

Winter 2-15-1985

Quenti Lambardillion: Tolkien's Linguistic Aesthetic

Paul Nolan Hyde

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hyde, Paul Nolan (1985) "Quenti Lambardillion: Tolkien's Linguistic Aesthetic," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 11: No. 3, Article 14. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol11/iss3/14>

This Column is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



Quenti Lambardillion: Tolkien's Linguistic Aesthetic

Abstract

Discusses the aesthetic basis of Tolkien's creativity in his love of language, supported by extensive quotations from his letters.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages—Aesthetics

Quenti Lambardillion

A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

Paul Nolan Hyde

Tolkien's Linguistic Aesthetic

Amidst the critical furor over his fantasy works, J.R.R. Tolkien seldom took up the gauntlet. He did, however, discourage thesis and dissertation writers contemplating work on his fiction. Lin Carter, in his Tolkien: A Look Behind "The Lord of the Rings", quotes from the transcript of an interview between Professor Tolkien and Henry Resnik:

He finds the attentions of his enthusiastic following rather embarrassing and his notoriety a bit of a bore. He particularly feels that studies of his work (such, I presume, as this one) to be an annoyance. He feels that they are premature. When asked if he approved of this sort of intensive research, he replied: "I do not, while I am alive anyhow." He went on to say that he has read some of these studies, "and they are very bad, most of them; they are nearly all either psychological analyses or they try to go into sources, and I think most of them are rather vain efforts." (p.29)

Tolkien's aloofness from the critical fray may have been due in part to the fact that he had already divulged the source of inspiration for his works and no one had taken him seriously. In the opening paragraph of the "Foreword" to the second edition of The Fellowship of the Ring, Professor Tolkien indicated that the story was "primarily linguistic in inspiration and was begun in order to provide the necessary background of 'history' for Elvish tongues." (I,p.5) In another place he was quoted as saying, "The invention of language is the foundation. The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. I should have preferred to write in 'Elvish'...It is to me, anyway, largely an essay in 'linguistic aesthetic'." [1]

This business of "linguistic aesthetic" has, for the most part, been ignored, even by those who have tried to understand the inner workings of the invented languages of Middle-Earth. Part of the problem may be due to the fact that Tolkien was not able to fully express what he meant himself, although he often tried to do it. In a letter to his son Christopher in February of 1958, Tolkien admitted:

I do not know what I mean, because 'aesthetic' is always impossible to catch in a net of words. Nobody believes me when I say that my long book is an attempt to create a world in which a form of language agreeable to my personal aesthetic might seem real. But it is true. An enquirer (among many) asked what the L.R. was all about, and whether it was an 'allegory'. And I said it was an effort to create a situation in which a common greeting would be "elen sila lumenn' omentielmo", and

that the phrase (sic) long antedated the book. (Letters, p.264-5)

In that same letter (which was written to congratulate Christopher on a paper delivered at St. Anne's College) Tolkien commented that during the lecture

I suddenly realized that I am a 'pure' philologist. I like history, and am moved by it, but its finest moments for me are those in which it throws light on words and names! Several people (and I agree) spoke to me of the art with which you made the beady-eyed Attila on his couch almost vividly present. Yet oddly, I find the thing that really thrills my nerves is the one you mentioned casually: "atta, attila". Without those syllables the whole great drama both of history and legend loses savour for me--or would. (Ibid., p.264)

Tolkien felt that this peculiar sensitivity that he had was a gift, one which he possessed almost from birth. In response to an inquiry by W.H. Auden as to how Tolkien began The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien said:

That is rather like asking of Man when language started. It was an inevitable, though conditionable, evolution of the birth-given. It has always been with me: the sensibility to linguistic pattern which affects me emotionally like colour or music; and the passionate love of growing things; and the deep response to legends (for the lack of a better word) that have what I would call the North-western temper and temperature. (Ibid., p.212)

In that same letter, speaking of this emotional response to language pattern, Tolkien revealed the affect of his initial study of Gothic on him.

