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# The Black Speech: *The Lord of the Rings* as a Modern Linguistic Critique

## **Abstract**

Uses the theories of Owen Barfield to analyze the language and rhetoric used in the service of evil in *The Lord of the Rings* as a critique of modernity and the divorce of true meaning from speech. Ted Sandyman, Saruman, and the Mouth of Sauron are used as particular examples.

## **Additional Keywords**

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Use of rhetoric; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*; Barfield, Owen. Poetic Diction—Influence on Tolkien; Rhetoric



## THE BLACK SPEECH: *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* AS A MODERN LINGUISTIC CRITIQUE

CODY JARDAN

IN THE PAST, J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* has suffered somewhat unfairly at the hands of critics. Studies of the novel have been marred by the tendency to dismiss the work as escapism, with Edmund Wilson in his article "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!" going so far as to describe it as "juvenile trash" (332). Or, as Verlyn Flieger notes in "A Post-modern Medievalist," even those scholars who are willing to give the piece any serious consideration often treat it as a literary anachronism rather than as a meaningful text that relates very specifically to the concerns of its day and age (251-52). This misunderstanding could very well be seen as a failure of such critics to respond to the text beyond the surface level. It is interesting that, historically, critics like Edmund Wilson, who often showed a sharp eye for the trends and tropes of Modern literature, fail to acknowledge that while the book may lack the experimental stream of consciousness of Joyce's *Ulysses* or the dissociated sensibility of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Tolkien's work is still reacting to what Peter Nicholls describes in *Modernisms* as a "complex of desire and disorientation" (163); it simply does so by creating the unified and relatable world of Middle-earth to serve as a counterpoint to the sense of disorientation and alienation that forms the backbone of Modern literature. Much like the works of T.S. Eliot and the other canonical modernists, Tolkien's novel responds to the culture shock felt by many in the early twentieth century. *The Lord of the Rings* pits a poetic and metaphorical system of language against a more Modern language of disorientation and shows the poetic system to be the more powerful. By doing this, Tolkien attempts to reinstate a meaningful tradition in which to take refuge from the ravages of the hyper-literal linguistic model of the modern world.

It is easiest to define Modernism as a reaction. Peter Nicholls argues that "the Anglo-American version [of Modernism] developed in part as a *critique* of modernity" (163). As Sara Blair notes in "Modernism and the Politics of Culture," this is clearly seen in major modernist works such as Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis's journal *Blast*, which Blair describes as "a salvo directed against Victorian humanist social ideals and the *contemporary* versions of populism, individualism, and liberalism they were thought to inform [italics

added]" (159). Modernism's penchant for manifestos such as T.E. Hulme's "Romanticism and Classicism" and the vorticist manifesto included in *Blast's* inaugural issue also makes it clear that from its very beginning Anglo-American Modernism was as interested in looking back to Classical tradition as it was in novelty and existed as a pointed stance against the status quo of modernity. This modernity was a widespread cultural fracture, which, on a linguistic basis, grew largely out of a new perception of language. Concerning this new perception of language, in "Metaphysics of Modernism" Michael Bell writes, "rather than describing or reflecting the world, language was now seen to form it." Scholars such as Saussure and Wittgenstein posited an understanding of language as arbitrary and "a precise reversal of the Adamic model of meaning as giving names to preexisting things, it sees that we only come to have things by creating names for them" (16). Ferdinand de Saussure addresses this in his posthumously published work from 1916, *Course in General Linguistics*, where he writes, "Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language" (112). Saussure argues that language is an interface between humans, their ideas, and reality, which allows them to break down the "vague, uncharted nebula" into manageable units. These ideas allowed Saussure to lay the ground work for modern linguistics as a distinctly scientific discipline devoted to analyzing the relationship between linguistic units, supplanting the discipline's more historical bent prevalent in the nineteenth-century (Bell 16). This distinctly scientific and ahistorical understanding of language, when taken to its furthest extreme, is often used by Tolkien's villains as he uses them to represent many aspects of modernity.

