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Quenti Lambardillion

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Quenti Lambardillion

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A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics by Paul Nolan Hyde

Snuffing Out Footsteps:

A Translation at Risk

One of the serious problems associated with Tolkien linguistics in general and Middle-earth linguistics in particular concerns philosophical assumptions. Within the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship (a special discussion group whose acronym needs no explanation) there are at least two strong views regarding the nature of J.R.R. Tolkien's language creations. On one hand are those who believe that the languages are a *fait accompli*; that is, all of the scrapes of invented language are somehow interrelated as part of the historical tapestry of Middle-earth. On the other hand are those who view the various Elvish transcriptions as related, but not necessarily part of the same creation. Thus, for the former group, all of the material contained in the *History of Middle-earth* series can be used to inform any specific untranslated passage in the *Lord of the Rings* and elsewhere. The latter group, however, often takes umbrage with this approach, suggesting that there is an inherent danger in assuming that everything has bearing on everything else, because the various linguistic pieces may be no more than examples of the developing languages in the primary world of Tolkien's mind rather than historical developments in the secondary world of Middle-earth. Neither party wishes to twist the investigation into Tolkien's invented languages, but both have grave concerns about the other's approach. In order to demonstrate the kinds of problems involved, we will attempt an elemental translation of a poem for which Tolkien provides a translation that seems to sort of, kind of, maybe, but hold on a minute here, fit the language elements: the untitled Nebrachar verse of *A Secret Vice*.

Nebrachar: a place of ?goblins

I have decided to call the eight lines of this poem the Nebrachar poem, because, as Christopher Tolkien says in the footnotes to *A Secret Vice*, "the name Nebrachar occurs nowhere else, and whatever story may be glimpsed in this poem cannot be identified in any form of the mythology that is extant" (*The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, p. 220, #11). The poem itself appears in Tolkien's essay on creative linguistics. In introducing the several poems which appear (*Oilima Markirya*, *The Last Ark*, *Nieninque*, *Earendel*, *Earendel at the Helm*, and "Nebrachar"), Tolkien prepares his audience for what was to follow:

The time has come now, I suppose, when I can no longer postpone the shame-faced revelation of specimens of my own more considered effort, the best I have done in limited

leisure, or by occasional thefts of time, in one direction. The beautiful phonologies, thrown away or mouldering in drawers. Arduous if pleasant in construction, the source of what little I know in the matter of phonetic construction based on my own individual predilections, will not interest you. I will offer some pieces of verse in the one language which has been expressly designed to give play to my own most normal phonetic taste — one has moods in this as in all other matters of taste, partly due to interior causes, partly to external influences; that is why I say 'normal' — and which has had a long enough history of development to allow of this final fruition: verse. It expresses, and at the same time has fixed, my personal taste. Just as the construction of a mythology expresses at first one's taste, and later conditions one's imagination, and becomes unescapable, so with this language. I can conceive, even sketch, other radically different forms, but always insensibly and inevitably now come back to this one, which must therefore be or have become peculiarly mine.

You must remember that these things were constructed deliberately to be personal, and give private satisfaction — not for scientific experiment, nor yet in expectation of any audience. A consequent weakness is therefore their tendency, too free as they were from cold exterior criticism, to be 'over-pretty', to be phonetically and semantically sentimental — while their bare meaning is probably trivial, not full of red blood or the heat of the world such as critics demand. Be kindly. For if there is any virtue in this kind of thing, it is in its intimacy, in its peculiarly shy individualism. I can sympathize with the shrinking of other language-makers, as I experience the pain of giving away myself, which is lessened by now occurring for a second time (MC, pp. 212-13).

As an aside, I might say that both ELF factions find this passage to their liking and can find ample support for their separate positions. The several poems are then given in the text with only minimal (if not interesting) introduction. In the case of "Nebrachar," however, the head note is worthy of consideration. After reciting two poems (and one translation) concerning Earendel, Tolkien says, "Or one can have a fragment from the same mythology, but a totally different if related language:" (MC, p. 217). Then follows "Nebrachar".

Dir avosaith a gwaew hinar
engluid eryd argenaid,
dir Tumledin hin Nebrachar
Yrch methail maethon magradhaid.
Damrod dir hanach dalath benn
ven Sirion gar melien,
gail Luthien heb Eglavar
dir avosaith han Nebrachar. (Ibid.)