I discovered in it not only modern historical philology, which appealed to the historical and scientific side, but for the first time the study of a language out of mere love: I mean for the acute aesthetic pleasure derived from a language for its own sake, not only free from being useful but free even from being the 'vehicle of a literature'. (Ibid., p.213)

After recounting a few of his early aesthetic experiences with Old English, Latin, and Greek, Tolkien tells Auden

A fascination that Welsh names had for me, even if only seen on coal-trucks, from childhood is another; though people only gave me books that were incomprehensible to a child when I asked for information. I did not learn any Welsh till I was an undergraduate, and found in it an abiding linguistic-aesthetic

satisfaction. Spanish was another: my guardian was half Spanish, and in my early teens I used to pinch his books and try to learn it: the only Romance language that gives me the particular pleasure of which I am speaking—it is not quite the same as the mere perception of beauty: I feel the beauty of say Italian or for that matter of modern English (which is very remote from my personal taste): it is more like the appetite for a needed food. Most important, perhaps, after Gothic was the discovery in Exeter College library, when I was supposed to be reading for Honour Mods, of a Finnish Grammar. It was like discovering a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a find and flavor never tasted before. It quite intoxicated me; and I gave up the attempt to invent an 'unrecorded' Germanic language, and my 'own language'—or series of invented languages—became heavily Finnicized in phonetic pattern and structure. (Ibid., p.213-214)

Over and over again, Tolkien appeals to emotional responses that Auden might have to music, color, or taste in order to convey the thrill which he had for language and how that affected his inventions, particularly the invented languages. Referring to these invented languages, C.S. Lewis said of Tolkien:

Strange as it may seem, it (the invention of languages) was undoubtedly the source of that unparalleled richness and concreteness which later distinguished him from all other philologists. He had been inside language. (Bog., p.133-4)

Humphrey Carpenter's observation on Tolkien's distinction as a philologist runs in a similar vein.

Comparative philology grew up in nineteenth century Germany, and although its practitioners were painstaking in their accuracy their writing was almost unredeemed in its dullness. Tolkien's own mentor Joseph Wright had been trained in Germany, and while his books are invaluable for their contribution to the science of language they reflect almost nothing of Wright's vigorous personality. Much as he loved his old teacher, Tolkien was perhaps thinking partly of Wright when he wrote of "the bespectacled philologist, English, but trained in Germany, where he lost his literary soul." (Ibid., p.134)

The reason Tolkien did not lose his literary soul was that he appreciated the relationship between language and the reason for language; the same kind of relationship that he felt existed between the history of a barbarian and the syllables "Attila". In a letter to a Mr. Thompson, Tolkien explained the relationship:

Thank you very much for your kind and encouraging letter. Having set myself a task, the arrogance of which I fully recognized and trembled at: being precisely to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own: it is a wonderful thing to be told that I have succeeded, at least with those who have still the undarkened heart and mind.

It has been a considerable labor, beginning really as soon as I was able to

begin anything, but effectively beginning when I was an undergraduate and began to explore my own linguistic aesthetic in language-composition. It was just as the 1914 War burst on me that I made the discovery that 'legends' depend on the language to which they belong; but a living language depends equally on the 'legends' which it conveys by tradition. (For example, that the Greek mythology depends far more on the marvellous aesthetic of its language and so of its nomenclature of persons and places and less on its content than people realize, though of course it depends on both. And "vice versa". Volapuk, Esperanto, Ido, Novial, etc. etc. are dead, far deader than ancient unused languages, because their authors never invented any Esperanto legends.) So though being a philologist by nature and trade (yet one always primarily interested in the aesthetic rather than the functional aspects of language) I began with language, I found myself involved in inventing 'legends' of the same 'taste'. The early work was mostly done in camps and hospitals between 1915 and 1918—when time allowed. But I think a lot of this work goes on at the other (to say lower, deeper, or higher introduces a false gradation) levels, when one is saying how-do-you-do, or even 'sleeping'. I have long ceased to "invent" (though even patronizing or sneering critics on the side praise my 'invention'): I wait till I seem to know what really happened. Or until it writes itself. (Letters, p.230-1)

Philip Norman once quoted Tolkien as saying that behind every name he invented there was a story waiting to be told.[2] Of this sensitivity for words, Tolkien wrote to Father Robert Murray.

