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Dwayne Thorpe

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Tolkien's Elvish Craft

Abstract

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Tolkien’s readers all have the same impression: they have walked or ridden every inch of Middle-earth in all its weathers. It is a curious impression, this experience of an imaginary place, and one difficult to create, as Tolkien noted. “To make a Secondary World,” he wrote, “commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft” (Tolkien, 1984b, p. 140). It would require similar skill to explain that craft, though perhaps gnomish rather than elvish. That may be the reason why Tolkien’s artistry has not been much studied. After the initial storm of reviews, both attacks and defences, we have had many studies of his relevance, themes, sources, bibliography, biography, and so on, but only an occasional comment on aesthetics. And that cannot be right. Given its international role in the literature of our century, the aesthetics of fantasy should be a major subject of analysis; and Tolkien’s role in the turn from realism to fantasy is undisputed. He is too important to become the property of enthusiasts and too fine to shrivel into thematics. The power of his work, as he said and we should recognize, lies not in the message but in the telling. We are first caught by artistry, then led to concepts.

I want to say a little about Tolkien’s artistry. Not that I propose a full explanation. That, like some name in Treebeard’s language, would be too long and mouth-filling for hasty humans. I intend to examine only one tool in Tolkien’s workshop, giving it the name of “fusion”.

By way of illustration, let me begin with two paragraphs of description: the first a delight for those who enjoy seasons, country walks, and Wordsworth; the second a delight for Tolkien readers.

After stumbling along for some way along the stream, they came quite suddenly out of the gloom. As if through a gate they saw the sunlight before them. Coming to the opening they found that they had made their way down through a cleft in a high steep bank, almost a cliff. At its feet was a wide space of grass and reeds; and in the distance could be glimpsed another bank almost as steep. A golden afternoon of late sunshine lay warm and drowsy upon the hidden land

between. In the midst of it there wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, arched over with willows, blocked with fallen willows, and flecked with thousands of faded willow-leaves. The air was thick with them, fluttering yellow from the branches; for there was a warm and gentle breeze blowing softly in the valley, and the reeds were rustling, and the willow-boughs were creaking.

(Tolkien, 1965a, p. 126)

Many of you recognize that this passage describes not England but part of Tolkien’s fantasy world: the Old Forest outside the Hedge. And the walkers are not Wordsworth, Dorothy, and Coleridge, but hobbits. Nevertheless, I would ask why the paragraph can’t be called realistic: pure mimesis? Might this not be a place Tolkien had seen? Everything in it is actual. The interplay of light and shadow; angles of vision; season, weather, breeze, colour, motion: all mark the familiar, witnessed fact. Near the end of September, in the sunshine of late afternoon, river-banks really are thick with willow leaves that turn the air gold. This is the way realists use words: not as permission to dream, but as stand-ins for reality.

Nevertheless, this is a fantasy paragraph, though only context reveals it. It marks a crucial moment in the attempt of the hobbits to slip out of the Shire, setting the scene for Old Man Willow and Tom Bombadil. The hobbits have been forced down to the Witherwindle, and the reader knows there is something hostile about the Old Forest. The gully opens like a gateway placed by some picturesque artist. But its beauty is a hook for an ancient willow who is using the golden day to fish for hobbits. In less than two pages Pippin vanishes; so does Merry (except for his legs); and Frodo nearly drowns, hypnotized by Old Man Willow’s song. Tolkien’s realistic treatment of willows, and especially his incessant repetition of that word “willow,” are foreshadowings. We cannot, of course, know this on a first reading. But in retrospect the paragraph is a piece of deft fantasy-creation quietly doing its work.

Here now is the second passage, Frodo’s first glimpse of Lothlórien as his blindfold is removed. As in the first

paragraph, a hobbit emerging from darkness catches a vision of beauty.

When his eyes were in turn uncovered, Frodo looked up and caught his breath. They were standing in an open space. To the left stood a great mound, covered with a sward of grass as green as Spring-time in the Elder days. Upon it, as a double crown, grew two circles of trees: the outer had bark of snowy white, and were leafless but beautiful in their shapely nakedness; the inner were mallorn-trees of great height, still arrayed in pale gold. High amid the branches of a towering tree that stood in the centre of all there gleamed a white flet. At the feet of the trees, and all about the green hillsides the grass was studded with small golden flowers shaped like stars. Among them, nodding on slender stalks, were other flowers, white and palest green: they glimmered as a mist amid the rich hue of the grass. Over all the sky was blue, and the sun of afternoon glowed upon the hill and cast long green shadows beneath the trees.

