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Negating and Affirming Spirit Through Language: The Integration of Character, Magic, and Story in *The Lord of the Rings*: Part II

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Negating and Affirming Spirit Through Language: The Integration of Character, Magic, and Story in *The Lord of the Rings*: Part II

Abstract

Focuses on Tolkien's narrative treatment in *The Lord of the Rings* and the "Ring as an emergent symbol of language itself." Notes that through Tolkien's "characterization of protagonists and antagonists, his use of sub-texts and 'sub-authors,' Tolkien demonstrates the ways in which magic and language are bound up with one another."

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Language; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Magic; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Narrative; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Symbolism

NEGATING AND AFFIRMING SPIRIT THROUGH LANGUAGE

THE INTEGRATION OF CHARACTER, MAGIC, AND STORY IN
THE LORD OF THE RINGS: PART II

ALAN MCCOMAS

Continued from the Last Issue

Part Four

Looking at One Ring Through Another: A Search for the Sources of Magic.

Distinguishing Sauron from his Ring ought not to be terribly difficult. The two ought to be as different in nature as a knight and his sword, or a wizard and his staff. But Sauron and the Ring are really so deeply enmeshed with each other that pulling them apart in order to separate them would be like pulling apart an organism in order to distinguish the nervous tissue from the muscle tissue. They are two aspects of the same totality.

The nerves and muscle or brains and brawn metaphor of Sauron's relation to the Ring is an appropriate one. In making the Ring, we might say that what he did was separate his will and his power. Thus in making it Sauron became a creature of which the Ring is an essential extension. Without the Ring, his Will remains dangerously powerful, but its power is considerably diminished. The Ring lends power to anyone who wears it, but the catch is that the power is by nature evil, and that the use of the power inevitably draws the user back into the Will. Further, Sauron's Ring of power is not entirely unique. It operates in context with a number of other such rings. Gandalf summarizes the situation at I, 82, as follows:

The Enemy (Sauron) still lacks one thing to give him strength and knowledge to beat down all resistance, break the last defences, and cover all the lands in a second darkness. He lacks the One Ring.

The Three, fairest of all, the Elf-lords hid from him, and his hand never touched them or sullied them. Seven the Dwarf-kings possessed, but three he has recovered, and the others the dragons have consumed. Nine he gave to Mortal Men, proud and great, and so ensnared them. Long ago they fell under the dominion of the One, and they became Ringwraiths, shadows under his great Shadow, his most terrible servants. Long ago. It is many a year since the Nine walked abroad. Yet who knows: as the Shadow grows once more, they too may walk again. But come! We will not speak of such things even in the morning of the Shire.

So it is now: the Nine he has gathered to himself; the Seven also, or else they are destroyed. The Three are

hidden still. But that no longer troubles him. *He only needs the One; for he made that Ring himself, it is his, and he let a great part of his own former power pass into it, so that he could rule all the others* [my emphasis]. If he recovers it, then he will command them all again, wherever they be, even the Three, and all that has been wrought with them will be laid bare, and he will be stronger than ever." (I, p. 82).

What the Ring contains is Sauron's power, but exactly what kind of power is it? Its qualities (beyond the invisibility it confers) remain nondescript throughout Tolkien's narrative — firstly because it is too dangerous to be put to use, and secondly because its function is to *command other rings*.

Whatever the magical qualities of the three hidden rings are, the One is meant to subjugate and control them.

Who then are the keepers of the Three Elven Rings, and what sort of powers do they gain from their rings? Tolkien answers these questions within *The Lord of the Rings* (III, 381), as well as in an appendix (III, 456), and in the "legendarium" (*Silmarillion*, p. 288, 298). So we may discover not only the names of those who kept the rings, but the names of the rings themselves.

Elrond kept Vilya, the ring of air, set with sapphire, "mightiest of the three"; Galadriel kept Nenya, the ring of water, set with adamant; and Gandalf kept Narya, the ring of fire, set with ruby.

The specific powers of the Three Elvish Rings have different qualities (Vilya/air, Nenya/water, Narya/fire) and are expositied through the narrative in a similar fashion. The Three Rings lend their keepers power "to ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world" (*Silmarillion*, 288). Tolkien words this same idea with a different emphasis elsewhere: "and where they (any of the Three) abode there mirth also dwelt and all things were unstained by the griefs of time" (*Silmarillion*, 298). Further, each of the Elven Rings has clearly defined attributes, which address specific aspects of reality — air, water, fire. An ostensible example of this is the small scene presented in the index, where Narya, Gandalf's ring, is given to him by the Elvish Lord Cirdan. Cirdan desires Gandalf to take it specifically because, as he says,

your labors will be heavy; but it will support you in the weariness that you have taken upon yourself. For this is the Ring of Fire, and with it you may rekindle

hearts in a world that grows chill. But as for me, my heart is with the Sea, and I will dwell by the grey shores until the last ship sails. I will await you." (III, 456)

In as much as the rings are texts (literally textual constructions, and by inference, objects like Sauron's Ring, which is overwritten with a textual spell of magic), the manner in which Tolkien images them denotes a balance between identity and objectivity that signifies a language more positively evolved, and less obstructive to its consciousness, than our own. The charms or texts that — we may infer — their makers used to enchant the three Elven rings are represented as not having been entirely isolated from nature. Each ring bears a stone referring it to an element, and each is oriented toward the essential aspects of that element. The "language" represented by these rings is thus oriented toward Spirit — toward the divine creation itself, toward the language of being. This is antithetical to the ostensibly unidentified and unidentifiable facade of the One — plain, round, smooth — it is a chameleon or a parasite by comparison, a text devised to articulate other texts, rather than any immediate quality of reality. To go back to Calvino, we might say that the Three comprise a transformational system — a language — that images the world. The implication is that Sauron, in the One, has re-cognized the world as language. His primary interest lies in controlling the language represented by the Three — he is insensible to the reality it denotes.