I was brought up in the Classics, and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer. Also being a philologist, getting a large part of any aesthetic pleasure that I am capable of from the "form" of words (and especially from the "fresh" association of word-form with word sense), I have always best enjoyed things in a foreign language, or one so remote as to feel like it (such as Anglo-Saxon). (Letters, p.172)

In one of the many letters to Christopher during the composition of The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien determines not to change the name of Sam Gamgee.

As to Sam Gamgee. I quite agree with what you say, and I wouldn't dream of altering his name without your approval; but the object of the alteration was precisely to bring out the comicalness, peasantry, and if you will the Englishry of this jewel among hobbits. Had I thought it out in the beginning, I should have given all of the hobbits very English names to match the Shire. The Gaffer came first; and Gamgee followed as an echo of old Lamora jokes[3]. I doubt if it is English. I knew of it only through Gamgee (Tissue) as cottonwool was called being invented by a man of that name last century. However, I daresay all your imagination of the character is now bound up with the name. (Ibid., p.88)

The final phrase is Tolkien's most revelatory;

"Imagination...bound up with the name." The source of power for Tolkien's creative writing consisted of the thrill of the imaginative discovery of the significance of a linguistic novum, even if it were his own invention. Yet for all of Tolkien's private and public expression of his linguistic aesthetic, the languages of Middle-Earth came under attack from the first reviews. Edmund Wilson dubbed the whole linguistic creation a "philological game" which Tolkien played with his readers.[4] Even R.J. Reilly, who was generally enthusiastic about The Lord of the Rings, claimed that "no one ever exposed the nerves and fibers of his being in order to make up a language; it is not only insane but unnecessary." [5] W.R. Irwin disagreed:

Emphasis on language is even more persistent in Tolkien's trilogy. He adapts to his purpose all the traditional eloquence of heroic romance: riddles, talismanic battle-cries, charms and incantations, efficacious names for weapons and horses, courtly address, parleys, defiance, curses, magical songs, exhortations to valor, the slimy speech of treachery. Proper names of evocative power abound. Moreover, Tolkien keeps ever prominent the linguistic history of the world which he is creating. This is far too complex to discuss here.[6]

Actually, the topic is too great even to discuss at length in The Lord of the Rings, as the subsequent publication of The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales would indicate. Even with these later volumes much remains unexplicated. Ruth Noel, herself a student of Tolkien's invented languages, sees Tolkien's linguistic training predominant in the shaping of the racial characteristics of the inhabitants of Middle-Earth. Noel observes

An expert philologist, Tolkien had a virtuoso control of language. He changed the type of English he used to suit the characters or events of his works, he created consistent languages for a variety of peoples, and he engaged in complex word-play. The languages reinforce Tolkien's depiction of the peoples through the sounds they use, indicate the relationships between other speakers and the hobbits, and clarify the interrelationships of various peoples.[7]

Even though W.H. Auden missed the point that many of the invented names and languages were invented before the stories, yet his observation regarding the relationship between the character and his language is accurate.

The first task of the maker of an imaginary world is the same as that of Adam in Eden: he has to find names for everyone and everything in it and if, as in Tolkien's world, there is more than one language, he has to invent as many series of names as there is tongues. In the nominative gift, Tolkien surpasses any writer, living or dead, whom I have ever read; to find the "right" names is hard enough in a comic world; in a serious one success seems almost magical. Moreover, he shows himself capable of inventing not only names but whole languages which reflect the nature of those who speak them.[8]