(Tolkien, 1965a, pp. 364-365)

Again I would ask: why might this not be a real place? This time the question is more pressing, for the Witherwind only borders Faerie, but Lothlórien is its heart. All remember it with something like Sam's wonder at "going to see elves and all." Lothlórien is a haunting experience. Yet, nearly everything here might be found in a great landscape garden. Of course there are exotic touches: the reference to the "Elder days," or the unfamiliar words "mallorn" and "flet" (to be joined in the next paragraph by other names with an elven air – Cerin Amroth, *elanor*, *niphredil*, Galadrim). But as with the description of the Witherwind, most of the fantasy is in the context: the disaster at Khazad-Dûm which lies only one chapter back; dangers from orcs; the presence of elves; and Caras Galadon, the City of the Trees, which follows. The context provides a frame – not picturesque but enchanted – which creates the sense of beauty. And beauty is of the essence in Tolkien's fantasy. As he put it:

We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red . . . We need . . . to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity.

(Tolkien, 1984b, p. 146)

The Lord of the Rings, of course, contains much fantasy which is fantasy and nothing but fantasy: singing willows, a city of gigantic trees and sylvan immortals; intelligent tree-herds. But that fantasy is effective because it grows from paragraphs like these two. And these paragraphs represent Tolkien's dominant method, which typically makes the impossible believable by placing the exotic inside the familiar. Fusion blurs the line between reality and fantasy, enhancing the common while lending credence to the fantastic. This is not just a matter of landscape. Perception receives the same treatment. Here, for example, are Frodo's reactions to Cerin Amroth:

It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was

upon it for which his language had no name . . . He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. In winter here no heart could mourn for summer or for spring. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lórien there was no stain.

(Tolkien, 1965a, p. 365)

The experience fuses the mundane and transcendent. So does Tolkien's style, fusing two kinds of verbal signs: names for familiar things and words which point toward the nameless.

Soon after, Frodo has a second experience of the same kind, tactile rather than visual.

He laid his hand upon the tree beside the ladder: never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within it. He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself.

(Tolkien, 1965a, p. 366)

These are elvish moments. Yet most people have had similar experiences of seeing ordinary things, such as colours, with the film of familiarity wiped away; or of suddenly realizing just how alive living things are: visions of a world with the sheen of wonder restored. The bark of a beech tree really is alive. But we do not always notice. And we never call it "skin." Tolkien's fusion wraps the surprising inside the ordinary, causing us to look. Thereafter we see trees in a new way. Mallorns, Ents, and ordinary elms become our delight. We feel we have seen deeply, like Merry and Pippin looking into the eyes of Treebeard:

One felt as if there was an enormous well behind them, filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present: like sun shimmering on the outer leaves of a vast tree, or on the ripples of a very deep lake. I don't know, but it felt as if something that grew in the ground – asleep, you might say, or just feeling itself as something between root-tip and leaf-tip, between deep earth and sky had suddenly waked up, and was considering you with the same slow care that it had given to its own inside affairs for endless years.

(Tolkien, 1965b, pp. 66-67)

This is the kind of thing Tolkien's fantasy does. But to what end? My subject is Tolkien's craft, of course – not his meaning. But one cannot understand a craftsman's methods without knowing what he is trying to do, so I must give some attention to Tolkien's aim as I see it.

The Lord of the Rings seems to me founded on the rock-bottom Christian belief that this world is not our home. Tolkien's elves singing of exile in "the world of woven trees," remembering "starlight on the Western Seas" (Tolkien, 1965a, pp. 88-89), give elven tongue to his own sense that the human world is a prison. In his lecture, "On Fairy-Stories," written as he was moving into *The Lord of*

the Rings, he defended fairy-stories as legitimate reactions to that prison. "Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?" (Tolkien, 1984b, p. 148). Of course this particular prison denies that it is a prison – or that there is any home to go to. It calls itself "the world." But its proper name is "culture." It would restrict all attention to itself. But Tolkien seizes on the desire for home as evidence that the prison is a prison.