If we can find narrative evidence of the qualities of the Elvish rings, we will have an inverted picture of the power Sauron would gain through them. This can be done, and two things to be discovered in the search are that (1) the qualities of each of the three rings, like those of the One, are bound up with the personal traits of the characters with whom they are identified: (2) in the case of Elrond and Galadriel, both of whom are sovereigns, this enmeshment of character and enchantment (or power) is further extended into the attributes — geographic, architectural, aesthetic, and otherwise, of their realms. Thus, in Rivendell, Frodo finds himself

safe in the Last Homely House east of the Sea. That house was, as Bilbo had long ago reported, "a perfect house, whether you like food or sleep or storytelling or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all." Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness. (I, 297).

The qualities of Elrond's house, in other words, refer to the qualities of the power bestowed by Vilya. Galadriel's ring, Nenyà, casts a spell over her lands that is analogous, but imbued with a different emphasis. As Frodo fords the Silverlode, the stream defining the border of Lothlórien, (Galadriel's realm), and sets foot on the Naith of Lorien,

a strange feeling had come upon him, and it deepened as he walked on into the Naith: it seemed to him that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more. In Rivendell there was memory of ancient things; in Lorien the

ancient things still lived on in the waking world (I, 453).

A correlation is thus demonstrated between Elrond/Rivendell, Galadriel/Lothlórien, and by implication, Sauron/Mordor. Gandalf is the exception to the rule: "he wandered far in the North and West and made never in any land any lasting abode" (*Silmarillion*, 300). The qualities of Narya must therefore necessarily be entirely evinced through the character and actions of Gandalf himself. Gandalf is a much more central character than Galadriel or Elrond, and turns out to be the ontological equal of Sauron, who is a Maia (an angelic being — Sauron's ontology is explained below) not an elf like Elrond or Galadriel. Consequently, though any one of the Three would serve as an antithetical index to the nature of the power delivered by Sauron's Ring, I will cite only the qualities of Gandalf's ring to approach a definition of the (potential) qualities of Sauron's Ring.

As noted above, Gandalf is especially able to "rekindle hearts", and we find him doing precisely that when he first re-appears to Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas (II, 124-125), when he heals King Theoden in the halls of Meduseld (II, 151-153), when he breaks the power of Saruman (II, 238-241), or when he rescues Faramir from the Nazgûl (III, 98-101). In a larger sense, it is Gandalf who rallies the free peoples of Middle-earth to oppose Sauron. Gandalf's ring somehow gives him the authority he needs to orchestrate the movements of the forces of good in the War of the Ring. So its power seems to be psychic, in one sense, because it helps Gandalf persuade (or cajole) people (and eagles, and even trees, for that matter) into taking action against the Enemy.

The ring of fire also seems to bestow metaphysical power of a sort, evidenced in the healing of King Theoden, for before Gandalf speaks to Theoden, the king appears as "a man so bent with age that he seemed almost a dwarf" (II, 148), but afterwards, "...tall and straight he stood, and his eyes were blue as he looked into the opening sky" (II, 153), "...yet he looked at Gandalf and smiled and as he did so many lines of care were smoothed away and did not return" (ibid.), and "as his fingers took the hilt (of his sword, brought to him by his command — and Gandalf's request), it seemed to the watchers that firmness and strength returned to his thin arm (II, 155)."

Gandalf's ring lends him not only the power to "rekindle" people's hearts, but even to miraculously heal their bodies, at least in Theoden's case. The metaphor seems to be that the ring somehow makes the fire of the human spirit burn brighter, rousing those whom it affects from complacency, despair, even dotage.

But Gandalf also demonstrates a command of actual as well as metaphorical fire. Gandalf's "fame in the Shire was due mainly to his skill with fires, smokes, and lights" (I, 48). Recounting his fight with the black riders at Weathertop, Gandalf comments "...they closed round at night, and I was besieged on the hill-top, in the old ring of Amon Sul. I was hard put to it indeed: such light and flame

cannot have been seen on Weathertop since the war-beacons of old" (I, 346). Gandalf guides the group of nine walkers, assembled in Rivendell at the Council of Elrond, to accompany Frodo and Sam in their quest to destroy the Ring. When the company of the Ring, in their attempt to cross the mountains through a high pass, are caught in a blizzard, and no one, not even Gimli the Dwarf, can light a fire to keep from freezing to death,

...Gandalf himself took a hand. Picking up a faggot he held it aloft for a moment, and then with a word of command, *aur an edraith ammen!* he thrust his staff into the midst of it. At once a great spout of green and blue flame sprang out, and the wood flared and sputtered. "If there are any to see, then I at least am revealed to them," he said. "I have written *Gandalf is here* in signs that all can read from Rivendell to the Mouths of Anduin." (I, 380).

These are only a few (and not the most dramatic) of the episodes which evidence Gandalf's elemental command of fire itself. Clearly the ability to "rekindle" Cirdan speaks of when he gives Narya to Gandalf applies to the qualities of Narya in many senses, yet all of them stem from qualities of "fire" — or perhaps more literally from qualities of *spirit*. What Narya seems to do is manipulate the essential or spiritual qualities of fire — an elemental aspect of creation — in all its manifestations.