Tolkien himself was well aware of the association which he had made between race and language in his

works. It was part of his linguistic aesthetic. "It is the things of racial and linguistic significance that attract me and stick to my memory," he wrote to Christopher. (Letters, p.108) In his letter to Auden, quoted above, Tolkien elaborated on what he meant by his linguistic tastes being hereditary:

In any case if you want to write a tale of this sort you must consult your roots, and a man of the North-west of the Old World will set his heart and the action of his tale in an imaginary world of that air, and in that situation: with the shoreless Sea of his innumerable ancestors to the West, and the endless lands (out of which enemies mostly come) to the East. Though in addition, his heart may remember, even if he has been cut off from all oral tradition, the rumour all along the coasts of the Men out of the Sea.

I say about this 'heart', for I have what some might call an Atlantis complex. Possibly inherited, though my parents died too young for me to know such things about them, and too young to transfer such things by words. Inherited from me (I suppose) by only one of my children, though I did not know that about my son until recently, and he did not know it about me. I mean the terrible recurrent dream (beginning with memory) of the Great Wave, towering up, and coming in ineluctably over the trees and green fields. (I have bequeathed it to Faramir.) I don't think I have had it since I wrote the 'Downfall of Numenor' as the last of the legends of the First and Second Age.

I am a West-midlander by blood (and took to early west-midland English as a known tongue as soon as I set eyes on it), but perhaps a fact of my personal history may partly explain why the 'North-western air' appeals to me both as 'home' and as something discovered. I was actually born in Bloemfontein, and so those deeply implanted impressions, underlying memories that are still pictorially available for inspection, of first childhood are for me those of a hot parched country. My first Christmas memory is of blazing sun, drawn curtains and a drooping eucalyptus. (Ibid., p.212-13)

A few lines later he concludes:

Linguistic taste changes like everything else, as time goes on; or oscillates between poles. Latin and the British type of Celtic have it now, with the beautifully co-ordinated and patterned (if simply patterned) Anglo-Saxon near at hand and further off the Old Norse with the neighboring but alien Finnish. Roman-British might not one say? Scandinavia and the Baltic. Well, I daresay such linguistic tastes, with due allowance for school-overlay, are as good or better a test of ancestry as blood groups.

All this as background to the stories, though languages and names are for me inextricable from the stories. They are and were so to speak an attempt to give a background or a world in which my expressions of linguistic taste could have a function. The stories were comparatively late in coming. (Ibid., p.214)

This sense of linguistic aesthetic is not only expressed in the invented languages, but also in

Tolkien's use of historical languages and in the dialogue between the characters themselves. In Tolkien's fantasy works, then, language not only becomes an outward manifestation of a character's nature, but also a cultural marker. There are several techniques which J.R.R. Tolkien used to develop the cultural history and personality for each of his races and individual characters through the outward manifestations of language, both spoken and written. All of them spring from his linguistic aesthetic, his sense for philological sound and form.

Notes

[1] Edmund Wilson, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!", The Nation, 182 (April 14, 1956), p.312

[2] Philip Norman, "The Prevalence of Hobbits," New York Times Magazine (Jan. 15, 1967), 30-31, 97, 100, 102.

[3] Letters, p.439, "While on holiday with his family at Lamora Cove in Cornwall in 1932, Tolkien amused the children by giving the nickname 'Gaffer Gamage' to a local 'character'; 347-8, "It started with a holiday about thirty years ago at Lamora Cove (then wild and fairly inaccessible). There was a curious local character, an old man who used to go about swapping gossip and weather wisdom and such like. To amuse my boys I named him Gaffer Gamage, and the name became part of the family lore to fix on old chaps of the kind."

[4] Wilson, op. cit., p.312.

[5] R. J. Reilly, "Tolkien and the Fairy Story," Thought, Vol. 38 (Spring, 1963), p. 96.

[6] W. R. Irwin, "There and Back Again," Sewanee Review Vol. 69 (October-December, 1961), p. 572.

[7] Ruth S. Noel, The Mythology of Middle Earth (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 28.