Some readers, anxious about charges of escapism, ignore Tolkien's declaration that escape is a primary value of his sort of literature. But escape and escapism are not much alike. Escapism is by definition illegitimate, but escape may be not only legitimate but necessary: even a duty. At the very least, the desire to escape shows that some part of the prisoner is not imprisoned. It is a mark of humanity. Of course many desires are simply personal; but literary fantasy directs itself toward desires which are primordial and universal. A biographer, looking at Tolkien's life, has many reasons to see *The Lord of the Rings* as an orphan's book. It is certainly rooted in yearnings for mother, family, and belonging. That he began creating his elven world soon after the deaths of his two closest friends, while himself recuperating from trench fever, speaks for itself. But biography reads backward. It may explain the circumstance which caused Tolkien to turn down the road to Minas Tirith, but it does not explain what we really need to know: why we follow. Tolkien understood literary fantasy not as an uncontrollable overflow but as a painstaking art which arouses the very desire it intends to satisfy by creating a "secondary belief": one not equivalent to belief in the mundane world but taken seriously while the tale is told. That secondary belief is a hacksaw hidden inside a fruit pie. No belief, no saw. No saw, no escape. "Such stories," Tolkien said, "open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe" (Tolkien, 1984b, pp. 128-129).

"The Monsters and the Critics," his 1936 address on *Beowulf*, describes an allegorical tower which says something about the *Beowulf*-poet but much more about Tolkien and Other Time.

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material . . . They all said: "This tower is most interesting." But they also said (after pushing it over): "What a muddle it is in!" And even the man's own descendants . . . were heard to murmur: "He is such

an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion." But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

(Tolkien, 1984a, pp. 7-8)

The application to Tolkien is obvious. And the elven towers in *The Fellowship of the Ring* look back to that allegory.

Three Elf-towers of immemorial age were still to be seen beyond the western marches. They shone far off in the moonlight. The tallest was furthest away, standing alone upon a green hill. The Hobbits of the Westfarthing said that one could see the Sea from the top of that tower; but no Hobbit had ever been known to climb it . . . They spoke less and less with the Elves, and grew afraid of them, and distrustful of those that had dealings with them; and the Sea became a word of fear among them, and a token of death, and they turned their faces away from the hills in the west.

(Tolkien, 1965a, p. 17)

Sea-longing haunts Tolkien's characters. The earliest of them, Tuor, feels it at Vinyamar. All elves are driven by it, soon or late, like Legolas after he has ridden the Paths of the Dead. Frodo too at Cerin Amroth hears "far off great seas upon beaches that had long ago been washed away, and sea-birds crying whose race had perished from the earth" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 366). *The Lord of the Rings* ends with the major characters taking ship at the Grey Havens. And an epilogue, only recently published, ends as that longing comes upon an ostensibly comfortable Sam, long after Frodo's departure. "He heard suddenly, deep and unstilled, the sigh and murmur of the Sea upon the shores of Middle-earth" (Tolkien, 1992, p. 128).

This sea-longing carries traditional significance: the rivers of time flow through Middle-earth to the sea, wherein lies the lost eternal world of the Eldar. But it also expresses Tolkien's motive for writing. Like his *Beowulf* poet Tolkien built from philology not only a house – his research and courses – but also a tower of fiction, which gave a glimpse of eternity beyond the modern prison and its intellectual systems based on conflict: Capitalism, Marxism, Fascism, Freudianism, Darwinism. *The Lord of the Rings* is a message from the Prisoners' Relief Society: a message of community. It begins with Bilbo's adoption of Frodo; extends to Frodo's devotion to the Shire; expands to include the members of the Fellowship, then their various peoples; and at last encompasses all Middle-earth. Evil is self-regarding and isolated. But from hobbits to elves, those on the side of good are moved by a sense of belonging to a larger thing. Sam's gardening, Frodo's affection for the Shire, the loyalty of the Fellowship, are really one thing. To be rooted is a drive shared by hobbits, elves, dwarves, men, trees, and even mountains: to be rooted in affection, yet desire the unknown sea.