If Sauron regained the Ruling Ring, he would acquire control of all the powers Narya lends to Gandalf, and could pervert them to achieve his own evil ends. Thus through Narya we might infer that Sauron could affect the spiritual aspect of people's perceptions by filling them with fear, despair, confusion, madness (and this is the actual tactic employed by the ringwraiths, Sauron's most lethal servants), versus the courage, hope, purpose, and clarity inspired by Gandalf. Physically Sauron might accelerate the processes of age or disease in his enemies, versus the youth and vigor Gandalf "rekindles" in Theoden. Sauron's elemental command of fire would also, through the Ruling Ring, appropriate all the aspects exhibited by Narya, but amplify and invert them (he would probably wield a "dark fire" much like the Balrogs at I, 428-430).

Are Gandalf's words also empowered by his ring? He speaks "a word of command" to ignite the fire in the blizzard, and his healing of Theoden seems to be accomplished entirely through speech. This takes us back to the earlier discussion of Benjamin's "language of being" versus "language of knowing." Is a ring of power a link, a reconnection of the two disparate languages, somehow re-uniting word and object?

Gandalf uses elvish words (possibly with the implication that their "archaic" nature links them with their object) to light the fire in the blizzard, but his speech with Theoden, no less magical in its effect, is delivered entirely in "the common tongue" of Middle-earth. In both cases his words, regardless of their form, seem to exhibit a transcendent function in the actual manifestation of their object

(burning or healing). If my argument that such transcendence in language must be achieved by the speaker, rather than the speech, is to hold up, then perhaps I had better ask "who is Gandalf" as well as "who is Sauron?" To do that, we must step outside of *The Lord of the Rings* and go to its referent texts, including *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales*, where considerably more information about rings of power and their users (which now appear to become increasingly integrated in all their aspects) can be found.

Note (1): Vilya/air, Nenyia/water, Narya/fire: By associating each of the three rings with a classical element, Tolkien seems to suggest a reference to the Greek elemental quaternity — earth, air, fire, water. The absence of "earth" here strikes me as a pointedly conspicuous omission on Tolkien's part. My argument above hinges on this omission!

Nevertheless, the question arises — could Sauron's Ring be associated with "earth," the fourth (missing) element?

An adequate answer to this question would require a detailed symbolic analysis of material from *The Silmarillion*.

Part Five

Spiritual Ontologies of Sauron and Gandalf.

Of old there was Sauron the Maia, whom the Sindar in Beleriand named Gorthaur. In the beginning of Arda Melkor seduced him to his allegiance, and he became the greatest and the most trusted of the servants of the Enemy, and the most perilous, for he could assume many forms, and for long if he willed he could still appear noble and beautiful, so as to deceive all but the most wary. (*Sil.*, p. 285).

To begin with we find here that Sauron, though less than a god, is more than an immortal Elf. The Maia are a species of angelic beings, somewhat less powerful than the Valar (of whom Melkor was the single most powerful, but turned to evil). The Valar are the first beings made by the omniscient, omnipotent God in Tolkien's cosmogony, who is named Eru Iluvatar. This God creates the world with a Word, much as it is created in Genesis (the text to which Benjamin applies his linguistic dichotomy of being vs. knowing): "therefore I say EA! Let these things Be!" (*Sil.*, p. 20).

Both the Valar and the Maia are endowed, by Iluvatar (to a respectively more limited extent), with the power to manifest their Word. Thus through the speech (or "song") of the Vala Manwe, the sky manifests. Manwe is associated with the air, and with all birds. Ulmo is the Vala who invents water, and dwells in the ocean. Melkor's evil words manifest "...bitter cold immoderate...the snow, and the cunning work of frost", and "heats and fire without restraint" (*Sil.*, p. 19).

The Maiar (and their incarnate forms, the Istari) are described by Christopher Tolkien as "members of the 'people' of (the Valar)" (*UT*, p. 393), extending and enhancing the aspects of Creation which each Vala manifests.

Sauron was originally "of the Maiar of Aule" (Sil, p. 32), a Vala whose aspects can be identified with earth and fire. Thus Sauron's transcendent linguistic powers are rooted in his ontology, not in the language he employs.

Sauron, a Maia, is a creature whose beginnings predate the creation of the world itself. And so, as it turns out, is Gandalf. Gandalf is a member of the order called the "Istari", briefly referred to in the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* (III, 455), but defined elsewhere more explicitly. In *Unfinished Tales* Christopher Tolkien brings to light some notes written by his father on the nature of the Istari, including this one:

We must assume that they [the Istari] were all Maiar, that is persons of the "angelic" order, though not necessarily of the same rank. The maiar were "spirits", but capable of self-incarnation, and could take "humane" (especially Elvish) forms. [*Unfinished Tales*, p. 394. (This note is further corroborated and expanded by the comments on p. 395)].

So it is what a "wizard" is, not what he says, that lends a "magical" quality to his words. Tolkien makes a hierarchy of spirit beginning with its omnipotent form, and descending through angelic orders into physical forms — immortal elves, mortal men. The potency of the Word of a Spirit diminishes as the form of the spirit is diminished. Spirit itself springs from the omnipotent Word of Iluvatar. The Words of the Valar and Maiar evoke the living forms and kinetic forces of nature — plants, animals, stars, mountains, oceans, wind, ice — but a crucial distinction is made between the creative powers of the Omnipotent (Iluvatar) and those of the finite angelic spirits who shape the world that has its genesis in Iluvatar. Only Iluvatar can create Spirit. The manipulations and manifestations of Spirit with which the Valar give the World its shape might be roughly equated with magic.