Bell notes that this change in the understanding of language led to "an emphasis in all the modernist arts on the nature of their own medium" (16). This impulse is obvious in the canonical modernists, with Joyce and Eliot both offering their readers something of a linguistic circus. Tolkien's work dramatizes this concern; rather than presenting his linguistic theories through form, Tolkien explores them through the conflicts of his narrative. Michael Bell writes that "Eliot and Pound [...] saw that civilization depends on words and it is the function of the poet and the critic to keep words accurate" (18). In the same spirit as Bell, Peter Nicholls writes, "modernism sought to correct the apparently amnesiac tendencies of modernity by reconnecting it to a valued cultural tradition" (164). Tolkien's heroes take up the "function of the poet" in Middle-earth and work to "correct the apparently amnesiac tendencies of modernity" Tolkien reveals in his villains.

The linguistic model Tolkien presents is not a major deviation from the theories that inspired the other modernists; it simply contains a means of addressing the problems caused by this understanding in such a way as to

reinstate a sense of cultural trajectory. In her essay "Poetic Diction and Splintered Light" Verlyn Flieger observes that Tolkien's model was largely inspired by Owen Barfield's 1928 work *Poetic Diction* which, she argues, "modified [Tolkien's] whole outlook" (36). Barfield postulated a theory of linguistic evolution that understood language to be a collection of metaphors, writing, "one of the first things that a student of etymology—even quite an amateur student—discovers for himself is that every modern language, with its thousands of abstract terms and its nuances of meaning and association, is *apparently* nothing, from the beginning to end, but an unconscionable tissue of dead, or petrified, metaphors" (63). Essentially, Barfield argues that the wealth of words that make up any given language is the product of a kind of semantic drift wherein expressions that were originally metaphorical give birth to new words. He illustrates this concept with an example taken from the poetry of Percy Shelley, observing that Shelley's metaphor that "[his] soul was an enchanted boat' [...] might lose its present meaning and call up to the minds of our posterity, not a vessel, but the concept 'soul' as enriched by Shelley's imagination. A new word, abridged perhaps to something like *chambote*, might grow into being" (65-66). Barfield concludes that such a development cripples poetic language: "it is necessary to point out that a meaning may be 'perceptual' (that is to say, the word's whole reference may be to some sensible object or process) and at the same time 'general' or 'abstract'" (79). Barfield also notes that myths take on a special role in this understanding of language, acting as "corpses which [...] remain visible" revealing an "older, undivided 'meaning'" (91).

In the preface to the second edition of *Poetic Diction* Barfield gives an example of what he saw as the risk of a language becoming progressively more divorced from metaphor, observing that modern logic "hoped to sweep away, as meaningless, all statements not related to physically observable or verifiable events [...]. For all propositions except those from which some observation-statement can be deduced are, it is averred, meaningless, either as misuse of language, or as tautologies" (17). C.S. Lewis elaborates on this idea in his 1939 essay "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," arguing that, due to language's origins in myth and metaphor, it can never truly be used strictly literally: "Either literalness, or else metaphor understood: one or other of these we must have; the third alternative is nonsense. But literalness we cannot have. The man who does not consciously use metaphors talks without meaning" (262). Lewis argues that those who assume to be speaking scientifically limit their ability to communicate meaningfully about reality by assuming that what is in fact one out of many metaphors is the absolute literal truth, an act which impairs their ability to comprehensively understand a subject (257). Tolkien dramatizes the attempt to undermine the quintessentially metaphorical nature

of language observed by Barfield and Lewis in *The Lord of the Rings* through the many debates between his heroes and villains.

Verlyn Flieger, in her essay "The Mind, The Tongue, and The Tale," argues that the "bedrock belief" of Tolkien was captured in an early draft of his essay *On Fairy-stories* where he writes, "Mythology is language and language is mythology" ("The Mind" 242). Flieger is correct to emphasize the importance of this passage to Tolkien's understanding of language, and she even goes on: "the whole text of *On Fairy-stories* is an extended gloss on this statement" (242). Tolkien expounds upon the meaning and ramifications of the relationship between myth and language throughout his essay, writing that:

languages, especially modern European languages, are a disease of mythology. But Language cannot, all the same, be dismissed. The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalization and abstraction, sees not only *green-grass*, discriminating it from other things [...] but sees that it is *green* as well as being *grass*. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective [...] (*On Fairy-stories* [OFS] 41)

In "The Mind, The Tongue, and The Tale" Flieger observes that *On Fairy-stories* was directly influenced by Owen Barfield's work in *Poetic Diction* (243). This passage from *On Fairy-stories* reveals this influence as Tolkien treats adjectives as a fragmenting of ideas and hypothesizes an early speaker drawing the green from the grass. Tolkien was uniquely interested in the relationship between the "Expression," or adjective, and the "Image," the quality antecedent to the adjective, which could create a "quality of strangeness and wonder [...] essential to fairy-story" (OFS 60).