Immediately on the heels of the poem itself, Tolkien submits a prose rendition of those eight lines:

Like a wind, dark through gloomy places the Stonefaces searched the mountains, over Tumledin (the Smooth Valley) from Nebrachar, orcs snuffling smelt out footsteps. Damrod (a hunter) through the vale, down mountain slopes, towards (the river) Sirion went laughing. Luthien he saw, as a star from Elfland shining over the gloomy places, above Nebrachar. (Ibid.)

As one begins a translation of this rather unique passage, one must consider the translation that Tolkien himself has given in conjunction with the somewhat cryptic phrases in the introduction; i.e., “same mythology” and “totally different if related language”.

Christopher Tolkien suggested in the quote given above that the story appears not to correspond with anything in the extant mythology. Admittedly the poem is short and there is not much of a story line presented, other than the idea of Damrod (and perhaps Luthien) being sought by the orcs. But the major characters and places are at least familiar to anyone who has spent a moderate amount of time with the posthumous works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Tumledin

Tumledin is undoubtedly a variant spelling of Tumladen, the Wide Valley (S, 351) of the hidden city of Gondolin. In the *Shaping of Middle-earth*, the valley is given the variant spellings Tumladin and Tumladen, the former being the older form. In the second volume of the *Lost Tales*, Tumladin is translated as “Valley of smoothness” (LT2, 382). In the *Lost Road*, *tum* is included in the Noldorin derivations for the root TUB-, meaning “deep valley, under or among hills”. In *Lost Tales*, *ladin* is glossed from the Gnomish Lexicon as meaning “level, smooth, fair, equable” (LT2, 344). In the same volume *ladin* is glossed as “level, smooth” in direct conjunction with Tumladin (LT2, 348). *Ladwen*, a familiar element in place-names, is a related term.

Damrod

Damrod, as a character, has had several manifestations. In the *Shaping of Middle-earth* (SM, 343), the *Lays of Beleriand* (LB, 377), and the *Lost Road* (LR, 422) he is the sixth son of Feanor. The *Lost Road* glosses his name as meaning “hammerer of copper” (LR, 375), from *damma-* (hammer; LR, 375) and *rauta-*, *-rod* (metal, originally “copper”; LR, 383). In these cases the name elements are declared to be Noldorin or Old Noldorin. In the *Book of Lost Tales, Volume Two*, the name varies to Amrod (LT2, 354). This same volume uses the name Damrod for the father of Beren (also Egnor; LT2, 357) and for the son of Beren and Tinuviel, the father of Elwing (also Dior; LT2, 358).

Luithien

The spelling of Luithien is glossed in the *Lost Road* as a Doriathrin word meaning “enchantress”, a derivative of the root LUK- (LR, 370). On page 439 of that same volume, the same spelling is given as the name for the daughter of

Thingol (and Melian, we presume), with the related names and spellings Luthien, Luththien, Firiell, and Tinuviel. However, in *Lost Tales, Volume Two*, Luthien is an Elvish name for England and also for Aelfwine, the traveler from England (LT2, 371). In the *Shaping of Middle-earth*, Luthien is a son of Gelmir who formerly had been called Oleg (SM, 6). A most telling gloss appears in *Lost Tales II*, page 302, cited by Christopher Tolkien:

I have been unable to find any trace of the process whereby the name of Luthien came to be so differently applied afterwards (*Luthien Tinuviel*). Another note of this period explains the name quite otherwise: ‘Luthien or Lusien was the son of Telumath (Telumaktar). Aelfwine loved the sign of Orion, and made the sign, hence the fairies called him Luthien (Wanderer).’ There is no other mention of Aelfwine’s peculiar association with Orion nor of this interpretation of the name Luthien; and this seems to be a development that my father did not pursue.

I think that it would seem reasonable to conclude, in the instance of the poem “Nebrachar”, that the Luthien referred to here is not Luthien Tinuviel, but rather the son of Telemaktar (Orion) who appears in the poem as a literal star shining over “the gloomy places”. If this be so, then the poem and its invented language dates from the same time period as the note given by J.R.R. Tolkien in the manuscript of the *Book of Lost Tales*.