Of such is the kingdom of heaven.

Having said this much about Tolkien's aim, let me return to his craft of fusion. I have already shown how he weds

fantasy and realism to produce Middle-earth, but fusion is not limited to that combination. It produces many kinds of mixtures, using many kinds of materials. But all bear the same mark: qualities removed from their normal contexts and blended artfully to make a new thing. Neither it nor Middle-earth depend on magic, which Tolkien disliked. It depends on solid, patient, careful craft.

I do not know what you mean by that [an elf responds when asked if elven-cloaks are magic] . . . They are elvish robes certainly, if that is what you mean. Leaf and branch, water and stone: they have the hue and beauty of all these things under the twilight of Lórien that we love; for we put the thought of all that we love into all that we make.

(Tolkien, 1965a, p. 386)

The magic in Tolkien's world is, as Sam says, "right down deep, where . . . you can't see nobody working it" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 376). Its effects are obvious but its operations nearly invisible.

Tolkien was a craftsman, therefore crafty. He was like a woodworker who makes a block of walnut seem flexible as caramel, or joins two pieces so cunningly that only the expert eye finds a seam. So his craft usually does its work without being noticed. But he did not keep his workshop locked. He led the reader through it in "On Fairy-Stories." There, he explained fantasy as a product of the same process which produces the adjective: the mind's ability to abstract. A mind which can remove green from grass, treating it as a separate quality, can also place it, at will, on a face, or a ceiling, or the sun. The mind has an innate ability to split wholes and abstract parts. The adjective, that common, unregarded aspect of language, is the key to the power of fantasy, which combines imagination (simple image-making) with art to achieve "the inner consistency of reality" (Tolkien, 1984b, p. 139). The combination is not necessarily significant. It is often frivolous, decorative, or fanciful. "Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough" (Tolkien, 1984b, p. 140). Elvish craft "produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter" (Tolkien, 1984b, p. 143).

Moria and Lórien, the realms of dwarf and elf, show the method, intertwining natural and human qualities and imposing the fusion on places. The beauties Tolkien associates with trees – grace, beauty, delight, longevity – he bestows on elves. At the same time, the human capacity to feel and respond, to deserve individual names, he bestows on trees. Mixing these things, he exchanges and fuses the human, the natural, and the fantastic till they are inseparable. "Whether they've made the land, or the land's made them, it's hard to say" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 376). Dwarves, similarly, are the humanized forms of mineral qualities: hard, grim, enduring, unyielding; while places of stone and earth, such as Khazad-Dûm or Caradhras, have human qualities and make moral choices. Elves and dwarves are drawn partly from tradition, of course. But Tolkien uses the same process to make his own inventions: ents who are as ancient as their immemorial forest, and who boom and mutter about history

and tales and the growth of words like a certain prominent philologist; the regal, civilized men of Gondor with their complex system of law, seven-volumed history, and seven-tiered city; the horsey riders of Rohan, their humanized horses, and the rolling horse-meadows which create both; and Hobbits, their furry toes, inns, six meals a day, and absorption in family trees drawn from the comfortable associations of rural Oxfordshire and the habits of Inklings. He was ingenious at abstracting qualities from their normal locations and fusing them with his own inventions to produce cultures, geography, languages, creatures.

Shelob is one of the best examples of fusion, joining the abstract, the physical, and the imaginary. She is "an evil thing in spider-form," Tolkien says at once (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 332), emphasizing abstraction. Yet, she is overwhelmingly physical: "Great horns she had, and behind her short stalk-like neck was her huge swollen body, a vast bloated bag, swaying and sagging between her legs" (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 334). She is arachnoid, of course, but not a spider so much as a fusion of many quite different spiders. Tunnelling spiders, for instance, are not web spinners; and neither chases prey, as Shelob chases Frodo. But Shelob's most marked features are fabulous: her mythic size and age. She is ancient beyond telling, one:

such as Beren fought in the Mountains of Terror in Doriath, and so came to Lúthien upon the green sward amid the hemlocks in the moonlight long ago. How Shelob came there, flying from ruin, no tale tells, for out of the Dark Years few tales have come. But still she was there, who was there before Sauron, and before the first stone of Barad-dûr . . . Far and wide her lesser broods . . . spread from glen to glen, from the Ephel Dúath to the eastern hills, to Dol Guldur and the fastnesses of Mirkwood. But none could rival her, Shelob the Great, last child of Ungoliant to trouble the unhappy world.