The Word of entities like Sauron and Gandalf can affect Spirit, but cannot generate it. Spirit gives the world and all its elements reality. Magic, by contrast, can manipulate, but is secondary to, Spirit. Magic requires some essential, pre-existing material to work with.

Magic in *The Lord of the Rings* can be seen as a demonstration of "the language of man." Magic is a limited power, which allows those who master it to unite, transform, and articulate the various aspects of nature.

Out of Spirit comes "the language of things," the cornerstone on which magic rests.

The important difference distinguishing the two ideas lies in their respective limitations. Magic is finite, Spirit infinite.

To carry the argument back to Benjamin, we might qualify his two types of language as two sets of language — the magical or epistemological being a subset of the spiritual or ontological — the former a model of reality unidentified with, but ultimately contained by the latter, the reality it reflects. If Spirit is the only agent capable of

transcending, with language, the bounds of epistemological language, then the extent of a conscious spirit's finiteness defines the scope of its ability to manifest ontological language.

Part Six

Handing The Ring To The Reader: The Poetic Demonstration of a Linguistic Conception.

I have mentioned that Sauron is both more and less the creator of the Ring because of the transformation he brings about in his own nature by committing his essence to the rings. If we read *The Lord of the Rings* as an investigation of what could happen when language transcends symbol, we must recognize that though Sauron's Word has magical powers, the process he has undergone to engineer a device (or devices) capable of containing those powers, is both linguistic and reciprocal, if indeed language and consciousness "act and react on one another". Sauron himself is transformed by the meaning of the spell with which he forges the Ring into an entirely cerebral, linguistic entity. It is as language that Sauron's power animates the Ring. Sauron makes of himself an impersonal (vs. characterized) and specifically unnatural (vs. supernatural) force.

To begin with, Sauron is, like all of the other characters in the story, a construction of language, one that has a secondary reality of its own, an imaginary person. But after having incarnated himself in the Ring, Sauron becomes something less — merely a text that signifies itself: Sauron is the verse, inscribed with "fire letters" that encircles the One Ring — the text that Gandalf reads to Frodo after heating the Ring up in the hearth in Frodo's living room:

"It is quite cool," said Gandalf. "Take it!" Frodo received it on his shrinking palm: it seemed to have become thicker and heavier than ever.

"Hold it up!" said Gandalf. "And look closely!"

As Frodo did so, he now saw fine lines, finer than the finest penstrokes, running along the ring, outside and inside: lines of fire that seemed to form the letters of a flowing script. They shone piercingly bright, and yet remote, as if out of a great depth.

"...I cannot read the fiery letters," said Frodo in a quavering voice.

"No," said Gandalf, "but I can. The letters are Elvish, of an ancient mode, but the language is that of Mordor, which I will not utter here. But this in the Common Tongue is what is said, close enough:

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

It is only two lines of a verse long known in Elven-lore:

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the Sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where the shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them,
In the Land of Mordor where the shadows lie." (I, p. 80-81).

The Ring is imprinted with a script of Elvish runes comprising a verse or spell of power, quoted above. In that sense it is a page overwritten with text — an image of language and literature. But the Ring is not merely a symbol or token of power. It is of itself the actual entity referred to by the signs that encircle it — the crucible filled with the living power to which the signs point.

Within the circle of the One Ring, epistemology and ontology merge: the "language of man" and the "language of things" interact: the boundary between Spirit and Magic is dissolved. When the object and the language articulating it are paradoxically recombined, so that they are and are not one and the same, what happens? Spirit — the inarticulate basis of the object, no longer has a place in the scheme. Existence, within the circle of the Ring, is utterly reduced to language. This is Tolkien's idea of evil.

This is the image in which the whole story is entangled. It is here, in and through the Ring, that sign merges with symbol, and symbol emerges as actuality. With this image Tolkien is opening a demonstrative discourse on the self-contained and perpetually self-regarding nature of language. The limitation of human language lies in the very property that makes it so useful (and dangerous) — it is divorced from its object. So always, ultimately, language only means *itself* — it is a system that is appropriately imaged by a circular object.

But this purely linguistic analysis of the scene quoted above fails to do justice to its total impact. This vision of Frodo, standing in his dim parlour, holding the heated Ring in the palm of his hand, and pondering the mysterious letters with which it is inscribed — as Gandalf looks on and explains — has grown to strike me, after many readings, as the most powerful and evocative scene in the whole book. It is here that all the linguistic arguments and conceptions regarding Tolkien that I have attempted to outline coalesce; here in this image of perilous, omnipotent, seductive language, literally being held in the palm of a very little man. This language will *insist* on being used. It will rend his soul, it will estrange him from the very memory of his nature (as has been shown). It is an image of language so utterly potent, and yet so entirely unidentified with any object, including itself, that though it threatens to assimilate all the world in its own system, and can overwhelm every argument of nature, yet in the end it will subsume itself through its own abnegation.

The poetry of this scene is poignantly moving, but masterfully understated, because it is hidden in the narrative treatment. Gandalf is here cast — not for the last time — as the sub-author of the scene, in a way that identifies him directly with Tolkien. Gandalf tells Frodo to take the Ring. Gandalf understands the "lost" or "forgotten" meaning of the "flowing script" encircling the Ring, and informs Frodo of all its import. He thus acts very precisely as Tolkien's second, conveying thematic information in terms of philology and history. Frodo meanwhile is in the position of the Reader (or vice versa — see part 3 above),

to whom the author must articulate the conception he wishes to convey. Thus the discourse between author and reader is brought directly into the drama of the story itself; the object Gandalf tells Frodo to take is the image of language offered by Tolkien to the Reader.

