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"No Pagan ever loved his god": Tolkien, Thompson, and the Beautification of the Gods

Abstract

Alexei Kondratiev award for best student paper, Mythcon 49. Many scholars have commented on the influence of Catholic mystic Francis Thompson's poetry on J.R.R. Tolkien's early forays into creative writing. However, few critical studies have addressed possible connections between Tolkien and Thompson's prose work. This paper suggests that if anything is comparable between Tolkien and Thompson, it is their respective understandings of art, creation, and the significance of artists, regardless of the form of poetic (or prosaic) expression these sentiments induced. Thompson's essays on art, paganism, and the immortality of beauty come together to form backdrop against which we might re-read Tolkien's own theories of the fantastic, the creative process, and the role of the artist in what he calls *evangelium*.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"; Subcreation; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of sub-creation; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Cosmology; Thompson, Francis —Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Thompson, Francis. Essays; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of Francis Thompson; Paganism



“NO PAGAN EVER LOVED HIS GOD”: TOLKIEN, THOMPSON, AND THE BEAUTIFICATION OF THE GODS¹

MEGAN N. FONTENOT

INTRODUCTION

IN MARCH 1914, J.R.R. TOLKIEN PRESENTED AN ESSAY on Francis Thompson to the Exeter College Essay Club in which he claimed that the Catholic mystic was “among the very greatest of all poets” and that he possessed ““a saintliness sensitive to beauty [and] an imagination contemplative of sanctity”” (“Minutes”).² Tolkien had apparently first encountered Thompson in 1910; later, Humphrey Carpenter tells us, “he became something of an expert on him” (55). Tolkien greatly admired Thompson’s work, so much so that in his essay he was anxious to explain away some of the more unsavory aspects of the man’s unusual biography (which featured among other things opium addiction, homelessness, attempted suicide, nearly crippling social anxiety, and mysticism). But 1914 was a monumental year for the young writer—and the whole world—and Tolkien was juggling a variety of passions and duties. Despite his almost painfully overloaded schedule (see Garth’s “Tolkien at Exeter College”), by November of that year he had found time to write a thoughtful, if largely appreciatory, essay on another of his private obsessions: the *Kalevala*. In February 1915 this was also presented to the Essay Club. He had clearly not yet abandoned his erstwhile infatuation with Francis Thompson, for in defending his attraction to the *Kalevala*—despite, he acknowledges, its decidedly unliterary form—he appeals to Thompson’s 1888 essay “Paganism Old and New.” Tolkien’s love for the poet had moved beyond his poetry.

Existing scholarship addressing the Tolkien-Thompson relationship, however, has tended to focus on Thompson’s poetic imagery and style rather than the ideas expressed in his prose. Christopher Tolkien, Humphrey Carpenter, and John Garth, among others, have discussed the influence of Thompson’s poetry on Tolkien’s early forays into creative writing. Often-cited examples of this include the resemblance between Tolkien’s undergraduate

¹ Winner of the Alexei Kondratiev Award for best student paper presented at Mythcon 49, Atlanta GA, 2018.

² Unfortunately, no full copy of the essay is known to exist, though what appears to be a fragment has been uncovered and archived by the Bodleian Library (“Tolkien’s Francis Thompson Essay”).

poem "Wood-sunshine" and certain scenes in Thompson's *Sister Songs*; Tolkien's (brief) appropriation of the name "Luthany," which he applied to England; and the roots of the gold Tree Laurelin in a few lines, again, from *Sister Songs* (an inspiration which Tolkien himself noted). Allan Turner, in "Early Influences on Tolkien's Poetry," takes a slightly different approach, however. While he does acknowledge the shared imagery, he ultimately dismisses claims of any *significant* influence on the part of Thompson's work. In contrast, he chooses to highlight the works of William Morris and the classical and medieval poets. Of Tolkien and Thompson he writes:

It is perhaps unfair to compare the young undergraduate making his first experiments in versification with the mature man expressing his whole experience of poetry and life. Nevertheless it is clear that in spite of his proclaimed admiration, Tolkien's artistic personality was very different from Thompson's and would naturally express itself in a different way.
(208)

If anything is "unfair," it is Turner's rather obvious haste³ to discredit attempted comparisons between Tolkien and Thompson by invoking "creative personality." Indeed, I would argue that if anything is comparable between Tolkien and Thompson it is precisely that: their attitudes towards art and creation and their respective understandings of their significance as artists—regardless of the poetic (or prosaic) expression these sentiments induced. The disjuncture observed by Turner appears only when Thompson's *poetry* is privileged as the sole or even primary influence on Tolkien's work and thought. I would suggest that this is exactly where existing scholarship fails to adequately address Tolkien's preoccupation with Francis Thompson. Ultimately, Thompson's prose work on art, paganism, and the immortality of beauty come together to form a rich and vibrant backdrop against which we might re-read Tolkien's own theories of the fantastic, the creative process, and the role of the artist in what Tolkien calls *evangelium*. Through this interplay and conversation, yet another window is opened onto the landscape of Tolkien's elaborate fantasy and vision for Middle-earth.

