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How Tolkien Saved His Neck: A *lusinghe* Proposition to the Oxford Dante Society

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Abstract

Despite Tolkien's decidedly "Northern" literary preoccupation, he has long been assumed, as a medievalist and a Catholic, to have at least a passing interest in and knowledge of Dante's Divine Comedy, though all that has been confirmed in print so far is his membership in the Oxford Dante Society (20 February 1945 to 15 February 1955), and the fact that he read a paper to the Society on November 11, 1947. A pencil manuscript of Tolkien's paper, however, entitled "A Neck Verse," survives in the Tolkien Archives at the Bodleian Library, and it reveals that he read it with attention, in Italian, and brought his "Northern" scholarship to bear on the "Southern" genius of Dante. A synopsis of the paper, with a few quotations, reveals a self-dramatized persona of Tolkien as what he calls a "Northren Man," a surprising reference to the 1922 novel Babbitt, which Tolkien elsewhere cited as influencing The Hobbit, and a Germanic-Romance history of two words from Dante, bruno and lusinghe.
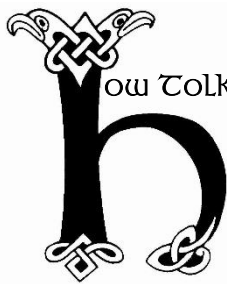
Additional Keywords

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John R. Holmes

Even critics who dislike J.R.R. Tolkien can be caught conceding his skill at creating lifelike characters. Tolkien's fans go even further, admitting the sometimes unsettling experience of a Barliman Butterbur or Sam Gamgee seeming more real than some of their acquaintances—certainly much more real than that guy in the corner office. But I submit that nothing shows Tolkien's skill in characterization more than the greatest persona he ever created: the character of the Oxford Professor, J.R.R. Tolkien.

The mask Tolkien made for himself has that quality he admired in *Beowulf* and described in *On Fairy-Stories*: it has "the inner consistency of reality" (60), but it is, like all personas, a construct. We find it in a number of places: his introductions, where we meet the man who hates allegory (never mind that he is one of the best 20th century practitioners of the mode); in his Valedictory address, where we find the professor who would rather anatomize one word than "pot a poet in a paragraph" (224) (a truth, yet a truth that hides the contrasting truth, that his synthetic mind could pot a plethora of poets with astonishing ease). But every now and then a chance bit of Tolkien scholarship will allow us a peek under the mask and show us that Tolkien the man was much more complex than his self-caricature suggests.

The aspect of Tolkien's character I would like to explore in this essay is his pose as the counterpart of the "Southren Man" of Chaucer's Parson in the prologue to his tale. The counterpart is the "Northren Man" who so ably defends the greatness of "Northern" culture that he is sometimes taken for an anti-Mediterranean bigot. The bit of Tolkien scholarship that confirmed the crack in the *Northren Man* persona is actually an article about several Inklings: Jim Stockton's "Inklings and Danteans Alike" in *Mythlore* 38 (2020).

Stockton's note, a transcription of the minutes of the Oxford Dante Society, 25 May 1937 to 28 May 1957, put together several pieces and answered several questions about a superb paper Tolkien gave to the Society on 11 November 1947 (coincidentally, the 28th anniversary of the Armistice of the Great War). The paper survives in a pencil draft of eight sheets in the Bodleian Tolkien Archives (MS Tolkien A13/1, folios 168-175) with emendations in ink. The last page degenerates into fragments, list, and outlines, from which Tolkien

must have extemporized the end of the lecture. The large envelope in which it was preserved (folio 167), a recycled Allen & Unwin sheath, bears the puzzling title of the talk, in pencil, "Neck Verse." The puzzle is explained in the opening paragraph of the talk.