Our mortal language could never have the supernatural power of this evil rhyme wrapped around a golden circle, but Tolkien brings its image as close to the point of contact between reality and fantasy as language will allow — by setting it in the hand, and inspecting it through the eye, of Frodo, the reader's liaison into his world — the leader of the hobbits in whose point of view the reader's perceptions are focused. The whole passage delivers an awesome image of a living crucible of language, and it is generated by language! It slips into the mind through the eye, taking on an invisible life of its own within the imagination.

Part Seven

Text and Anti-text.

When exposting a circle, it is difficult to "begin at the beginning." A discussion of Sauron will inevitably lead us into the Ring, just as a discussion of the Ring will lead us into Sauron. Sauron precedes the Ring and makes it; he is, if nothing else, the point at which we may enter the circle, but if we pursue him, he recedes like the horizon — having himself, in making the circle, become it. The treatment of Sauron throughout is demonstratively consistent with the self-imposed dissolution he undergoes in vying for power through the Ring.

In fact, Tolkien never narrates from Sauron's perspective. Sauron's history and his current activity is 'always alluded to in a second or third-hand fashion. We see the evidence of Sauron's power and we witness confrontations with the agents of his power, but Sauron himself — the Will — remains secluded and aloof, abstract and unattainable. Regarding Sauron, we are given only rumors, shadows, ancient parchments.

Sauron's character, when not approached by the generalizations of the third person narrator, is always delineated by the voices of other characters. Gandalf fills this office most often, and at the greatest length, especially in the two key chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Shadow of the Past" and "The Council of Elrond". Gandalf speaks of Sauron, however, as if he were speaking of an historical figure, or in his own words, as if he were speaking of a "character" — in the sense of a *text* — "a shadow on the borders of old stories" (I, 81).

We cannot even be certain of what Sauron looks like. He is most often described as an "Eye", but how literally we are to take this description remains unclear. Frodo sees a vision of the "Eye" in the mirror of Galadriel (I, 471). Clearly it is a vision of Sauron, but its aspect may be only a composite of Frodo's fears and anxieties regarding the Ring.

Wearing the Ring upon the hill of Amon Sul, Frodo "feels" the Eye searching for him (I, 519). Here again the image may be taken metaphorically as easily as literally —

the Eye may be Sauron, physically searching for Frodo, or it may be a metaphor for the unceasing process of possession that the Ring asserts on its wearer. Perhaps Frodo has already reached the point at which, if he wears the Ring at all, he will be enslaved by it.

At II, 21 the Eye is referred to by Aragorn as an insignia identifying Sauron's soldiers. At II, 61 the phrase "the Great Eye" is employed as a proper name — equivalent to "Sauron", and yielding up as much information. At II, 131 and II, 248 Gandalf speaks of "the Eye of Mordor" and "the Eye of Barad-dûr" as if he were referring, not to Sauron himself, but to a machine or device with which Sauron threatens or perceives his enemies. What exactly is signified by the Eye remains pointedly abstract.

Whatever form Sauron's organism occupies, we can assert, at least, that Sauron has (or once had) a hand. Records discovered by Gandalf show that long ago, Isildur cut the Ring off of Sauron's hand — which "was black and yet burned like fire" (I, 332). Gollum, who has been personally interrogated by Sauron, asserts that "he has only four [fingers] on the Black Hand" (II, 315), but earlier (II, 311) uses the phrase "the Black Hand" as a proper name (like "the Great Eye") for Sauron. Are we to associate "the Black Hand" or "the Great Eye" with Sauron's personal attributes, or his reputation, or perhaps some evil machinery he possesses, or all three?

This narrative partitioning and abstracting of Sauron's anatomy further amplifies his mysteriousness. Tolkien lets Sauron's actual appearance remain an enigma to be pondered and invented by the reader's imagination. By necessity the reader fetishizes the eye and the hand of Sauron as the narrative progresses, and these two images become the fascinating reference points of a picture that has been intentionally left incomplete. Tolkien gives us only bits and pieces of the picture — enough to make us understand how perilous and evil Sauron is, but never enough for us to glimpse him as an integrated, whole being. Appropriately so, because Sauron is not "all together", but has dichotomized himself (see part 4 above). The sense that often comes across in those passages that deal most directly with Sauron is that of a sort of super-organism (as evinced at I, 72; I, 340; III, 246; III, 275).

Such is the salient treatment of Sauron within the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*. He remains a person regarding whom we may acquire significant amounts of intelligence, but the narrative and narrators of the story consistently relegate his proximity to an inapproachable distance; he recedes from us as we approach him. Paradoxically, Sauron (or Sauron's Will) at the same time essentially penetrates Frodo, with whom we intimately identify, to the very core. Sauron is immeasurably distant, and intimately near; he is broken down into pure language, and incarnate in Frodo's mind and body. He is and he isn't.

To Sauron we can directly apply T.A. Shippey's comment that Tolkien's view of evil is a paradoxical reconcili-

ation of Boethianism and Manichaeism: the former an absence of good, the latter a dynamic force, equal to and actively working against good (*Road to Middle-earth*, p. 107). Sauron is a void with substance, a disunion of mind and body, an entity whose objective form fits in Frodo's pocket, and whose subjective form is reportedly located in the Tower of Barad-dûr, a place to which we never gain access.