(Tolkien, 1965b, p. 332)

A lineage longer than Aragorn's, names from the mythic past, places covering half a continent, all weave her into Middle-earth, giving solidity and reality to the fabulous. The tactic is ingenious, for these specified places and names are inventions every bit as much as Shelob herself. But it is a rare reader who pauses to think so, much less to disentangle the web. The technique does its work by intertwining the conventions of realism and fantasy, creating a real-seeming dream whose parts are syllables. This careful specifying of mythic times, places, and people is a technique Tolkien made uniquely his own. He called his work "feigned history," a paradox which should make us pause. The tale is an account of the end of the Third Age, buttressed by chronologies, maps, and the sort of historical material we find in "Prologue: Concerning Hobbits." The carefully constructed network of topography, geography, history, cultures, and languages which makes Middle-earth all but tangible is the most obvious and frequently recognized aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* and needs no further comment. But Tolkien does not simply pile up false facts to gain verisimilitude. He is

more subtle and artful than that. No one is taken in by Tolkien's history, any more than by his feigned role as editor and translator of the "Red Book of Westmarch". These things cater, rather, to our desire to believe. The fusion of feigning and history arouses a desire to enter the fantasy and promotes the illusion that we can. The way we read the maps and chronologies mimics conventional ways of treating space and time as Tolkien fuses recognized conventions of representation with invented space and time. Much of our conviction that his fantasy can be entered comes from redundancy: a judicious amount of material which goes beyond the requirements of story. Most of the places on the map of the Shire are gratuitous, like Brockenborings in the East Farthing or Needlehole in the West. They never appear in the story but remain names. Many events in the chronology of kings also lie outside the story: Rómendacil I's death in battle in 541; or the inauguration of Falastur in 830. Tolkien's place names too change according to the observed laws of actual language. Linguistic corruption has made "Brandywine" out of "Baranduin," and the Baranduin River is clearly related to the Anduin further east. Like real languages, Tolkien's are also consistent, as in the use of roots and suffixes: Forodwaith, Enedwaith, Haradwaith.

T.A. Shippey has analysed the varied styles of speech of Tolkien's characters. But that pattern is only one aspect of a larger stylistic strategy which allows Tolkien to fuse levels of diction, from high rhetoric to realistic description to satire, shifting so smoothly that one rarely notices. Everyone feels the comic incongruity when Pippin responds to Théoden King by whispering to Merry, "So that is the King of Rohan! A fine old fellow. Very polite" (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 164). But not one reader in a thousand sees the shifts in Tolkien's narrative voice. All seems perfectly natural while it is going on, but to take up three different passages is to almost feel one is looking at three different books. The playful style of the beginning does not balk at coy coinages like "eleventy-first birthday," or "tweens, as the hobbits called the irresponsible twenties" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 29). The swift, straightforward voice of the action scenes is quite different. "The sun was already westering as they rode from Edoras, and the light of it was in their eyes, turning all the rolling fields of Rohan to a golden haze" (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 131). And neither of those styles is much like Tolkien's poetic prose.

His golden shield was uncovered, and lo! it shone like an image of the Sun, and the grass flamed into green about the white feet of his steed. For morning came, morning and a wind from the sea; and darkness was removed, and the hosts of Mordor wailed, and terror took them, and they fled, and died, and the hoofs of wrath rode over them.

(Tolkien, 1965c, pp. 112-113)

Individuals may, of course, prefer one style to another. But it is a remarkable feat to bind them together so cunningly that not a single fuss about "stylistic inconsistency" has been heard for almost forty years. The reader experiences not a combination of styles but a fusion: a seamless unity.