Barfield's understanding of language is notably reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's theory of "a dissociation of sensibility" from his 1921 essay "The Metaphysical Poets." In this essay Eliot identifies the court poets of the late Elizabethan era as "employ[ing] a device which is sometimes considered characteristically 'metaphysical'; the elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it" (242). Eliot then goes on to note a shift from this in later literature, "Tennyson and Browning are poets," he says, "and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of the rose" (247). This shift is Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility," which he claims led to a more refined, yet cruder, language (247). Eliot goes on to ask "what would have been the fate of the 'metaphysical' had the current of poetry descended in a direct line from them, as it descended in a direct line to them?" (248). In asking this, Eliot brings to light a characteristic of Modern literature, tracing a specific linguistic

shift (which could be seen as one small step in the evolution noted by Barfield) and its ramifications on literature. Much like the speaker and the “dead master” in Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” Tolkien hopes “To purify the dialect of the tribe / And urge the mind to *aftersight* and foresight [italics added]” (127-28). Tolkien may very well be seen as the answer to Eliot’s question concerning the current of poetry as he strives to reunite language and myth to create a more absolute sense of meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien expressed an interest in fairy-stories and myth as a means of recovery, describing recovery as “regaining of a clear view” (OFS 67). This builds a strong relationship between his work and that of the other modernists; similar to Eliot’s attempts in *The Wasteland* to stabilize modern culture through his use of the grail myth, Tolkien sought to reinstate a cultural and linguistic touchstone by reuniting myth and language. Much like Barfield and Eliot, Tolkien noted a linguistic upheaval creating a rift between the “language of poetry [and] the language of science” (Flieger, “The Mind” 243). Tolkien saw his mythological work as a cure for this as it brings together these languages, blending the strictly empirical and the metaphorical, creating a world where “in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory” (OFS 68). These ideas govern the appearance of language in *The Lord of the Rings* where Tolkien dramatizes the conflict between Barfield’s poetic language and Eliot’s theory of a dissociated sensibility in the novel’s principle debates between good and evil.

Tolkien’s life’s work is very literally a matter of myth. In his letters, Tolkien pointedly alluded to his work in the universe of *The Lord of the Rings* as an attempt to create a “body of more or less connected legend” that he “could dedicate simply to: to England” (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien [Letters]* 144). Tolkien’s intense thought on the nature of myth led him to write *The Lord of the Rings* not simply as pseudo-history spattered with fantastic creatures and the occasional moralizing, but as an attempt to reconstruct a mythic language, one in which metaphor is both factual and True. This quality is observed by Margaret Hiley in “Stolen Language, Cosmic Models: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien” where Hiley writes, “Within the boundaries of Tolkien’s world [...] the myth is not just believed to be true, it *is* true” (844). For Tolkien, myth and language are intricately related; therefore, his language operates in the same way as his myth. This quality is essentially Tolkien applying his theological understanding of Truth to his work both as a linguist and an author, an understanding founded on a mythology grounded in both metaphor and reality, utterly divorced from abstraction.

In *The Inklings* Humphrey Carpenter presents a reconstructed conversation between Tolkien and his friend and Oxford colleague C.S. Lewis, in which Lewis accuses Christianity of being “the old ‘dying god’ story” and

Tolkien responds by saying, “except that here is a *real* Dying God, with a precise location in history and definite historical consequences. The old myth has become a fact. But it still retains the character of a myth” (44). Ultimately, Tolkien’s worldview is built on an understanding of a Truth that is both literal and figurative, material and spiritual; his “sensibilities” are far from “disassociated.” This is dramatized throughout his work, but is especially clear when his protagonists interact with his villains. In Tolkien, heroes speak plainly with a mythic language of literal and figurative truth, while evil limits language to the material and uses this to play games with meaning.