The very existence of this essay, as well as Tolkien's ten-year membership in the Oxford Dante Society, ought to be enough of an antidote to a scholarly oversubscription to Tolkien's pose as the "Northren Man" who only cares for the Boreal, the Germanic, the Rohirric, scorning the Southern, the Mediterranean, the Gondorian. Tolkien's championing of the Germanic and Celtic classicisms is a predilection, not a prejudice. If it sometimes appears akin to bigotry, perhaps such an appearance is due to the predilection's birth as a defense against another bigotry: the Mediterranean (read "Greco-Romance") bias in European cultural histories.

At the same time, there was a bit of honest and noble deference in Tolkien's use of the "modesty *topos*" in the opening of the lecture, presenting himself as the "Northren Man" looking at the "Southren" genius of Dante. After all, Tolkien was aware of his own preeminence in Germanic philology, but in presenting this lecture on Dante he knew he was speaking to an elite selection of Oxford's Dantisti. Elite the Society was by statute—there were only a dozen members allowed in Tolkien's time. The group that day included Alessandro Passerin d'Entréves, newly elected to the Serena Chair of Italian at Oxford, and soon to be author of *Dante as Political Thinker* (1952); Sir Frederick Maurice Powicke, author of "Dante and the Crusade" (1932); and fellow Inkling Colin Hardie who, while an amateur in Dante studies (as most members of the Society were), published scholarly reviews of virtually every important book on Dante that appeared in the 1940's. The Society's invited guest that night was Carlo Dionisotti (1908-1998), a young lecturer at Oxford who would soon become Professor of Italian at Bedford College, London.

What would a *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain* scholar have to say about the poet of the *Comedia*? The conversational voice of Tolkien's essay wanders a bit, but several philological topics, characteristically centering on specific words, are discernible in the surviving manuscript. After a preamble explaining the title concept of a "neck verse," detailed below, the following topics are broached in this order:

1. Dante as a medieval Christian poet who is still, like Snorri Sturlusson and the poet of the Old English *Seafarer*, able to detect traces of the pagan gods.
2. A comic side-reference to a slighting mention of Dante in the 1922 American novel *Babbitt*, which reveals what aspects of that novel influenced *The Hobbit*.

3. Philological proof that the phrase *aer bruno* (*Inferno* Canto 2, line 1, "the brown air," in the sense of darkling or twilight) was not Romance in origin but Germanic. In tracing this word to the 14th century poem *Pearl*, Tolkien asserts that the *Pearl*-Poet in contemplating an interview with a lost loved one in Paradise—a young woman now among the blessed (the root meaning of *beatrice*) represents the closest English equivalent in kind (though not, Tolkien stipulates, in degree) to the mind of Dante in the *Comedia*.

4. A single-word study which Tolkien, and the minutes of the Dante Society, identifies as the main topic of his essay: an account of the Italian word *lusinghe* in *Purgatorio* Canto 1, line 92. Tolkienists will recognize *lusinghe* as a variant of the word treated most fully in his 1951 essay "Middle English 'Losenger.'" Colin Hardie's minutes of the Oxford Dante Society describe the evening's lecture thus: "Professor Tolkien read a paper on 'Lusinghe' (Purg I Inf XIII)" (Stockton 135).

INTRODUCTION: NECK VERSE

Tolkien opened the evening's entertainment by reciting, without identification or translation, the Vulgate Latin version of the first two verses of Psalm 51: *Miserere mei Deus, secundum magnam miseracordium tuam. Et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum dele iniquitatem meam.* "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. And according to your great mercy blot out my iniquities." This is the "Neck Verse" of Tolkien's title, his explanation of which turns into a pretty complement to his audience. This scrap of Latin, Tolkien explained, was sometimes memorized by desperate men who had been sentenced to the gallows; by reciting it they could claim "benefit of clergy" and perhaps, if the judge accepted their claim, be saved from hanging.