Tolkien's flexibility extends even to himself. As narrator,

he is a major presence at the beginning of the book; but he is quietly removed thereafter. In the "Foreword," he is the author, though a little uncertain about that role. At moments, he writes as if he has made this book; at others as if he has discovered it; at still others leans in both directions simultaneously. Part editor of the Red Book of Westmarch, part gentle satirist, part irritable critic of his critics, he is a fusion: a voice inviting us into the book. In the "Prologue," he is a scholar providing a helpful selection of information about hobbits. Particularly ingenious is his revised account of Bilbo's discovery of the One Ring, which he treats not as a revision but as a lie revealed, showing the effects of the Ring on its bearer. By "Chapter I" he has been reduced to a jovial presence in parenthetical asides and playful comments. And that is the last we hear of him. By the second chapter, the book has become mimetic, as thoroughly dramatized as any late nineteenth-century novel. With no audible narrative voice, the words as words fade, so that we seem to experience events. The elements of language which call attention to itself, or to the author as stylist, are avoided. Anglo-Saxon words dominate; sentences are normally short or mid-length, in that loose order which makes comprehension effortless for the modern reader: subject, followed by predicate, followed by objects and modifiers. The main principles of organization are time and space, other kinds of subordination used sparingly. An almost exclusive focus on actions and the senses promotes the illusion of sensory experience rather than a tale told. For example, in Moria:

He raised his staff, and for a brief instant there was blaze like a flash of lightning. Great shadows sprang up and fled, and for a second they saw a vast roof far above their heads upheld by many mighty pillars hewn of stone. Before them and on either side stretched a huge empty hall; its black walls, polished and smooth as glass, flashed and glittered. Three other entrances they saw, dark black arches: one straight before them eastwards, and one on either side. Then the light went out.

(Tolkien, 1965a, pp. 328-329)

But Tolkien is not Conrad. The strategy does not simply aim to make the reader see. Like the realistic description of willows with which I began, it has one aim: to make the imaginary believable. And the more fantastic the events, the more tightly Tolkien screws down his style. About eighty percent of "The White Rider," for instance, consists of dialogue. All the rest describes action. But "The White Rider" contains the greatest risk and most astounding passage in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf's return from the dead.

Tolkien showed his keen awareness of language as strategy in a letter to Hugh Brogan, a former student who had called the dialogue in "The King of the Golden Hall" fustian. Tolkien replied that he ought to distinguish between fustian and actual antiquarian language, which he had used because "many of [the] things said could not be said in our slack and often frivolous idiom" (Tolkien, 1981, pp. 225). His point was that language ought to be appropriate to particular ways

of thinking rather than simply follow contemporary usage. It is a mistake to trick out a counterfeit warrior in modern words. Tolkien knew how cultures use language to form thought. But he also knew that the fantasist, by virtue of being a fantasist, can escape those “cookie-cutter sentences, all alike” which, just like grey uniforms, are prison-issue. Doing so, however, was not a simple matter of inserting antique language into his book. He needed to invent a style fusing his knowledge of archaic words and modern prose. Théoden’s dialogue, the target of Brogan’s objection, is a case in point. Here is the moment, in “Helm’s Deep,” which justifies character and speech.

“The end will not be long,” said the king. “But I will not end here, taken like an old badger in a trap. Snowmane and Hasufel and the horses of my guard are in the inner court. When dawn comes, I will bid men sound Helm’s horn, and I will ride forth. Will you ride with me then, son of Arathorn? Maybe we shall cleave a road, or make such an end as will be worth a song – if any be left to sing of us hereafter.”

“I will ride with you,” said Aragorn.

(Tolkien, 1965b, pp. 144-145)

No modern speaker could say, “The end will not be long” without feeling stagey or archaic. No ancient speaker could say, “I will not end here, taken like an old badger in a trap,” at all. Yet the reader experiences the speech not as two clashing styles but as one, proper to Théoden and no one else. The fusion, and the triumph of Tolkien’s approach to style, are complete.

Tolkien’s approach to language as strategy is, finally, only one aspect, though a large one, of his ideas about words, and especially word-making, which produced such a brilliant horse-name as Hasufel. There is neither time nor space here to take up the expansive subject of Tolkien’s relationship to language. But I can point to Tolkien’s lifelong attempt to wed things, thoughts, and sounds as a final example of fusion and at least one key to his poetics.