Sauron's treatment, to sum up, is pointedly vague and contradictory. He (or It) is the last vestige of an archaic time when the gulf between the natural and numinous worlds had not yet been made; a liminal power, incarnate in the world, but hidden. Hidden by choice, and hidden for his own purposes. He is a text that becomes more powerful and invulnerable when it cannot be read.

But scraps and fragments of information still survive that will reveal his nature and purpose, and like a true philologist, Tolkien (through Gandalf) digs up the fragments for us, and deduces their meanings. Perhaps the most expansive "philological" treatment of Sauron, which focuses primarily on the Ring and which explicitly demonstrates the narrative distancing posited above, is to be found in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in the chapter titled "The Council of Elrond." Here Gandalf (the sub-author) relates explicit and crucial information about the history of the Ring. He discovered this information as a philologist would discover it — in an ancient manuscript in the libraries of Minas Tirith:

But in that time also he [Isildur] made this scroll," said Gandalf; "and that is not remembered in Gondor, it would seem. For this scroll concerns the Ring, and thus wrote Isildur therein:

The Great Ring shall go now to be an heirloom of the North Kingdom; but records of it shall be left in Gondor, where also dwell the heirs of Elendil, lest a time come when the memory of these great matters shall grow dim.

And after these words Isildur described the Ring, such as he found it.

It was hot when I first took it, hot as a gleade, and my hand was scorched, so that I doubt if ever again I shall be free of the pain of it. ...The Ring missed, maybe, the heat of Sauron's hand, which was black and yet burned like fire... maybe were the gold made hot again, the writing would be refreshed...

When I read these words, my quest was ended. For the traced writing was indeed as Isildur guessed, in the tongue of Mordor and the servants of the Tower" (I, pp. 331-332).

This scene is typical of Tolkien's demonstrative treatment of his antagonist, and the antithetical nature of the antagonist. If we follow Tolkien's progression of narrators (and here I am borrowing a model devised by Calvino — see *Uses of Literature*, pp. 101-121), we see that Tolkien is projecting the narrative information about Sauron deeper and deeper into the layers of the story. Tolkien projects himself into a third person narrator, which projects the character of Gandalf, who then begins to explain the history of the Ring. Gandalf, while speaking, quotes the

words of another character, Isildur. Gandalf thus functions as an author projecting himself into a first person narrator, projecting the character Isildur, who writes an account of how he took the Ring from Sauron. In generating Isildur's narrative, Tolkien has submerged himself through a third person, through Gandalf, through Gandalf's first person, and through Isildur and Isildur's first person, to the account of an actual contact with Sauron. He goes deep into a layered narrative structure before allowing the subject Isildur to confront the object Sauron.

This business of layered projection puts Sauron at a narrative level many times removed from the reader, but the process is reversed when the text is assimilated by the reader. The reader retrieves the author from the story by following the pathway into the idea that is formed by the narrative layers. So we read that Tolkien tells us that Gandalf tells us that Isildur wrote that he took the Ring from Sauron, long ago. The narrative text has exposed the author's mind to the reader. The function of language has been fulfilled.

Sauron's Ring is a text which inverts this relationship. To wear or "read" the ring causes the reader to be internally revealed to its author.

And if he often uses the Ring to make himself invisible, he *fades*; he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the dark power that rules the Rings. Yes, sooner or later — later, if he is strong or well-meaning to begin with, but neither strength nor good purpose will last — sooner or later the dark power will devour him. (I, 76)

Nothing, then — no idea, no story — is communicated by the text of the Ring. It is, as language, entirely void. What its author was trying to show through it will never be known to its reader, but everything about the reader will be, not only known, but possessed and controlled by its author. The text which began by assimilating other texts (the Three) — bypassing spirit or reality for the sake of dominating language — ends by assimilating spirit itself (the spirit, literally, of the ringbearer) and relegating spirit to language.

The thrust of the conception is a text (or language) that has eradicated its author, who could only generate the text by becoming it, and now exists only through it. Further, this text, rather than informing its reader of the obliterating process to which it subjugates its author, functions to neutralize and absorb the reader, perpetuating a process of oblivion. It is an image of an anti-language, a linguistic black hole that Sauron has dug for himself, and into which he intends to make all language (even all creation) disappear.

If words are, for Tolkien, "a light by which to see," (Flieger, *Splintered Light*, p. 10) Sauron has transformed them into a devouring, blinding darkness — a language that subtracts knowledge from being, a language that, rather than fragmenting and becoming continually more discrete and articulate, must ultimately merge into a mute void of silence. Sauron's language is a "language of un-

being," the ultimate expression of which would be the total nullification of all things and all knowledge.

Part Eight Summary and Conclusion.

In an effort to explain "magic" in *The Lord of the Rings*, — a quality that is as inherent and impressive in that story as it is elusive — this paper examines the story linguistically, and attempts to uncover the meaning and operation of magic by doing so for story. An approach to story is formulated by juxtaposing with some of Tolkien's own critical ideas the comments, regarding language and its nature, of three different critical or philosophical authors: Italo Calvino, Walter Benjamin, and Rudolph Steiner. The correlations between these ideas support similar notions about language, though they approach it through different avenues. Language empowers speaking peoples by catalyzing and cultivating the development of consciousness, but exacts a price for this consciousness by estranging it from its nature. One reason for this is that as cultures develop languages to articulate the experience of reality, reality becomes re-cognized as language. A world perceived as language suggests a dichotomy of language; one language inherent in and wholly identified with its object, the other divorced from and wholly unidentified with its object. There is no "middle point" in this evolution — no language that can be both articulate and identified, unless it were the language of omniscience, which in any case is unattainable to any mortal creature. The danger of articulate language thus stems from the very properties that make it useful. It is a kind of specular obstruction we are impelled to set up between ourselves and our world, for the sake of communicating the world.