[8] Neil D. Isaacs and Zimbardo, Rose A, eds., Tolkien and the Critics (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 50-1.

Continued from page 41

in some Victorian cabbage-patch), MacDonald refers to "the world once-invented" and how one must go on from there to develop the story line, always within a lawful, literally moral, perimeter. I think this contradiction is a matter of terminology. George MacDonald's world in the Scottish hills and dark, mysterious mine tunnels, was a landscape already implanted in his own unique subconscious as though by immaculate conception. The Princess and the Goblin and The Princess and Curdie blossomed into two of the loveliest of fairy tales. Although they have a different flavor from the works of later fantasists, who wander more widely in myth and legend, MacDonald has been referred to as "the father of modern fantasy." Poet as well, and myth-maker, his fairy stories are of a nature and style that appeal most of all to children.

James Thurber with his wry wit and perceptive satire is a favorite of mine but I hadn't expected to find him writing fantasy nor did I know him as a fantasist. In fact, he has written a number of fairy tales; The Thirteen Clocks, The Wonderful O, and

several others. Humor can belong as legitimately to fantasy as do horror, magic, dreams. Every area of literature has a place there as long as it observes the accepted rules. Thurber has expressed his belief that L. Frank Baum's The Wizard of Oz did qualify as fantasy though there are some in this collection of critical and reflective essays who disagree. Michael Moorcock in his essay "Wit and Humour, in Fantasy," declares that "fantastic fiction is happily very rich in humour." Thurber's second piece, "Tempest in a Looking Glass," is an attack on the psychoanalytic view of the fairy tale, specifically the ridiculous charges leveled at Alice in Wonderland by Dr. Paul Schilder, research professor of psychiatry at New York University. He found this utterly charming, imaginative work by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson full of "cruelty, fear, and sadistic trends of cannibalism!"

Besides those authors mentioned above we find Andre Norton with "On Writing Fantasy," while Katherine Kurtz continues to charm the child-like curiosity with her Celtic-English, The Chronicles of the Deryni. Felix Marti-Ibaniz and Mollie Hunter believe that fantasy, though most appreciated for its sheer magical entertainment, is also beneficial to young readers, actually helping them to adjust to a harsh world from which they may want to withdraw. That familiar, happy, eccentric character, G.K. Chesterton, tells us that fairyland, though lovely and infinitely desirable, is not a place where one can throw aside all discretion and do as one likes. It is a highly moral country where goodness is rewarded only if all the conditions are met. "The whole happiness of fairyland hangs upon one thread." There is one door that Bluebeard's wife must not open. "A promise is broken to a cat and the whole world goes wrong." In his essay, "Tolkien's Magic Ring," Peter Beagle praises the credibility and purity and poetry of that widely known fantasist.

Fantasy in mythological stories and science fiction has become more popular in this century where the classical fairy tale once predominated. Not every reader is drawn to fantasy. It takes a certain kind of imagination; the kind that looks inward and backward to the unconscious mind and ancestral archetypes. We escape "into ourselves," as Susan Cooper puts it. While Jane Langton in her essay "The Weak Place in the Cloth," observes that the fantasy lover is, like Dr. Seuss's foolish king who wanted something new to come out of the sky, "something different than the ordinary sunshine, rain, and snow."

Although all of us seek at times to escape from the worries or the grey monotony of everyday life, the reader of fantasy is drawn to an impossible world that resembles the real so strongly yet so subtly, he is completely smitten. He hears and heeds the echoes of Pan's pipes floating over the wind in the willows, or he stumbles with eager curiosity over the borders of Lilliput. Alice's deliciously contrary Wonderland entices him beyond resistance, or he soars on magic wings in the Land of Oz in the same real way that one floats in a dream.

I found, as I believe will every lover of the fairy tale, that the book Fantasists on Fantasy is a fantasy in itself. Readers, like wine-tasters utterly absorbed in the tasting experience, will savor with profound, sensuous appreciation, each of these essays by those who commute to the land of faery and choose to tell us of its wonders.

Mabel Drew