Not just Théoden but all Middle-earth is preoccupied with song. And in many ways *The Lord of the Rings* is about language as an escape from time and conflict into love and delight. In Middle-earth words – simple sounds – have power. And words – simple sounds – have power over Tolkien’s readers. The realm of Faerie, Tolkien said, includes “ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted” (Tolkien, 1984b, p. 113): literally, brought inside song. One thinks of Sam rubbing his eyes in the light of Lothlórien and saying, “this is more elvish than anything I ever heard tell of. I feel as if I was *inside* a song, if you take my meaning” (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 365). That is the essential experience of Tolkien’s readers. He works magic with sound, creating a poetry of names: Galadriel, Palantír, Rohirrim, Mordor. The effect of these fantasy names is one of the splendours of *The Lord of the Rings*. The names are so familiar now that we almost forget they were ever new – the pleasure with which we first heard of Legolas, Gimli, Gandalf, Frodo, Bilbo – and our sense that they had the same kind of rightness as names like Ebenezer Scrooge, Tom Jones, Robinson Crusoe. Tolkien makes names that never were, and the cultures

which produced them, seem as natural as the sun. Names like Cerin Amroth, Michel Delving, Meduseld, Moria, Minas Tirith create whole peoples. It is not simply that each invented tongue adds to the vision beyond the prison. Naming is itself a way of breaching walls. If there ever was a time (as Owen Barfield believed, apparently with Tolkien’s support) when language had semantic unity, making one thing of body and spirit, inner and outer, that time is lost in prehistory. Language, especially poetic language, tries to join inner perception and outer reality. But the language we know, and that Tolkien knew, cannot succeed in doing so because words are social products, evolved through long historical backgrounds. We are always using someone else’s words – words rubbed and thumbed-over and smudged until even our most intimate expressions are palimpsests. So language is never quite on the mark. And above all, as an historical linguist like Tolkien well knew, it never stops changing. Of all things we make, words are the most human: the most us. But Tolkien resisted the idea that words are made only by cultures or that the fusion of sound, sense, and object is entirely beyond our craft. In Middle-earth, at least, all language is elvish. “Elves made all the old words: they began it,” says Treebeard/Tolkien (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 68). That implies a good deal, for elvish language has wondrous effects. The hobbits, hearing an elvish song, “partly understood” it, without knowing the language. “The sound blending with the melody seemed to shape itself in their thought into words” (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 88). That happens again at Rivendell and once more in Lothlórien, when Galadriel sings a Quenya song that Frodo does not understand but which is so engraved in memory that he later translates it. Tolkien clearly believed language is more than a social phenomenon, for he created fourteen languages with no social function at all. Sense lies deeper than culture. Language can express meaning independent of history or culture: not nouns which mark known objects but sea-sounds which mark the yearnings of the heart and the something for which it yearns. That perception of the relationship of sound to meaning may be anathema to most contemporary linguists, but it is a commonplace among musicians. And it runs long roots through Tolkien’s work, where language is music, meaning is everywhere, and even things speak. This is true fantasy: Tolkien’s version, in truth, of one of the deepest human desires: that the world should make sense.

Frodo, in a passage I have already quoted, reacts to Lothlórien as Tolkien might, experiencing familiar yet unknown colours “as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful.” Perceiving the unfamiliar is not particularly Tolkienian. But making names new and wonderful is. And his practice issues a challenge to linguists. No theory which omits the capacity of language to give airy shape to our longings can be complete or convincing. Cultural theories of language allow us to reconstruct former realities, but only a theory which includes the capacity of language to articulate the nameless allows for the Word in its Christian sense, the *logos*. “In the beginning was the Word,” begins the philological text Tolkien placed most faith in. “And the Word was with God;

and the Word was God." It is an almost-forgotten ideal which the twentieth century, dominated by political and social ideologues, has rejected. But Tolkien had not forgotten it. He made the elven tongues because the human heart wants a language where sound, sense, and beauty converge. Much has been said about the roots of his invented words and names in Welsh, Finnish, Old Norse, Icelandic,

Anglo-Saxon. But a search into his sources, like one into his biography, seems to me to read backward. It is not his sources we want but his elvish craft, his glimpse of the sea, Galadriel singing to the hobbits as they glide away on the river of time:

Namárië! Nai hiruvalyë Valimar.
Nai elyë hiruva. Namárië!

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