THE ESSAYS OF FRANCIS THOMPSON: "PAGANISM OLD AND NEW"

"Paganism Old and New," a short, idiosyncratic piece, is Francis Thompson's first known essay and also his first attempt at publication. He mailed the essay (along with a few poems) from the Charing Cross Post Office in 1887; from the letter he included, we know that the manuscript was "soiled," and for this he apologizes, saying that "it is due, not to slovenliness, but to the strange places

³ His section on Thompson is brief, noticeably the shortest in the chapter.

and circumstances under which it has been written" (*Letters of Francis Thompson* 23). He goes on to add, in his characteristic attitude of morose self-deprecation (not entirely unlike Tolkien's own), "I do not desire the return of the manuscript, regarding your judgment of its worthlessness as quite final. I can hardly expect that where my prose fails my verse will succeed." He closes the letter with the request that the editor of the periodical *Merry England* (Wilfrid Meynall, who became a close friend and generous benefactor) "address [his] rejection" to the same post office from which the letter was sent.

Despite Thompson's denigrating attitude towards his own work, the essay was published in 1888, and again in the 1910 collection of his essays, *The Renegade Poet*. In it, Thompson argues that "old" paganism (i.e., pre-Christianization paganism) was neither beautiful nor lovely, because its gods were neither. Indeed, he writes that

The poetry of Paganism is chiefly a modern creation; in the hands of the Pagans themselves it was not even developed to its full capabilities. The gods of Homer are braggarts and gluttons; and the gods of Virgil are cold and unreal. [...] To the heathen mind its divinities were graceful, handsome, noble gods; powerful, and therefore to be propitiated with worship; cold in their sublime selfishness, and therefore unlovable. No Pagan ever loved his god. Love he might, perhaps, some humble rustic or domestic deity,—but no Olympian. (40)

Whatever the Christian exceptionalism startlingly obvious in Thompson's reading of paganism, his point is not largely mistaken and made with undeniable lyrical skill, though perhaps exaggerated in some instances by his own religious commitment. The pagan gods were feared and placated, at worst, understood as capricious or playing favorites—and placated still—at best. Odysseus does not love Athena any more than she can be said to truly love him. "We, who love the gods," Thompson writes, "do not worship them. The ancients, who worshipped the gods, did not love them. Whence is this?" (40-41).

Thompson argues that the beautification of paganism and pagan mythologies must be attributed to Christianization, citing a small multitude of Romantic poets to support his claims, though he appears particularly partial to the work of Keats. With the advent of Christianization, Thompson says, paganism, as it confronted and was subsumed within Christianity, both lost its status as true religion or belief system, and gained an aura of beauty and mystification that had heretofore been impossible. The gods are at once beautified and the threat they posed to Christianity mitigated. Thus, the old paganism, *pagan* paganism (as Thompson understands it), is forever lost. To bring it back—or even to attempt to bring it back—is to "smite beauty on the cheek" (49). But even that attempt would utterly fail, for "you *cannot* bring back

the best age of Paganism, the age when Paganism was a faith" (50, emphasis original).

THE ESSAYS OF FRANCIS THOMPSON: "NATURE'S IMMORTALITY"

The other essay I wish to highlight is "Nature's Immortality," a strange little essay in which Thompson laments Nature's heartlessness, muses on the imagined nature of paradise and its relationship to earth, and speculates on the possibility of an Art made by an immortal or infinite being. He proposes that Art is a trinity: and not "the so-called Art which aims at mere photographic representation of external objects, for that can only reproduce; but the creative Art which alone is one essence with Poetry and Music" (83-84). He goes on to unfold a meandering yet complex exploration of his theory of the creative process, one concerned with explicitly platonic notions of ideal and reality. He argues that there are three stages in the artist's creative process:

There is first the ideal, secondly the mental image of the ideal (i.e., the picture of it in form and colour formed on the mental eye), thirdly the external or objective reproduction of the mental image in material form and colour, in pigments [Thompson is using painting as an example]. Now of these three stages, which is the most perfect creation, and therefore the most beautiful? They lessen in perfection as they become material; the ideal is most perfect; the mental image less perfect; the objective image, the painting, least perfect. (84)

What Thompson wants to suggest is that the first stage, the ideal, is in fact a true thing with a *real* existence—it is not simply an abstract concept; it is put into the mind of the artist by God. Because humans are both mortal and finite, however, the material creation produced is both less than perfect and less than the ideal. Indeed, the ideal (or conception, as he later terms it) cannot finally be captured in its perfection by limited, mortal beings. The "essence is the same in all three," however, and "if the spirit of man were untrammelled [sic] by his body, conception could be communicated by the interpretation of soul and soul" (86).

Towards the end of the essay, Thompson hypothesizes what might happen were an omnipotent or immortal being to engage in the making of art. His conclusion is that in the same moment that "an ideal wakes in the Omnipotent Musician [here the example is music], Creation vibrates with the harmony, from the palpitating throat of the bird to the surges of His thunder as they burst into fire along the roaring strand of heaven" (87). Thus, for the omnipotent artist, the moment of conception coalesces with the moment of creation: the instant the ideal arises in the mind of the Creator, it is *realized* in its embodied existence. Because God is omnipotent and immortal, Thompson

argues, God creates in this way, and therefore nature is the instantaneous incarnation of the perfect conception.

