. "For I am the daughter of Elrond. I shall not go with him now when he departs to the Havens; for mine is the choice of Luthien, and as she so have I chosen, both the sweet and the bitter" (Return 282). Because she has not lived with the doom of men her whole life, its meaning comes to her most potently when the time for Aragorn's departure arrives.

> And for all her wisdom and lineage she could not forbear to plead with him to stay yet for a while. She was not yet weary of her days, and thus she tasted the bitterness of the mortality that she had taken upon her. . . . "I say to you, King of the Numenoreans, not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last. For if this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive."
>
> "So it seems," he said. "But let us not be overthrown at the final test, who of old renounced the Shadow and the Ring. In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! We are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!" (Return 389).

Beyond the circles of the world is more than memory. And eucatastrophe is the final word about human history for those who can accept it (Dowie 282f.). The Lord of the Rings is "founded on the rock-bottom Christian belief that this world is not our home" (Thorpe 316). And so we learn to live in Middle Earth as true Men and Women, and to leave it as Gandalf teaches us: "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" (Return 346-7).

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