Tolkien dramatizes the first conflict between good and evil in *The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*] between two hobbits in the Green Dragon Inn at Bywater. This exchange takes place between Sam Gamgee, one of the nearest things to a paragon of virtue in Tolkien’s work, and Ted Sandyman, whom Tolkien simply describes as “the miller’s son” (I.2.44). This description, rather than only telling the reader Sandyman’s occupation, actually hints at Tolkien’s opinions of his character. Sandyman is implicated in the most mechanical or industrial aspect of the Shire’s economy, and Tolkien was very outspoken concerning his view of industrialization. In a 1944 letter to his son Christopher Tolkien, he wrote, “Unlike art which is content to create a new secondary world in the mind, it [machinery] attempts to actualize desire, and so to create power in this World; and that cannot really be done with any real satisfaction. Labour-saving machinery only creates endless and worse labour” (*Letters* 87-88). Tolkien’s dislike of machinery is laid bare at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* when the hobbits rebelling against Saruman, or Sharkey, meet Sandyman who is “grimy-faced and black-handed” after having turned to Saruman’s service and wantonly wasted the Shire’s natural resources in his work at the mill (VI.8.1017). Furthermore, Sandyman makes his first appearance in the chapter titled “The Shadow of the Past,” a chapter Tolkien uses to formally introduce evil as it appears and functions within the novel, implicating him in the evils of Sauron.

The conversation between Sam and Sandyman is presented as simple and slow barroom banter, and given its occurrence in the seemingly innocent land of the Shire many readers would fail to discover in it indications of Tolkien’s idea of evil, let alone identify it as a dramatization of linguistic theory, yet, this is exactly what Tolkien manages. When Sam brings up the rumors circulating in the Shire, Sandyman dismisses them saying, “I can hear fireside-ales and children’s stories at home, if I want to.” This disregard sets the tone for Sandyman’s character, a character who refuses to believe more than his eyes can see and uses this as a means of undermining the beliefs of those around him. As the conversation continues, Sandyman seemingly out debates Sam but really only manipulates language and meaning in their



argument. When Sam attempts to defend his belief in the rumors and “fireside-tales,” saying, “Take dragons now[,]” Sandyman immediately subverts his meaning, saying, “No thank ‘ee [...] I won’t. I heard tell of them when I was a youngster, but there’s no call to believe in them now. There’s only one Dragon in Bywater, and that’s Green” (I.2.44). In this exchange, Sandyman not only twists Sam’s suggestion to “take dragons,” but he also immediately reduces the idea to the literal level as he refers to the Green Dragon Inn.

Sandyman continues this behavior when Sam tells about his cousin Hal seeing a tree like “an elm tree [...] walking seven yards to a stride, if it was an inch.” When Sandyman dismisses him by saying, “What he saw *was* an elm tree,” Sam retorts that “there ain’t no elm tree on the North Moors[,]” leading Sandyman to reply, “Then Hal can’t have seen one” (I.2.44-45). In this exchange Sandyman is once again making light of meaning. He undermines Sam’s story by making Sam’s tree a specific kind of elm tree, limiting it to a material and testable existence, while undermining Sam’s original meaning. Sam’s tree, much like his dragon, does not need to be tied down to what he can observe, even as he argues for the objective existence of both. The nature of what he means with his words is poetic, referencing both the legends and “fireside-tales” of his youth and the reality of the world around him. Sam is aware of both the symbolic and literal meaning of his words, and so his meaning is absolute; therefore, the way he employs his words is earnest, unlike Sandyman’s tricky wordplay.