The Supreme Spirit, creating, reveals His conceptions to man in the material forms of Nature. There is no necessity here for any intermediary process, because nobody obstructs the free passage of conception into expression. An ideal wakes in the Omnipotent Painter; and straightway over the eternal dikes rush forth the flooding tides of night, the blue of Heaven ripples into stars. (86)

However, even this (presumably, for Thompson, because of the Christian understanding of humanity's fall) is less than the perfect conception, the "Divine Ideal." And yet nature is, as the essay's title suggests, immortal. Here Thompson's mysticism is most fully expressed. "Within the Spirit Who is Heaven is Earth," he writes:

for within Him rests the great conception of Creation. There are the woods, the streams, the meads, the hills, the seas that we have known in life, but breathing indeed 'an ampler ether, a diviner air,' themselves beautiful with the beauty which, for even the highest created spirit utterly to apprehend were 'swooning destruction.' (87)

Nature is therefore not perfect, but nevertheless it showcases the perfect ideal of beauty, and because this is its animating force, this its spark of life, it is immortal.

Interestingly, as he begins the thought experiment above, Thompson includes a brief note that reveals more than a touch of his characteristic self-deprecation. "I am not trying to *explain* anything," he clarifies. "I am merely endeavoring analogically to *suggest* an idea. And the whole thing is put forward as a fantasy, which the writer likes to think may be a dim shadowing of truth" (86, emphasis original). To Thompson's mind, doubtless, this "suggestion" explained both the beauty and the imperfections of Nature; and it placed him, a struggling artist plagued by depression and addictions and despair, in a special and mystical relationship with the "Omnipotent Creator." Even his description of his thought experiment as "a fantasy, which the writer likes to think may be a dim shadowing of truth" recalls his earlier discussion of conceptions and their material counterparts. What Thompson hopes, the reader is to understand, is that his theory is the imperfect embodiment or expression of divine inspiration: a glimpse of truth, albeit through the crooked eyes of mortality and finitude.

TOLKIEN AND THOMPSON’S ESSAYS

It must be noted that Tolkien explicitly refers to Thompson’s prose work only once, at least as far as we are aware, in what remains of all his work. As mentioned previously, Tolkien quotes and summarizes “Paganism” in his 1914/1915 talk on the *Kalevala*. In several places in *The History of Middle-earth* volumes, Christopher Tolkien notes that his father likely acquired the collected works of Francis Thompson between 1913 and 1914, which implies that Tolkien may have owned a volume of Thompson’s prose work as well as his poetry. In all probability, Tolkien would have read “Paganism” in the essay collection *The Renegade Poet* (1910), for until then the essay in question had not been published again since its first appearance in *Merry England* in 1888, a few years before Tolkien’s birth in South Africa. Given that the collection was published the same year that Tolkien first encountered Thompson, it is likely that he came into contact with “Paganism,” and by extension Thompson’s other essays, through this collection.

What follows here is an exploration of four of Tolkien’s significant works that address the creative process and the purpose of art, and the ways in which Thompson’s influence appears to be at work. “On Fairy-stories” is foregrounded as Tolkien’s only explicit prose expression of his creative theories, and this is supplemented with observations from his poetic apology for fantasy and myth, “Mythopoiea.” This paper also incorporates observations from the applied theorization in two of Tolkien’s fiction works: the “Ainulindalë” of *The Silmarillion* and the short story “Leaf by Niggle.” Finally, I will close with some general observations about the significance of Thompson’s theoretical influence on Tolkien and how we might revisit or reimagine some of Tolkien’s writerly methods, decisions, and habits in light of this knowledge.

MYTHOPOEIA: OF ELVES AND THE DESIRE FOR REALIZED ART

According to Tolkien, what he calls “elvish craft” is more traditionally referred to as enchantment (he writes it with a capital ‘e’), and it is, first and foremost, art perfected. It is, as he says in “On Fairy-stories,”

Fantasy with a realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism. As a result, [its] usual effect (upon a man) is to go beyond Secondary Belief. If you are present at a Faërian drama you yourself are, or think you are, bodily inside its Secondary world. (142)

Elvish Art, then, is either real or so closely approaches reality that the uninitiated may mistake it for reality. For Tolkien, this is clear and irrefutable evidence that the artist desires “a living, realised sub-creative art,” whether that desire is “open or concealed, pure or alloyed” (143). Stories we tell about the Elves, he

argues, are actually revelations of deeply human desires: Elves are said to be immortal, for example, reflecting a desire to escape death. Elves also often possess the ability to talk to animals (and sometimes even trees and rocks). This, for Tolkien, is a result of humanity's desire to communicate with other living things, but also evidence that we once could do so, though for some reason (he implies that it is because of the fall) that relationship has been sundered (152). Of course, it would not have been possible for Tolkien to ignore the implications this framework has for Elvish Art. In his 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien writes that "Elves are there (in [his] tales) to demonstrate the difference" between "the devices and operations of the Enemy" (magic), and "those of the Elves," and that "their 'magic' is Art, delivered from many of its human limitations: more effective, more quick, more complete (product, and vision in unflawed correspondence). And its object is Art not Power" (Tolkien, *Letters* 146).