The complimentary, comic analogy was quite elaborate: Tolkien presents himself humbly as "on trial" before his jury, his fellow members of the Dante Society (ten members present, all told).[1] Like the "lewed" convict conning

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[1] I am most grateful to Jim Stockton for sharing his photographs of the minutes of the Oxford Dante Society. They reveal more details about that night in 1947 than are published in his *Mythlore* article. In addition to the three members already mentioned—d'Entreves, Powicke, and Hardie—and the invited guest Dionisotti—other members present included Benedict Humphrey Sumner (identified in the minutes only as "the Warden of All Souls"); Dr. Clement C.J. Webb; Professor Richard M. Dawkins; Professor Alfred Ewert, Professor William James Entwistle, C.S. Lewis, and Sir Cyril Norman Hinshelwood. Brief biographies of these scholars are given in Stockton 137-138. At the end of the entry for 11th November 1947, signed by Tolkien's fellow Inkling C.J. Hardie, another hand, with a blunter nib and darker ink, recorded seven more auditors. Presumably these were non-members who, not guests at the dinner, were allowed to hear the lecture. They were

his Neck Verse, Tolkien admits that he can never match the learning of his audience ("bishops of erudition," he calls them), but hopes that his modest scrap of learning will save his neck. Pleading before these "bishops," Tolkien laments the audacity of his rash promise to speak on Dante to genuine Dantisti, which a pretender like he would make "if only the date is far enough removed, and a dinner lies between" (MS TOLKIEN A 13/1 folio 168).

1.   **A *NORTHREN* MAN LOOKS AT DANTE**

        Tolkien's dramatic (and decidedly comic) image of himself as the feigned clerk trying to speak learnedly to judges more learned than he morphs into the self-image of the "Northerner" seeking the light and warmth of the Southern master Dante. Yet the motives of northernism he chooses to display are calculated to finding a common theme with the Dante enthusiasts. He begins with two: the bitter solitude and cold of the Seafarer in the Old English poem that conventionally bears that name, and the prophecies of Ragnarök spoken by the sybil in the Norse *Völuspá* (and quoted in the so-called "Younger Edda" by Snorri Sturlusson). Tolkien names himself at first a "northern barbarian," but crosses that out and writes "Man of Thule." The emendation is well-advised; the *humilitas* trope must be perfectly balanced to fit the occasion of the talk. Too little humility, and the rhetor would not acknowledge the profound respect he had for the Society fellows with whom he shared the banquet hall at Exeter that evening; too much and he would belie the expertise in his own branch of medievalism that those fellows knew he held. "Barbarian" could only reinforce the austrocentrism, the Mediterranean bias that Tolkien resented in the popular (and sometimes even scholarly) "medievalism" of his century.

        The pictures of the "Man of Thule" that Tolkien conjured at that moment, drawn from *The Seafarer* and *Völuspá*, were quintessentially Northern in spirit, yet vibrated sympathetically with themes from Dante's *Comedia*, a sympathy that he knew his audience would recognize; that in fact most of them had voiced in previous papers before the Society. Tolkien's picture implied that there was something more somber, more melancholy in the spirit of Thule than in the spirit of Tuscany. And yet the Tuscan poet's masterpiece took him to the darkest and coldest places in the universe; an *inferno* cut off from the light of God, the deepest circle of which is a frozen waste. And even when the scene brightens as Dante the Pilgrim climbs the mountain of *Purgatorio* and shoots upward through the spheres of *Paradiso*, he is still on the other side of the veil

William J. W. Jackson and W. Daniel, both of Worcester College; Mr. Fisher of New College; Professor Pollock of Christ Church College; Prof. Bradley [College affiliation illegible, hidden in the gutter of the binding]; W. Henderson of Exeter, and "The Dean of Ch[rist] Ch[urch]," who in 1947 was John Lowe.

that mediates this life and the next. Tolkien had spent a good part of his professional life teaching and editing and studying a Middle English poem which did the same: *Pearl*. He would broach that connection later in the talk.