Nebrachar

As was indicated above, Christopher Tolkien concluded in his footnotes to *A Secret Vice* that Nebrachar appears nowhere else in his father’s writings. In the second part of that footnote he says in addition “the poem and its translations are found also in a preliminary draft: in the poem *Luithien* appears in this as *Luthien*, and in the translation the ‘Stonefaces’ are explained to be ‘Orcs’, and *Nebrachar* ‘a place of [?goblins]’” (MC, 220).

Whoever Damrod is, he goes through a vale, down mountain slopes, towards the river Sirion. Given what we know about Gondolin, it would seem likely that the path Damrod takes is either through the Orfalch Echor (the Hidden Way towards the south-west of Gondolin) or the Cirith Thoronath through which Tuor leads the escape. Both traverse a vale, the mountain slopes of Crissaegrim, and finally the upper reaches of the river Sirion. In order to see the star Luthien as from Elfland, or Eldamar, he would have to be looking towards the West over Ered Wethrin, Hithlum, and Dor-Lomin. These may very well be the “gloomy places” spoken of over which the star shines. Nebrachar could very well be at Tol Sirion, or the various orc garrisons in Dor-Lomin and environs, or it could be Angband itself. I think that it would be clear that the events surrounding the search for Damrod by the Orcs would of necessity be after the Fall of Gondolin itself, or the Orcs upon Tumledin would be anachronistic.

Beginnings of a Translation

The value of attempting to establish a setting, historical or mythological, for the poem is evident. Poetry and lan-

guage must have some sort of grand backdrop, like Niggle's canvas, in order to have any kind of creative power. Tolkien understood this when he began his languages. He knew that there must be legends and tales for the languages to have substance. Hence, the creation of Middle-earth. Having some sort of tentative footing, then, gives us a place to set our fulcrum with which we may lift the translation into light.

"Nebrachar" (MC-217)

Dir avosaith a gwaew hinar

1 2 3 4 5

engluid eryd argenaid,

6 7 8

dir Tumledin hin Nebrachar

9 10 11 12

Yrch methail maethon magradhaid.

13 14 15 16

Damrod dir hanach dalath benn

17 18 19 20 21

ven Sirion gar meilien,

22 23 24 25

gail Luithien heb Eglavar

26 27 28 29

dir avosaith han Nebrachar.

30 31 32 33

Some of the remaining elements are easily defined because of the linguistic materials contained in the various volumes published by Christopher Tolkien and the several manuscript collections in the United States and Britain.

#4 gwaew: a Noldorin word derived from the root WA- with the meaning "wind" (LR, 397). The related Sindarin word for the blustery month of March, Gwaeron (LB, 382; U, 443), with related Gwaihir (a name of one of the great eagles of Thorondor) and the Quenya cognate for the third month, Sulime.

#7 eryd: this is, of course one of the favorite forms used for naming mountain ranges in the *Shaping of Middle-earth* and the *Lost Road*. The variant form *ered* is frequent, although *eryd* appears to be the older spelling (see SM, 108, #3; SM, 354).

#13 Yrch: this is the plural form of the Noldorin derivation from the root OROK- meaning "goblin" (LR, 379). This is the same name that Legolas uses for the Orcs in the *Fellowship of the Ring* (I, 402), as do the Elves of Lothlorien (I, 359). In the *Letters*, J.R.R. Tolkien makes the somewhat subtle distinction (to English speakers at least) between the partitive and general plurals, citing *yrch* and *orchoth* as examples (L, 178).

#20 dalath: this is noted in the Etymologies as an Exilic Noldorin form derived from DAL- meaning "flat surface, plain, plane" (LR, 353). The form also shows up in place names like Dalath Dimen, and alternates with Talath, which in turn as a Sindarin spelling appears far more frequently in the *History of Middle-earth* series.

#21 benn: not to be confused with the derivations from DER- or BES- (meaning "man" or "husband"), this form most likely is more closely related to the Gnomish Lexicon entry defined as "shape, cut, fashion" (LT, 254). Related forms produce names like Giorben, Giorbend, and Giorvent.

#26 gail: as a Noldorin form in the *Lost Road*, *gail* is defined as "bright light" derived from GAL- (LR, 362). In the *Book of Lost Tales* it is glossed as "star", with references to Gailbridhir/Gailbridhnr as alternative names for Varda (LT, 269).