This is where Thompson's influence makes its first clear appearance. Tolkien's Elves are immortal, first of all, which to him means they are removed from the same limitations that face human artists. Thompson's view of art clarifies *why* this is the case; his thought experiment in "Nature's Immortality" specifically uses an omnipotent artist (i.e., God) as its subject; but substitute "immortal" for "omnipotent," and the result is Tolkien's Elvish Art. The elvish craft is still a measure removed from reality, however, though it is, to an unsuspecting human, indistinguishable from it. At the last, their Art is "nothing more" (though this in itself is quite a lot) than enchantment. It still achieves, however, the "unflawed correspondence" between "product" and vision," and this is the key to its significance (*Letters* 146). The language used here must not be overlooked, for it is clearly (though perhaps unconsciously) a reinvigoration or revision of Thompson's platonic theories of conception and material product or image. Elvish Art, for Tolkien, is art released from the trammels of human mortality, and thus it exists on a higher plane, one that is ultimately closer to the Divine Ideal than is the art produced by humanity. Elvish Art is "effortless" and quick as thought. And yet, because it is conceived within the fallen world, it is less than perfect—it does attain the level of that "unflawed correspondence," but it simultaneously remains at the level of enchantment rather than reality. As Thompson explains it, even "Divine embodiment [is] transcendently inferior to the Divine Ideal" in this world (87).

Thompson's language is curious here. While he is obviously referring to the state of the world after the human fall (a fall which, incidentally, is understood to have affected the natural world nearly as much as it did the human), in context the statement suggests that even God's creations are lesser or inferior to God's conceptions. We must also ask why Thompson chose the word *embodiment* here, for it comes precariously close to supporting a doctrine

condemned as heretical since the days of the Apostolic Fathers. Within the framework of orthodox Christianity, God the Father is omnipotent, invisible, immortal spirit. Christ's presence on earth is read as the incarnation of God—the *embodiment* of God in human form. Traditionally, this embodiment is seen as perfect and complete; Thompson's claim in this passage, however, is that the incarnate form is necessarily and inescapably inferior.⁴ Interestingly, this is one instance in which Tolkien (though by no means a consistently orthodox Catholic himself, for all his piety) firmly departs from Thompson's theories. For Tolkien, it seems, the omnipotent Creator's work, or Art, is always perfect: any stains, imperfections, or inferiority are thus products of the Fall, are introduced by the human conduit, or else are simply perceived as existing because human perception is skewed by our condition as fallen persons within a fallen world. This may explain why Tolkien only applies Thompson's thought experiment to beings lesser than the omnipotent Creator. Both the Elves and the Ainur are immortal, powerful creatures with semi-divine capabilities, but neither produce creations that rise to the level of pure and perfect embodiment in Reality. Some do try, Melkor and Aulë among them; but the life-giving Imperishable Flame resides with the Creator and is only given out according to his discretion.

Whereas the Ainur possess an immortality by virtue of their solely spiritual nature, unrelated to their position in the created order or the natural world, the Elves possess an immortality of a different kind altogether. Of course, Tolkien makes it very clear throughout his writings that mortality and immortality are gifts of Ilúvatar given to humans and Elves, respectively—"bad theology," he calls it, not without a hint of sarcasm (*Letters* 189). But it is also evident that the Elves are immortal because they are inherently *natural* beings. We call them supernatural, Tolkien observes, but the idea only holds true if we mean the "super" in the superlative sense: actually "they are natural, far more natural than humans," he explains. "Such is their doom" ("On Fairy-stories" [OF5] 110). When the idea is juxtaposed with Thompson's primary thesis in "Nature's Immortality," it becomes clear exactly why the Elves are natural and yet immortal, and what these ideas finally have to do with each other—and we also understand the significance, for Tolkien, of elvish beauty and the tragedy of its loss.⁵ As far as Thompson is concerned, Nature is immortal because it is

⁴ Church fathers rigorously attacked all manifestations of the doctrine of Christ's inferiority (Arianism not least among them). Athanasius, in particular, writes a polemical treatise on the necessity of Christ's perfection as *image* and *revelation* of God—as incarnate deity—which he titles "The Incarnation of the Word of God." In it he viciously attacks Arianism and argues for Christ's primacy, perfection, and equality with God.