The echoes of *The Seafarer* are paraphrastic at first, as if Tolkien were still describing himself as the wretch seeking to save his neck. Then he paraphrases the sibyl of the *Völuspá* and her talk of, as Tolkien puts it, "the doom that hung black behind the minds of gods and men alike" (folio 169). Then he chants both of the sources he was citing in their Northern originals: lines 18-22 of *The Seafarer* and *Völuspá* 45.

Þær ic ne gehyrde	būtan hlimman sæ
íscaldne wæg;	hwilum ylfete song
dyde ic me to gomene,	ganetes hléoþor
ond huilpan swég	fore hleahtre wera,
mæw singende	fore mededrince

    (There I heard nothing   but the roar of the sea
    The ice-cold path;   sometimes the song of the swan
    I took as entertainment,   the ganet's cry
    And gull's sound   for the laughter of men,
    The mew's singing   for mead-drinking.)

Bræðr munu berjask	ok at bönum verðask,
munu systrungar	sifjum spilla;
hart er í heimi,	hórdómr mikill,
skeggöld, skalmöld,	skildir ro klofnir,
vindöld, vargöld,	áðr veröld steypisk;
mun engi maðr	öðrum þyrma.

    (Brethren shall clash   and slay each other,
    Cousins shall   defile kinship
    The worthless world,   a great whoredom,
    An ax age, a dagger age,   shield splintered,
    A crow-age, a wolf-age,   ere the world totters;
    Men shall never   spare one another.)[2]

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[2] Translations of both passages are mine, but the second is partly Tolkien's; I have fitted phrases syntactically to the Icelandic original, but the wording reflects, sometimes verbatim, Tolkien's paraphrase earlier in the previous paragraph. I have also followed Tolkien's paraphrase in rendering *huilpe* as "gull" in the *Seafarer* passage; most commentators agree that the most likely referent is the curlew, agreeing with the modern English dialect *whaup* which names that bird. Yet Tolkien may be following the logic of Margaret E. Goldsmith in observing "We cannot identify the sea-birds of the poem with certainty. If this could be done, the lexicographers would long-ago have erased their question-marks" (226). Indeed, Clark Hall's entry for *huilpe* in *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* reads "curlew?"

Both passages lingered in Tolkien's imagination, the seafarer with his sea-birds invoking Tuor's following of the gulls to find the sea, and Legolas's passionate response to the same birds in *The Lord of the Rings*: "Gulls! They are flying far inland. A wonder they are to me and a trouble to my heart. […] I heard them crying in the air as we rode to the battle of the ships. Then I stood still, forgetting war in Middle-earth; for their wailing voices spoke to me of the Sea" (V.9.873).

The passage from *Völuspá*, also quoted in full by Snorri Sturlasson in his discussion of the Norse end of the world, Ragnarök, is in Tolkien's head as he finds the proper words for Théoden's call to battle to the Rohirrim in *The Lord of the Rings*: "spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered, / a sword-day, a red day, ere the sun rises!" (V.5.838). The context is different—and yet not so different. Such a call to arms, what Homer's scholiasts called *epipolesis,* may not strike the reader as too apocalyptic but for the context of what Tolkien called "the Northern courage," that is, Théoden's knowledge that he, like the Norse gods and heroes at Ragnarök, was headed for his own personal world-end.

Once they understood the apocalyptic nature of the "Northren" verse Tolkien was reciting, the audience did not need a road map to make the connection with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In classical terms, one of the most precise ways to name the genre of the *Comedia* is an apocalypse, a dream-vision genre consisting of a first-person account of the writer being taken to higher realms to see things hidden from the earthbound. Revealing what is covered: that's what the word *apocalypse* means—taking away (*apo*) the veil (*kalypso*). And seeing through the veil is also what the *völva* in *Völuspá* does in her vision of the end times.[3] The connection with Dante's visions of hell and purgatory and the heavens would have been readily apparent to Tolkien's listeners.