This paper presents various aspects of Tolkien's story as an arena for the animation of these philosophic and critical ideas about language, regarding its potential both to negate and affirm our existence. The situation is modeled by the novel, which represents the world (a world) literally boiled down to pure language, and mediated to the perceptive, or reader, by character constructions. Tolkien's foremost mediators are his hobbits, especially Frodo and Sam, who also become, in certain passages, analogues of the reader, as well as (like many of the other characters) analogues of the author.

Gandalf's revelation to Frodo that the heirloom left him by his uncle Bilbo — the Ring of Power — constitutes a threat to the physical and spiritual world so potent that if it is not destroyed, it will surely subsume and devour them both — amounts to a worst case scenario of the most malignant potentials of language. The poetic impact of Tolkien's conception arises in part from the fact that it alloys both linguistic and aesthetic discourse in a magical image of language objectified. The image of the Ring gives literal substance to the most problematic aspects — fatal and universally destructive — of the relation between language and consciousness. All of this, meanwhile, remains a purely cerebral conjecture within the bounds of an

imaginary world, even though the many themes it explores (of which the "ologies" I refer to in my opening are only a part) may be applied to our own actual experience, history, and condition. Through his characters Tolkien therefore not only makes the impact of the conjecture more immediate but also qualifies it as a literary discourse, by objectifying the book within itself, and relegating the whole to an interior space; that space from which ideas issue, and in which minds may meet.

The One Ring is "magical" because it empowers the Word of its possessor — in spite of his or her spiritual genesis — through spirit corrupted into language; the language, literally, with which the Ring is inscribed. I support this point with a lengthy excursus of the spiritual ontologies in Tolkien's invented cosmogony. The only "real" magic in that cosmogony is ascribed to the miraculous existence of Spirit, where the Word of Spirit in its omnipotence is not a mediator of reality, but is reality itself. Perhaps I have made too much of the "logic" of Tolkien's magic. He himself wrote,

I do not intend to involve myself in any debate whether "magic" in any sense is real or really possible in the world. (*Letters* of J.R.R. Tolkien, p. 200).

But he also wrote,

Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic — but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician. There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away (*Tree and Leaf*: "On Fairy-Stories", p. 10).

It is dangerous to try and "explain" magic in story, because to the extent that the explanation succeeds, it destroys the effect of enchantment associated with the magic before its operation is apprehended — where generating a sense of enchantment is the point of the whole business. Worse, to the extent that the explanation fails — wherever it can be proved inconsistent (if not inaccurate) — it opens up a floodgate of hypothetical argument, in itself absurdly trivial, which buries the purpose for the magic under a mountain of deduction, logic, and inference regarding its operation. Magic in fairy stories (and in their criticism) must always remain only a means to an end, and that end is the story itself.

If story is also (among other things) a means to an end, a vehicle for the transfer of moral or philosophic notions, or an aspect of myth and an agent of culture, its end must always be achieved through the language comprising it. Magic finds an effective medium in story because story limits the apprehension of magic to the imagination. Tolkien realized the danger of over-explaining magic, and the advantages of conveying its import through the narrative language of story (especially as opposed to theater — see "On Fairy Stories", *Tree and Leaf*, p. 51). But he also saw the need for its consistent presentation, and to that end, al-

ways asserted an ontological explanation of it:

...a difference in the use of "magic" in this story is that it is not to be come by by "lore" or spells; but is in an inherent power not possessed or attainable by Men as such (*Letters* of J.R.R. Tolkien, p. 200).

With this comment Tolkien himself relegates magical power to type. Either it is in your morphology or it isn't. The implication is that while there is no language as such in Middle-earth that has magical properties, there are persons with magical properties. Because there are also "lore" and "spells" in the story, these must be arrived at through the use of magic — not the reverse. On the other hand, in as much as magic is only a vehicle to carry along his story — which is "mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality, and the Machine" (*Letters*, p. 145), mainly concerned, in other words, with the narrative conveyance of various moral and philosophical themes — Tolkien contradicts his "ontological theory" of magic's operation when applying its function in the narrative to the conveyance of his themes:

Both of these ("Fall" and "Mortality") will lead to the desire for Power, for making the will more quickly effective — and so to the Machine (or Magic). By the last I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents — or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills. The Machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognized.

(*Letters* of J.R.R. Tolkien, p. 145-46).

It remains arguable that there is not a contradiction between the two quotes excerpted above (i.e. magic is "in an inherent power not possessed or attainable by Men as such" versus magic is "all use of external plans or devices [apparatus] instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents"). But an attempt to unravel the apparent contradiction here would become exactly the sort of tedious argument I have just described. If there is a contradiction, it arises (in part, at least) because the two entities "magic" and "story" cannot really be wholly separated from each other. They are too essentially interactive, especially in Tolkien, who only presents the former through the latter. The great temptation for any modern mind — even for Tolkien's — is to separate the magic out and explain it away as technology (however much he qualifies his terms).