⁵ For the Elves to "fade"—a word traditionally associated with a loss of beauty or vitality when applied to a person—is for them to lose their claim on reality: they become a "fairy-tale," a legend, a shadow in old stories of what they once were.

beautiful, because it is the vessel, the most pure and perfect vessel, for the Divine Ideal. The Elves, as essentially natural beings, are thus themselves vessels of some sort of Divine Ideal, though as “free” creatures, they too have fallen from the conception. They are, like nature, immortal in that they are the unmediated expression of the perfect conception. Tolkien himself writes that the Elves love the physical world “as a reality derived from God in the same degree as themselves.” It is fitting, then, that he also says that “the Elves represent, as it were, the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Humane nature raised to a higher level than is actually seen in Men. [...] They also possess a ‘subcreational’ or artistic faculty of great excellence” (*Letters* 236).⁶

Of course, the artistic faculties of the Elves are themselves only shadows of the capabilities of the Ainur, of whom we read in the “Ainulindalë.” The primary (meaning here both first and most significant) function of the Ainur is creation. They facilitate the creation of the universe through their Art: through music. The themes come directly from Ilúvatar, but each Ainu fashions and embellishes it according to its own inclination, and this is how the world is made, though they do not realize at first that they are participating in a larger goal:

[T]hey saw with amazement the coming of the Children of Ilúvatar, 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. (18)

Thus, the Ainur are as it were one stage above even the Elves; and yet their Art only becomes Reality by Ilúvatar’s gift of the Imperishable Flame, which he sets at the heart of the world created by the song of the Ainur (20). Tolkien is completely in accord with Thompson’s scale of relative perfection, but he still refrains from applying the theory to Ilúvatar. In fact, the Art of the Ainur becomes *more* beautiful, perfect, and complete as it is “brought to life” by the Imperishable Flame. It so far *exceeds* the expectations and conceptions of the Ainur that they are astonished by what their music accomplishes (19).

This idea is in part related to Tolkien’s theory of language that he develops throughout his stories. In the early days of Arda, language is a living thing; to speak or name something is to call it into being, into Reality (Barootes

⁶ This, of course, is related to the idea (discussed above) that Elves in human stories function as revelations or explorations of deep-seated human desires. Thus, for Tolkien, they also reflect the human artist as he or she wishes to be, and perhaps as he or she *would* be, but for the fall (and yet Tolkien’s Elves have themselves fallen and are thus far from ideal or perfect).

120). Ilúvatar—apart from his status as the Creator—can therefore speak a command of being, *Eä*, and Arda springs to life before the eyes of the Ainur. Oaths taken (by Fëanor, for example) come to life and dog the steps of the oath-taker. This quality of language diminishes over time (Barootes 117), but certain characters (Gandalf, for instance) can still conjure up its old power. What is unique about the circumstances here at the beginning of time, however, is that the focus is on art, music, rather than language. And, significantly, the narrator of the "Ainulindalë" prophesies that at the end of time "the themes of Ilúvatar shall be played aright, and take Being in the moment of their utterance, [...] and Ilúvatar shall give to their thoughts the secret fire, being well pleased" (15-16). The concepts of eternity and Art-as-Reality are here explicitly associated: Ilúvatar still plays the role of life-giver and keeper of the secret fire, but he freely shares it among the artists so that the temporal distance between music (art) and Reality no longer has any effect over the translation process.

This moves us quite naturally into another significant feature of Tolkien's theoretical essay: that is, the idea that the human artist receives the conception or idea directly from God, the Creator, as inspiration, rather than coming up with it on his or her own, out of thin air. For Tolkien, this is crucial.⁷ First of all, it means that the human artist follows in the footsteps of God as artist and creator—and that this imitation is not only sanctioned but actually encouraged by God. This is, of course, the primary focus and message of Tolkien's poem "Mythopoeia." Fantasy and artistry are both rights and gifts that we do well to exercise as much as possible—and they are not, significantly, taken away even when consistently "misused" (87). Tolkien also argues that story and writing are the best ways to exercise the artistic faculty, simply because God chooses to redeem humanity through a story that is not only artistically perfect, but is, more importantly, *real*. The Christian story is "gospel," *godspel*: good news, yes, but also *good story* (Shippey 203). Tolkien, as a devout Christian and storyteller, finds no greater inspiration. "Art has been verified," he proclaims. "God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused" (*OFS* 156). Ultimately, it is this pattern, this connection between Creator and creation, that undergirds Tolkien's most significant and dramatic claim in "On Fairy-stories," and one through which he once again reveals an apparent debt to Thompson's theories in "Nature's Immortality."

⁷ This idea is stated explicitly in the "Ainulindalë." As Ilúvatar tells the Ainur, they "shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost sources in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite" (17).

“ALL TALES MAY COME TRUE”: ARTISTIC PARTICIPATION IN CREATION

This complex and rather unorthodox claim is made in the essay’s epilogue. Tolkien approaches his hypothesis hesitantly, cautiously, aware that he is something of a wanderer in dangerous and uncharted territory. Indeed, his attitude towards his subject echoes almost exactly the spirit of Thompson’s qualifying note as he enters into the world of his thought experiment (quoted in full above). For Tolkien, however, the implications of his theory are both profound and eternal:

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of the secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it. [...] It is a serious and dangerous matter. It is presumptuous of me to touch upon such a theme; but if by grace what I say has in any respect any validity, it is, of course, only one facet of a truth incalculably rich: finite only because the capacity of Man for whom this was done is finite. (OFS 155)

Tolkien’s appeal to “Reality” here seems directly informed by Thompson’s ideas of conception: indeed, the hope that he might be probing into “one facet of a truth incalculably rich” invokes Thompson’s “fantasy, which the writer likes to think may be a dim shadowing of truth” (86). More importantly, both are gesturing to the notion, discussed above, that artistic production is only a shadow or thought of the actual existing ideal. And ultimately, it is *what* they are suggesting, and not only the way in which they suggest it, that is particularly significant.