The two wizards of *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf and Saruman, are the loftiest example of Tolkien’s linguistic theories. Saruman’s slippery language has been commented on by several scholars, with Tom Shippey writing in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, “Saruman, indeed, talks exactly like too many politicians. It is impossible to work out exactly what he means because of the abstract nature of his speech; in the end it is doubtful whether he understands himself” (75). In reference to the works of George Orwell, Shippey refers to Saruman’s language as “doublethink” (76), and, indeed Saruman is guilty of many of the misleading language techniques Orwell refutes in his essay “Politics and the English Language” as his language is “designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (2393). Jay Ruud elaborates on this idea in “The Voice of Saruman: Wizards and Rhetoric in *The Two Towers*” where he writes, “it is Saruman’s rhetoric, rather than any magical powers, that makes him so dangerous” (143). Ruud observes that this idea is supported by Tolkien himself who wrote that “Saruman corrupted the reasoning powers” (*Letters* 277). Gandalf is a plainspoken opposition to Saruman’s “doublethink.” Concerning Gandalf’s rhetoric, Ruud argues that his “speeches tend to be

hortatory rather than persuasive. He imparts information and then demands action based on conclusions he considers self-evident" (148). The dialogues between these two very different wizards recreate Sam and Ted Sandyman's conflict with raised stakes.

Gandalf recounts his first debate with Saruman in "The Council of Elrond." According to Gandalf, Saruman has declared himself "Saruman of Many Colours" (II.2.259). Gandalf explains his reaction to this:

I looked then and saw that his robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered.

'I liked white better,' I said.

'White!' he sneered. 'It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken.'

'In which case it is no longer white,' said I. 'And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.' (II.2.259)

In this passage, Saruman does with light the same thing he does with language, breaking both and manipulating them for his own ends, without any concern for whether or not his behavior is on "the path of wisdom." The broken white light is a major metaphor in Tolkien's writing. In "Mythopoeia," a poem Tolkien wrote concerning a conversation he had with C.S. Lewis, Tolkien writes:

[M]an, sub-creator, the refracted Light  
through whom is splintered from a single White  
to many hues, and endlessly combined  
in living shapes that move from mind to mind. (87)

Verlyn Flieger addresses this metaphor in "*Poetic Diction and Splintered Light*," explaining that Tolkien's refracted light is analogous to Barfield's theory of the fragmentation of language. A refraction or fragmentation which Tolkien would see as an aspect of Man's fallen nature (44). This fracturing allows man to create in God's image. However, this exchange between Saruman and Gandalf makes it clear that Tolkien was acutely aware of the negative potential of the refraction as well. William M.R. Simpson casts this refraction in a philosophical light in his article "The Science of Saruman: Nature, Structure and a Mind of Metal and Wheels," describing Saruman as a reductive physicalist who "can no longer distinguish living things from the machines of Orthanc" because he "assert[s] that the essence of anything that exists lies solely in its material decomposition" (88). Similarly, Saruman considers language in a strictly material sense. Words, to him, are just words;

meaning does not play a role in his calculations. Gandalf shows a more nuanced appreciation of meaning when he warns Saruman against wantonly breaking down white light, saying, "it is no longer white [...] And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom" (*LotR* II.2.259). Gandalf appreciates the metaphorical implications of their conversation, and knows that the white light, like language, can be unwisely broken, removed from its meaning, and rendered into a manipulative tool rather than a means of communication.

Gandalf and Saruman renew their debates in "The Voice of Saruman" where Saruman attempts to justify his failed attack on Rohan by convincing the Rohirrim they were in the wrong in their struggle against him. This section contains some of Saruman's most impressive linguistic acrobatics; in "The Voice of Saruman: Wizards and Rhetoric in *The Two Towers*," Jay Ruud observes that from the beginning of his conversation with the leaders of the Rohirrim Saruman "uses the tools of rhetoric" with "fallacious" appeal (144). Saruman begins by appealing to Théoden, saying, "Much have I desired to see you, mightiest king of western lands, and especially in these latter years, to save you from the unwise and evil counsels that beset you! [...] I alone can aid you now" (*LotR* III.10.579). Ruud notes that Saruman attempts to appeal to *pathos* immediately as he attempts to flatter Théoden (144), a flattery that is doubly specious because Théoden is the only king of western lands at the time. Perhaps the most astute observation of Saruman's use of language comes from within the text itself when Gimli says, "The words of this wizard stand on their heads [...] In the language of Orthanc help means ruin, and saving means slaying" (*LotR* III.10.579). Gimli reveals that Saruman's abuse of language has gone so far as to utterly subvert the meaning of his words. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Saruman's speech is utterly devoid of metaphor, and the words themselves have lost any connection to meaning as he offers empty compliments, while Gimli uses metaphorical language to dispel Saruman's lies.