"He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom," warns Gandalf (I, 339). Whether or not Tolkien contradicts himself in explaining the structure behind the magic in his story — and whether or not the structure itself is entirely consistent — it cannot all be explained as technology, and it must not be, because the dynamic created by the interaction of mortal and magical beings within the story is, like the image of the Ring, a means of symbolically transcending the interiority of language. It is language, not science, that is at issue. Tolkien himself admits that such transcendence is unattainable

(see pp. 15-16 above) and even, as has been shown, goes to the trouble of demonstratively qualifying his fiction as fiction. What is important is the gesture itself; the conception of a time and place in which ideas and realities that are presumed by our modern consciousness to be innately interior, intangible, and cerebral, lived and walked among us in the external world.

I hope, in my explanation of the magic that encompasses *The Lord of the Rings*, that I have not "explained it away". I fear I have not explained enough. Much of my limited excursus is drawn from my own inferences — paths down which the concise but sparse passages of words that Tolkien reluctantly yields up to explicit descriptions of magic or magical phenomena have pointed me. The magic in his book must be found between the lines, and there is much I have not had space to discuss which may appear to contradict my little model — or at least not correspond with it: especially the "songs" of Tom Bombadil and Old Man Willow, the Music of the Ainur, and the mysterious figure Celebrimbor, who made the three Elven rings without the direct corroboration of Sauron.

Part of my motive for discussing the operation of magic in *The Lord of the Rings* at such length in a paper of this limited kind was to show that it is indeed taken very seriously by Tolkien, "in that story". But more importantly, I have tried to show that the magical "machines" and their qualities are so enmeshed with the characters who mediate the story and its themes that they must in many ways be considered as wholly integrated narrative agents. This much I believe has been shown, and I would here suggest that the integration of character and magic must ultimately be extended to an integration of story and magic.

It may well be that Tolkien framed his story in its archaic, "high" style precisely because he was reacting against the modern impulse to compartmentalize, dichotomize, and fragment meaning in every field of thought. This is why he has so laboriously linked the notion of magic with the idea of spirit. *The Lord of the Rings* aspires to evoke a vision of meaning that is continuous, rather than discrete. Linguistically it is a criticism of the whole direction being taken by our language as we evolve it (though it also evolves us) — the tendency to break meaning down within language until all things appear to become hatefully absurd, and life is robbed of its purpose (to say nothing of its spirit).

The Ring, then, appears to "make language mean reality", but actually the reverse is the truth. It reduces reality — even the reality of its author — to mere language. Thus the Ring becomes a discourse on the dangers of epistemological language, language unidentified with its object. So extremely unidentified with Spirit is the spell twined around the Ring that it threatens to assimilate all the world into its process, which is finally void. This is what has become of Sauron, who, in making the Ring, reduces his own spiritual existence into the language of a magical spell. *The Lord of the Rings* is in that sense the story of an

immense lie, invented by a powerful and malicious liar, and the vast efforts and sacrifices people have to make to show the lie up. It is a story of how people talk and think themselves into annihilation, with doctrine, policy, technology, science, rhetoric... magic. Language.

But it is also a story of how language, oriented affirmatively rather than negatively, can lead consciousness back to its spiritual source, rather than to the void. This is the thrust of the "fate of the Elves", whose rings are at last disempowered by the destruction of Sauron's Ring. Their mistake lies in their desire — however benevolent their motives — to possess and control the Spirit generating their reality, and hence the reality itself. Their desire is corrupted and exploited by Sauron, and in order to save themselves, they must lose their world.

As Sauron is relegated to the Void, the Elves are relegated to an Idea. They who sought to exteriorize the power of their language become entirely interiorized. They fade from the world, but not from the imagination. This death of Elvish culture, with all its symbolic import, is correlated with the death of Elvish language. The archaic Elvish tongues, like Latin, fall out of general use, and become the special province of the High King's Court (the Dunedain — the kin of Aragorn the King — are the only living people remaining in Middle-earth who preserve the study of Elvish language):

The archaic language of lore is meant to be a kind of "Elven-latin", and by transcribing it into a spelling closely resembling that of Latin (except that *y* is only used as a consonant, as *y* in *E*. Yes) the similarity to Latin has been increased ocularly. Actually it might be said to be composed on a Latin basis with two other (main) ingredients that happen to give me "phonaesthetic" pleasure: Finnish and Greek. It is however less consonantal than any of the three. This language is High-elven or in its own terms *Quenya* (Elvish). (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 176).

The analogy between the two languages (Latin/*Quenya*) and their fates can thus even be extended into the grammatical structure of *Quenya*. Both are archaic, both were once the living languages of powerful cultures, both have declined to "languages of lore", essentially only employed as specialized vehicles for the "pure" expression of spiritual and historical conceptions. So Tolkien makes his art participate in the linguistic evolution it questions.

And here, perhaps, is the final argument for the integration in Tolkien of "character", "magic", and "story." When the last of the magical beings leave the Middle-earth and recede to the imagination in which alone their story can be apprehended, the story ends. The stage is set for the world to become defined and perceived through the facets of mortal language only — human language as we have it in its actual, "disenchanted" form. *The Lord of the Rings* in that sense is the end of the story of the Elves, which begins in *The Silmarillion*, and is not to be summarized here.

Suffice it to say that the Elves were thrust out of para-

dise by their language — specifically, by a terrible oath — yet, having survived all the evil that their desire and pride and knowledge led them into, they came at last — and largely through their language — to know themselves, to recognize their source, and to return to it.

Whether humankind will manage to do the same is a question left unanswered, but not unasked, by Professor Tolkien.

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