Collating what can easily be glossed from the Etymologies and related texts with the place names, the following partial translation can be proposed:

Dir avosaith a gwaew hinar

1 2 3 4 5

wind

engluid eryd argenaid,

6 7 8

mountains

dir Tumledin hin Nebrachar

9 10 11 12

Tumledin Nebrachar

Yrch methail maethon magradhaid.

13 14 15 16

Orcs

Damrod dir hanach dalath benn

17 18 19 20 21

Damrod plain cut (vale?)

ven Sirion gar meilien,

22 23 24 25

Sirion

gail Luithien heb Eglavar

26 27 28 29

star Luithien Elfand

dir avosaith han Nebrachar.

30 31 32 33

Nebrachar.

There are a few words, the spelling forms of which are glossed in the Middle-earth texts, but not always gratuitously.

#1, #9, #18, #30 *Dir*: in Exilic Noldorin the form derives from the root DER- and refers to an "adult male, man" (LR, 354). There are instances where the derivatives from TIR-voice the first consonant, producing place-names like Dalath Dirnen, the Guarded Plain. Given the syntax of both the poem and the translation included with the poem, however, it is likely that *dir* is to be understood as a kind of preposition meaning "through" or "over".

#2, #31 *avosaith*: this form is glossed consistently in the Gnomish Lexicon as "avarice, money greed" (LT2, 336, 337). The word *avos* is glossed in the same place as "fortune, wealth, prosperity" (LT2, 336); *aith* is spearpoint (LR, 355). Another close form shows up in the second line of an alternative rendition of the hymn to Elbereth sung in Rivendell; the first two lines reading: *Elbereth Githioniel sir evrin peniar oriel/ dir avos-eithen mriel* (RS, 394). Given the circumstances under which the hymn was sung, together with the meaning of its replacement (see *The Road Goes Ever On*, 64), it is unlikely that the second line has much to do with greed and avarice, although the heavens might be thought of as sparkling like jewels of great wealth. Interesting, too, is the introductory particle *dir* which in this case may be "over" or "through" as well, given the translation of the printed text in the *Lord of the Rings*. Needless to say, our translation problem has now doubled, for in order to test our theories about the meaning of Nebrachar, we would need to accurately translate the Elbereth chant in the *Return of the Shadow*. To do so would be to begin to build a house of cards. Welcome to the world of linguistics! The oddity that compounds our problem is that the syntax of the translation given for our poem "Nebrachar", would lead us to conclude that *avosaith* equates to "gloomy places", which may or may not play well in the translation of the alternative Elbereth chant.

#3 *a*: an extraordinary problem exists with one letter elements; they are inevitably derived from many sources. In the present case, *a* is glossed as "and" (LR, 63), "of the" (LT2, 348), "Ah!, Oh!" (L, 448; Road, 63), and perhaps others.

#6 *engluid*: the Etymologies has an entry *en* which is glossed as "there, look!, yonder" derived from the root EN- (LR, 356). What other morphological elements might be in *engluid* in conjunction with *en* (if *en* indeed is there) is anybody's guess.

#8 *argenaid*: guessing that this word is "Stonefaces", a name for Orcs, is an exercise in the process of elimination. If our suspicion regarding #6 is anywhere correct, then #8 would presumably have to be the Orcs. We are skating on thin ice indeed. The element *ar-* would probably have to be some kind of strange metamorphosis from *sarn*, not impossible, but a mighty stretch of the imagination. I have no doubt that there is some linguistic shark somewhere who will smell out this open wound and apprise me of it in no uncertain terms.

#15 *maethon*: although the word itself does not show up there are some interesting near misses. As a derivative

of MAK-, both Noldorin words *maeth*, *maethor*, and *maetha* ("battle", "warrior", and "to fight" respectively; LR, 371) could have some bearing on the passage, given the characters who are in pursuit of Damrod.

#16 *magradhaid*: in light of some of the textual possibilities suggested in #15, it is interesting to me that in the Gnomish lexicon (see LT, 359-60) are found words like *Magron* (God of Battle), *magru* (slaughter, battle), and *magrusaig* (bloodthirsty). These kinds of glosses, however, though textually appealing, are somewhat far afield of the given translation "snuffling smelt out footsteps".

#22 *ven*: the past tense *va* is given in the *Book of Lost Tales* (LT, 264) as "went", from the root VAHA-. The Quenya word for "leave" is *lende* from the root ELED- which has no bearing on this poem.