Thompson’s envisioning of the theory is less developed than Tolkien’s, though neither of them say as much as they might have. In defending nature’s immortality, Thompson asks, “Do our eyes indeed close for ever on the beauty of earth while they open on the beauty of Heaven?” (83). The answer is a passionate denial, though once again Thompson makes recourse to the term “fantasy” to make his point. “I think not so,” he says; “I would fain beguile even death itself with a sweet fantasy, if it be no more than fantasy: I believe that in Heaven is earth. [...] For beauty—such is my faith—is beauty for eternity” (83). This statement is the lynchpin of Thompson’s argument. He believes, as he states earlier, that “Absolute Nature lives not in our life, nor yet is lifeless, but lives in the life of God: and in so far, and so far merely, as man himself lives in that life, does he come into sympathy with Nature, and Nature with him” (82).⁸

⁸ This means, according to Thompson, that not one of the Romantics—not even Shelley or “Wordsworth himself”—came as close to Nature as did “the Seraph of Assisi,” St. Francis,

Because communing with God brings a person into a deeper relationship with nature, Thompson therefore cannot accept that entrance into heaven (i.e., restoration of perfect communion with God) should also mean exile from earth. Instead, and as a result of his philosophy of the Ideal, heaven becomes a mystical state: an experience of "the Spirit Who is Heaven," and who encompasses earth, "for within Him rests the great conception of Creation" (87). To enter into a relationship with God via art is to "identify [self] with the Divine Ideals" (88). Ultimately, this means that the artist's relationship towards nature and "Reality" is transformed in that to enter Heaven is to see nature redeemed, as it was perhaps meant to be seen. Thompson calls this "Absolute Nature." It is difficult to miss the mystical overtones of these passages, and it may be that Thompson had some kind of practice of ecstasy or other out-of-body experience in mind while writing this passage. Indeed, he does speak of going "yet higher, yet further" into the truth of Nature's immortality (82). Is heaven and the new vision of Absolute Nature a purely mystical experience? The implication is certainly present, though Thompson does not follow the idea through to any sort of conclusion. Regardless, it is clear that he understands eternity and immortality as purely bound up with the ecstatic union of (human) soul and (divine) Spirit, and that this union leads finally to a fuller and more perfect understanding of nature.

Tolkien, on the other hand, presents a theory that, while notably less mystical, extrapolates these same ideas and takes Thompson's less-developed suggestion to a logical extreme. For Tolkien, to participate in art places one in a special and intimate relationship with God, certainly, and one that resembles a childlike desire to imitate a parent, but it also does much more than that. He closes "On Fairy-stories" with the following words, which, due to their significance, I give here in full:

Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium [the telling of the gospel] has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the "happy ending". The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know. (156-57)

who is the patron saint of animals and is remembered for such oddities (or perhaps sincerities) as preaching sermons to woodland creatures (82).

Artistry in the here and now is no less than participating in creation: beauty and joy in fantasy are “sudden glimpse[s] of the underlying reality or truth” (155). It is this quality of storytelling that is redeemable and will one day, for Tolkien, be transformed from art to Reality—which in turn is precisely that desire undergirding all human stories of the Elves. The redemption of human artistry is about raising it to another level. Thus, the end of time becomes the moment in which, as we read in the “Ainulindalë,” human art is hallowed and verified, and the conceptions of artists and creators “take Being in the moment of their utterance” (15-16).

Perhaps ironically, Tolkien’s hypothesis is itself “like and unlike” Thompson’s conception of heaven and eternity. Where Thompson’s language tends toward the purely mystical, Tolkien’s is grounded through the invocation of “truth” and “reality.” And yet, the two authors have certainly put forth similar ideas. According to Thompson, the movement between earth and heaven is facilitated by the artist’s union with divinity; this experience unveils Absolute Nature, in that the artist is now able to see and experience—and commune with—the Divine Ideals. For Tolkien, the experience is perhaps less mystical in that it occurs as an actual, physical event, but he still retains the connection between coming into eternity and the transformation of perception and reality—and of art.

The similarities between the two become more obvious and profound when Tolkien’s allegorical short story, “Leaf by Niggle,” is introduced to the conversation. The story tells of an artist who spends his entire life working on a single painting. His *conception* is a tree, and such he intends to paint: but all that finally remains of his painting is a single leaf. Upon his death, his “long journey,” he is conveyed to another world, where he spends time in work and convalescence (a sort of purgatorial space); from there he goes on to a new, unnamed place, presumably some version of a paradise. Here he begins exploring and comes across the Tree—his Tree—but in this new place it is real and complete and alive:

“It’s a gift!” he said. He was referring to his art, and also the result, but he was using the word quite literally.