Later in the debates, Éomer, one of the leaders of the Rohirrim and Théoden's heir, accuses Saruman of murder in his war against Rohan. In response to this Saruman replies, "My lord of Rohan, am I to be called a murderer, because valiant men have fallen in battle? [...] If I am a murderer on that account, then all the House of Eorl is stained with murder" (III.10.580). Ruud observes that in this passage Saruman's argument is built on blurring the line between defensive and offensive war (146). This blurring is facilitated by a strictly literal understanding of the terms war and murder, with Saruman stripping the terms of their contextual baggage to argue his point.

When Théoden refutes Saruman, calling him "a finger of the claw of Mordor," Saruman loses his temper and says, "What is the house of Eorl but a

thatched barn where brigands drink in the reek, and their brats roll on the floor among the dogs?" (III.10.580-81). Here, Saruman expresses his own opinion clearly for the first time. In many ways, this is Saruman at his most honest and, it is interesting to note, his most metaphorical. This passage is one of the clearest examples of Saruman's method of language manipulation. He disregards the antiquity of Théoden's culture, and ignores the mythology that comes with the title "house of Eorl." He attacks the physical construction of Théoden's hall, Meduseld, and divorces the men of Rohan from their honor-based militaristic culture, turning them into "brigands."

Gandalf provides and is himself the ultimate refutation of Saruman in this chapter and the book as a whole. After snapping at Théoden, Saruman pleads with Gandalf. Gandalf simply responds by saying, "What have you to say that you did not say at our last meeting? [...] Or, perhaps, you have things to unsay?" This question perplexes Saruman and leaves him "mus[ing], as if puzzled" (III.10.581). Saruman fails to understand the idea of taking back his words, and therefore undoing the evils they are a part of, because he has divorced his words from meaning and cannot see their significance beyond their manipulative powers.

After Gandalf asks Saruman if he has anything to unsay, Saruman begins his final ploy to get Gandalf to abandon the Rohirrim. Saruman's voice becomes so persuasive that some of the Rohirrim become momentarily convinced that "Gandalf would ascend into the tower, to discuss deep things beyond their comprehension" (III.10.582). Tolkien describes Gandalf's response:

Then Gandalf laughed. The fantasy vanished like a puff of smoke.

"Saruman, Saruman!" said Gandalf still laughing. "Saruman, you missed your path in life. You should have been the king's jester and earned your bread, and stripes too, by mimicking his counsellors [...] Understand one another? I fear I am beyond your comprehension. But you, Saruman, I understand now too well. (582)

This passage reveals the relationship between Gandalf and Saruman and the relationship between the linguistic approaches they represent. At this point in Tolkien's narrative Gandalf, as the head of the White Council, is so superior to Saruman that he completely understands Saruman even as Saruman only vainly guesses at his motivations by attempting to play on his pride. In just the same way, Saruman is no longer able to understand Gandalf's intentions because his idea of language is utterly divorced from an objective or figurative meaning. He has turned language into a game and in the process has fractured his signifiers and his signified, while Gandalf's words are laced with meaning. The power of Gandalf's language is illustrated all the more clearly at the end of

the scene when Gandalf calls Saruman back against his will and breaks his staff with a word (583).

The captains of the West are once again faced with a double-talking charlatan in the chapter "The Black Gate Opens." When the group rides to the gates of Mordor to deliver their ultimatum to Sauron they are faced with the Mouth of Sauron, whom Tolkien describes as "a tall and evil shape [...] The Lieutenant of the Tower of Barad-dûr he was, and his name is remembered in no tale; for he himself had forgotten it" (V.10.888). Tolkien wastes no time in letting his readers know what to look for with this character. The title the Mouth of Sauron implies that this character is the major language manipulator shown in the book, at least considering Sauron himself is never directly seen. The Mouth of Sauron is the visible sign of what evil does to language. He is the mouth of *Sauron*, who, despite his driving influence on the plot of the novel is basically a non-entity as he is never directly involved in the novel's action. Tolkien makes it clear that The Mouth of Sauron has thrown aside his own linguistic signifier, his name, to become the manifestation of Sauron who is, evidently, nothing at all. This makes him not just the embodiment of a Modern anti-poetic language, but a very significant example of it because he is so divorced from meaning that even his own existence has lost any linguistic correlative.