#23 *gar*: this element is almost universally glossed as "place, district" (LT, 251). In the Etymologies, however, there is a Noldorin language *gar-* meaning "hold, possess" that enjoyed momentary consideration before the entry was struck out by Tolkien. In our poem it would seem likely that *gar* is a reference to the "region" of the Sirion.

#25 *meilien*: the *Book of Lost Tales* gives a root MIRI- in conjunction with *Samirien* (The Feast of Double Mirth; LT, 265). Given the close phonetic relationship between "I" and "r", it is not inconceivable that *meilien* (apparently "laughing" in the translation) might be related in some fashion. "Laughter" is generally represented in Elvish by way of the nick-name of Turin's sister Urwen because of her association with the stream *Lalaith* which ran nearby their home.

What is left after all of this are words like #5 *hinar*, #11 *hin*, #19 *hanach*, #28 *heb*, and #32 *han*. Attempting to nail these down at this point would require us to begin to be quite specific about the grammar and syntax of the language, whatever it is. We might begin to suspect that it is some dialect of Noldorin, given the clear glosses which we began with. Poetry, however, by its very nature, is not particularly grammatical. My best guess would be that these unidentified words are prepositions, demonstrative pronouns, and the like. But #5 *hinar* might well be a related form for "sight", like *hen* (Amor Hen, the Hill of Seeing) which would throw our discussions on #6 and #8 into a cocked hat. #11 *hin* may be related to #5 *hinar*, and I suspect that *hin* is a preposition meaning something like "from" as the translation suggests. In this case, *hinar*'s function becomes necessarily interesting. #19 *hanach* may be the adverb "down", but there is nothing in the Glossaries to even hint at the possibility. #28 *heb* is glossed as "around, round about" (LT2, 343) and the element can be found in many words which seem to suggest "edge", "encircling", and "boundary". That is not quite "from" as the translation would suggest, but we may be dealing with a loose translation, especially given #11 *hin* which may be explicitly "from". #32 *han* is most likely the preposition "above" in connection with the translation.

Combining all that we know, and some of what we expect, we can come a little closer to the morphological analysis of the poem in conjunction with the poem. I have left some of the forgoing speculations out of the parsing; even I can only go so far. Please feel free to add your own.

Nebrachar

Dir	avosaith	a	gwaew	hinar
1	2	3	4	5
<i>Through gloomy places ? wind ?</i>				

engluid	eryd	argenaidd,
6	7	8
<i>look-? mountains Stonefaces</i>		

dir	Tumledin	hin	Nebrachar
9	10	11	12
<i>Through Tumledin ? Nebrachar</i>			

Yrch	methail	maethon	magradhaid.
13	14	15	16
Orcs	?	?	?

Damrod	dir	hanach	dalath	benn
17	18	19	20	21
<i>Damrod through ? slopes tale</i>				

ven	Sirion	gar	meillen,
22	23	24	25
<i>went Sirion region laughing</i>			

gail	Luthien	heb	Eglavar
26	27	28	29
<i>star Luthien ? Elfland</i>			

dir	avosaith	han	Nebrachar.
30	31	32	33
<i>through gloomy places ? Nebrachar</i>			

The process of putting a translation together is very much like assembling a jig-saw puzzle. Sometimes we know what the picture looks like, sometimes we can only guess as the translation progresses. The ever present danger is that we will somehow damage the various pieces in our desire to have it all done. Some of us are not so scrupulous that we have no compunction about cutting little knobs off here and there and placing them on other pieces that seem to need them. I have not been completely free of this infraction. In the end, however, linguistics is a kind of Art; one that may just have a smidge too much Science in it. But I believe that it is the exactness of Science which allows us to penetrate the Art of Linguistic

Aesthetic sufficiently to step inside the mind of genius. Once we are inside, there are paths a-plenty to explore, most of them benign. But as in every created world, there are linguistic Mirkwoods. I am, thus, reminded of Thorin and Company:

Goodbye then, and really goodbye!" said Gandalf, and he turned his horse and rode down into the West. But he could not resist the temptation to have the last word. Before he had passed quite out of hearing he turned and put his hands to his mouth and called to them. They heard his voice come faintly: "Goodbye! Be good, take care of yourselves — and DON'T LEAVE THE PATH!"
(*The Hobbit*, 149-50)

Well, we all know what happened after that. ☹



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