He went on looking at the Tree. All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time. Nothing was written on them, they were just exquisite leaves, yet they were dated clear as a calendar. (110)

What has happened here is precisely what Tolkien describes in “On Fairy-stories”—the translation of a work of art into Reality. In the passage above, Tolkien specifically links the concept (and even the potential concept) in the

mind of Niggle with the real Tree in the afterlife. He even includes the idea that the finished product is less perfect in relation to the ideal than the image fixed in the painter's mind: the leaves are "as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them." In this unforeseen paradise, Reality achieves "unflawed correspondence" with the ideal (*Letters* 146).

Whether the real Tree informed Niggle's imagination or his art produced the real Tree is left open for debate. What matters, to Tolkien, is that the artist who "wishes in some measure to be a real maker" is satisfied at last by the assurance that it is so, that his art was indeed "derived from Reality, or [...] flowing into it" (*OFS* 155). Niggle's position changes from creator of art to curator of Nature in a way that mirrors the transition of his art. Here, again, is Thompson's theory of conceptions/ideals and their embodiments. The entrance or translation into "heaven" is simultaneously a re-entrance or re-translation into earth: in the process, Niggle comes to experience the world in a new and drastically different way, and he discovers, to his joy, that his art is true—Real. Interpretation of the experience, "his art, and also the result," as a gift, is familiar, for it resembles Tolkien's own attitude in the "On Fairy-stories" epilogue, in which he describes "the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be 'primarily' true, its narrative to be history, without losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed" (156). It is interesting (but not, I think, surprising) that Tolkien chooses in this moment to describe the fairy-tale as "*specially* beautiful." Indeed, it is a strain that has run through much of our discussion thus far. Beauty "is beauty for eternity," Thompson writes; that is his fantasy (83). It is also central to the thesis of "Nature's Immortality." Tolkien takes it, and he builds on it, downplaying, perhaps, the mystical aspect of Thompson's essay, but ultimately producing a more complex, developed theory of art and its relationship to redemption.

Tolkien's addition to the conversation is the unambiguous translation of art into Reality in the space of eternity—something Thompson never explicitly suggests, though he does, through his thought experiment, write about the Art of an Omnipotent Creator. Tolkien reverses the situation, and suggests that art, because it contains some kind of core or heart of truth and beauty (however unlike Reality it may at first appear), is inherently immortal and will eventually be transformed and perfected. This vision of the role of art in (re)creation is what runs throughout Tolkien's work and serves as a foundation for the stories he tells, yes, but also for those he chooses to adapt, borrow from, and study. This is, I would argue, the other significant correlation between the works of Tolkien and Thompson, and it brings us to the final movement of this paper, and at the same moment back to "Paganism," where we began.

TOLKIEN, THOMPSON, AND THE BEAUTIFICATION OF THE GODS

In referencing “Paganism” in his *Kalevala* essay, Tolkien remarks, “We are grown older and must face the fact. The poetry of these old things remains being immortal, but no longer for us is the intoxication of both poetry and belief” (114). He echoes Thompson’s sentiments throughout the following paragraph, which may be read even as a loose paraphrase of the argument of “Paganism,” but he introduces another layer before he leaves it to discuss the language of the *Kalevala*. The addition is both a hope and a caution. If, he writes, we read the *Kalevala* and

we half hear the voice of Ahti in the noises of the sea, half shudder at the thought of Pohja, gloomy land of witchcraft, or Tuonela yet darker region of the dead, it is nonetheless with quite another part of our minds that we do this than that which we reserve for our real beliefs and for our religion, just as it undoubtedly was for the Icelandic ecclesiastics of old. Yet there may be some whom these old songs will stir to new poetry, just as the old songs of other pagan days have stirred other Christians [...].

As the world grows older there is loss and gain—let us not with modern insolence and blindness imagine it all gain (lest this happen such songs as the “Land of Heroes” are left for our disillusionment); but neither must we with neo-pagan obscurity of thought imagine it all loss. (114-115)

The second of these two paragraphs works to moderate the enthusiasm with which he recalls, along with Thompson, the Christian poets who have transcribed or re-inscribed paganism. And yet, it does not push too far in the opposite direction; it is a rejection both of the exclusive glorification of the past, and of the privileging of the present—something that is largely, though not wholly, absent in Thompson’s appraisal of the Christianization of paganism. Given Tolkien’s preoccupation with ancient myths and legends (not to mention his known distaste for modernity), his comment is somewhat surprising, but certainly not entirely inexplicable, either. As many studies of Tolkien’s appropriation of paganism point out, he was quite adept at holding multiple worldviews in the balance without necessarily privileging or slighting one against the other.

Far more interesting, however, is the prophetically self-referential statement found in the previous paragraph: “there may be some whom these old songs will stir to new poetry, just as the old songs of other pagan days have stirred other Christians” (114). It is not difficult to imagine that, though only an undergraduate and not yet fully immersed in his own world-building, Tolkien had his own desires in mind as he wrote this. And indeed, this is precisely how we see him work going forward: consciously, artistically revitalizing and reimagining paganism and its associated bodies of myths and folklore. I would

suggest that this idea, so hopefully expressed in 1914, provides an early example of a philosophy that informs Tolkien’s methods of storytelling and creation going forward—the philosophy that finally reveals itself in “On Fairy-stories.”