The Mouth of Sauron begins his "negotiations" with Tolkien's heroes by attempting to undermine their authority, saying to Aragorn, "It needs more to make a king than a piece of Elvish glass" (V.10.889). Here the Mouth of Sauron is removing the mythological authority from Aragorn. That "piece of Elvish glass" exists both in the literal and a figurative sense; its existence is both physical and symbolic. In response, Aragorn rebukes him without a word and cows him with a glance. By doing so, Aragorn reveals his strength and the power inherent in himself and represented in the Elfstone he wears. In many ways, Aragorn is a direct foil to The Mouth of Sauron's role as an empty signifier. As B.S.W. Barootes argues in "'He Chanted a Song of Wizardry': Words with Power in Middle-earth," "Aragorn's ascension [as king] marks the restoration or Recovery (Tolkien's term) of the many sites of diminution in Arda: light, geography, and, most importantly, language" (126). Barootes observes that Aragorn's coronation speech in "The Steward and The King" "carr[ies] the weight of the entire mythology" (126), as his exclamation "Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth I am come" (*LotR* VI.5. 967) refers to Aragorn's literal arrival in "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields" while also echoing his forefather Elendil's words on his arrival to Middle-earth, thus establishing Aragorn as the natural fulfillment of Elendil's oath. Aragorn's ability to deny the meaninglessness of The Mouth of Sauron with his glance foreshadows his ultimate role as the restorer of meaning and demonstrates the superiority of

the historically conscious linguistic model he represents over the manipulative and empty language of The Mouth of Sauron.

The Mouth of Sauron goes on to reveal the coat of armor, cloak, and sword that were taken from Frodo at Cirith Ungol, using these objects to mislead them into believing Frodo was still in Sauron's keeping. He offers them terms for Frodo's return, saying:

All lands east of the Anduin shall be Sauron's for ever, solely. West of the Anduin as far as the Misty Mountains and the Gap of Rohan shall be tributary to Mordor [...] but shall have leave to govern their own affairs. But they shall help to rebuild Isengard which they have wantonly destroyed, and that shall be Sauron's, and there his lieutenant shall dwell: not Saruman, but one more worthy of trust. (V.10.890)

Tolkien translates the Mouth of Sauron's offer by peering into the thoughts of Gandalf and his company, writing that "they read his thought. He was to be that lieutenant, and gather all that remained of the West under his sway; he would be their tyrant and they his slaves" (V.10.890). Once again, the Mouth of Sauron is both using and dramatizing the linguistic system that readers have seen in Ted Sandyman and Saruman. The company sees through his rhetoric to his true meaning, a meaning that is itself built on a lie. The Mouth of Sauron twists the significance of Frodo's gear to suit his purpose; rather than show the company that Frodo has made it to Mordor and nearly completed his quest, Frodo's gear makes the company fear for his life. However, Gandalf acts as a mouthpiece for the group as a whole by dismissing the Mouth of Sauron, saying, "We did not come here to waste words in treating with Sauron, faithless and accursed; still less with one of his slaves. Begone!" (V.10.891). Much like with Saruman, Gandalf shows that his speech is nearly synonymous with action as he can dismiss the Mouth of Sauron, while the Mouth of Sauron can only create a momentary fear.

Characters such as Sandyman, Saruman, and the Mouth of Sauron carry much more baggage when they are considered as a response to modernity. Tolkien studies have become far more interested in his work's relation to the twentieth century with scholars such as Tom Shippey and Verlyn Flieger creating extensive bodies of work exploring Tolkien, not as a curiosity, but as a major literary figure. Echoing popular polls Shippey has proclaimed him "The Author of the Century," and Flieger has written on the successes and failings of his mythology and titled him "A Post-modern Medievalist." In order to gain the most meaning from his work, Tolkien must be considered alongside the other modernist writers. Tolkien, much like Eliot, sought a cultural tradition to stabilize existence. Tolkien dramatizes a tradition of kinetic, meaningful language that questions the theories of thinkers like

Saussure and puts it into action in *The Lord of the Rings*, which essentially chronicles the failings of a Modern or strictly Structuralist understanding of language and presents a more stable and sensible one to replace it.

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