Scores of books and papers have been written on Tolkien’s fascination with paganism, his incorporation, in his fiction, of both Christian and pagan elements, and how the two traditionally contradictory worldviews interact and comment on each other. This is certainly not the place to rehash those manifold arguments—and ultimately I wish to suggest something different—but here it may be useful to recall Tom Shippey’s assessment of Tolkien’s treatment of Alcuin’s scandalized inquiry: “What has Ingeld to do with Christ?” Shippey discusses the story of Ingeld (“as an example of the most extreme gap between good ‘heroic’ behavior and good Christian behavior”) and Ingeld’s father, Fróda the peacemaker, whom Shippey reads as an inspiration for Frodo and as the mediating figure between pagan and Christian ideals (206). According to Shippey, while Ingeld ultimately has nothing to do with Christ (in answer to Alcuin’s query),

Fróda had something to do with both. He was a hinge, a mediation, like *The Lord of the Rings* in its suspension between pagan myth and Christian truth. He stood, in Tolkien’s view, for all that was good in the Dark Ages. [...]. Maybe his story had been, in God’s plan, an *evangelica praepraatio*: a clearing of the ground for the good seed of the Gospel. It is possible that Tolkien thought of *The Lord of the Rings* in the same way. (208-209)

In Shippey’s reading, Tolkien’s fiction becomes the ground of mediation for apparently irreconcilable differences. *The Lord of the Rings* is an *evangelica praepraatio* in that it invests or imbues a temporally pagan moment with deeply Christian significance, implying to its readers that pre-Christian redemption—at least in Tolkien’s eyes—is not only theologically comprehensible, but philosophically inescapable.

Tolkien sees in paganism many values to be admired, nobility and courage not least among them, and because of this he finds himself “[stirred] to new poetry” (“Kalevala” 114). But he is also aware of “the most extreme gap between good ‘heroic’ behavior and good Christian behavior” (Shippey 206), and this clearly troubles him: after all, Alcuin’s question, for all its scorn, is a fair and necessary one. Tolkien’s answer appears to be his fiction. Where Shippey sees Tolkien’s work as a mediation or hinge, however, I would suggest we might instead find that theory of redemption in action. Rather than simply reading *The Lord of the Rings* as “clearing the ground for the good seed of the Gospel,” we might read all of Tolkien’s fiction as itself a type of *evangelium*—as a *godspel*—that seeks the reparation of past wrongs and the validation of paganism and its attendant truths. In his commentary on *Beowulf* Tolkien writes, “I think that [the

Beowulf poet] attempted to equate the noble figures of his own northern antiquity with the noble figures, sages, judges, and kings of Israel—before Christ. They too were ‘damned’ owing to the Fall [...]. The redemption of Christ might work backwards,” he suggests, and then adds, “in the Harrowing of Hell why should not (say) Hrothgar be saved?” (160). One might easily ask the same regarding any of Tolkien’s own noble yet, theologically speaking, “damned” figures. It might thus be said that he understands his impulse to appropriate pagan stories as the impulse towards redemption. If, for Tolkien and Thompson, the beautiful and good aspects of art will one day be redeemed along with humanity and the earth, and raised to the plane of Reality, then there is every incentive to reimagine ancient myths and legends. That Shippey in this moment reads Fróda as a figure of “all that was good in the Dark Ages” is significant—and no less significant that Frodo refigures Fróda (208). To find the good and true at the heart of paganism, in this framework, is to participate in the work of redemption and *evangelium*—but throughout time rather than space.

By incorporating pagan elements into his tales, and by retelling the old pagan myths, Tolkien was not simply creating a place of mediation, or a space in which the two worldviews could meet and interact: not simply explaining what paganism had to do with Christ, to rephrase Alcuin’s question. The writing process actually became a way to spread the *godspel*, the good story, and in so doing, to highlight what could be, and was, good and beautiful about paganism, and specifically pre-Christian paganism, and therefore to bring it into the Christian promise of redemption and immortality. It was Tolkien’s way, as Thompson might have said, of finishing what paganism had begun and beautifying the old gods. But it was also a way to acknowledge and mourn that Christianity’s transformation of paganism had sacrificed the latter’s ancient power as religion: the tales are heavy with a sense of loss. They lament even while they hold beauty to the light. In this cycle of recognition, lament, and retelling, Tolkien became an active participant in the “Harrowing of Hell” and the progress of redemption and re-creation; and those who read his work, identifying the good and beautiful within them, participate in that work alongside him.⁹ Ultimately, Tolkien’s creative project might be understood as the attempt to mobilize the grace he believes is extended to the human artist in order to beautify the old gods, to resurrect “the intoxication of poetry and belief,” and in so doing to include them in the ongoing work of Good Story as it translates art into eternity.

⁹ In *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, Stanley Fish argues that reading Milton’s *Paradise Lost* causes the reader to inadvertently re-participate in the fall. My suggestion here is that Tolkien’s fiction is a reversal of that process, and thus does just the opposite: causes the reader to participate in redemption.

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