2.   MODERN ANALOGUES: BABBITT AND BEERBOHM

From the Germanic sublime of *The Seafarer, Völuspá,* and Snorri's *Edda*, the Professor descends to the Yankee ridiculous of a later English-language work, the American novel *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis. Or maybe not so ridiculous. Tolkien's seemingly inapposite glance at this jazz-age satire of American middle-class boorishness offers a clue to what it might have been about this 1922 novel that caused Tolkien to assert in a 1967 interview that *Babbitt* influenced his conception of hobbits.

There would seem to be few points of congruence between Tolkien and Sinclair Lewis as novelists. Tolkien's mode is fantasy, Lewis's realism, though with a satiric edge. Somehow, though, what some critics consider the American's failure with satire in *Babbitt* may constitute his strongest affinity

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[3] The Norse name for the seer, *Völva*, apparently means "wand-bearer," just as *Gandalf* suggests "staff-bearing elf."

with *The Hobbit*. Lewis failed to give the complacent middle-class American businessmen the proper skewering because he made George F. Babbitt too . . . likeable. Too aware of his own failures. There were two sides to Babbitt: the apologist for the urban rat race, and the dreamer who sought to escape it. And if we label the first Babbitt "Baggins" and the second "Took," perhaps we can see Tolkien's debt to this other Lewis, the American Lewis who was not an Inkling. As Mark Atherton pointed out, Babbitt's notion of "escape" matches Tolkien's in *On Fairy-Stories*, and his appeals are expressed in terms of fairies and giants (13-14).

But if Tolkien's hobbitry reflected Lewis's Babbittry, surely Tolkien's primary vocation of philology, which permeated his creative work, set him apart from the American novelist? Not as much as one might think. Sinclair Lewis may not have been formally trained in language study, but no linguist of the 20th century did more field research in American dialects, particularly in the Midwest, than he did as background for his novels. Tolkien's mentor and friend Joseph Wright may have compiled the premier English dialect dictionary, but Sinclair Lewis's friend and mentor H.L. Mencken produced the magisterial text *The American Language*, later editions of which cited Lewis's contributions to recording American dialects in his fiction. In the second edition (1921) Mencken applauds Lewis for "very accurately" reporting "vulgar American" (270). In the fourth edition Mencken reports a legal battle over the use of the supposedly vulgar word "realtor" for "real estate agent"; the matter was settled by an appeal to the appearance of the word "realtor" in *Babbitt*, an unimpeachable authority (285). The first supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* includes "realtor," listing *Babbitt* as its earliest citation (286).

Traditional philology noticed Lewis's contributions to the American lexis. Two years before the publication of *The Hobbit*, a doctoral dissertation on Sinclair Lewis's documentation of slang was successfully defended at the University of Hamburg in Germany (Wasmuth). A 1960 study in *American Speech* listed 100 words first recorded in Sinclair Lewis novels, including 35 from *Babbitt*, and not including words which dictionaries had already cited as first recorded by Lewis (Babcock).

It is in that subspecies of philology known as onomastics, the study of proper names, that Sinclair Lewis shows himself equally in harmony with Tolkien. Even Tolkien's detractors concede his facility in inventing names for persons and places Elvish, Dwarvish, and Entish; there is nothing even close to this creation of names *ex nihilo* in the novels of Sinclair Lewis. Yet when we come to Hobbit names in *The Lord of the Rings*, the most outlandish names that the skeptical reader swears must be made up can be readily found in British directories. And for every Bracegirdle, Proudfoot, Grubb, Chubb, Goodbody, or Boffin in Tolkien we find a Puffy Wuffles, Fulgence Wormhole, Adelaide Tarr

Gimmitch (a near miss for Tolkien's Gamgees), Berzelius Windrip, Ora Weagle, or Jat Snood in Lewis. Edward Wagenknecht in *Cavalcade of the American Novel* scoffed at Lewis's outlandish names as obviously "phony," but Lewis's first wife Grace described her husband halting at every "forgotten backwoods cemetery" for unusual names on tombstones, and fellow onomastician Dale Warren recorded trading favorite "primary world" name discoveries with Lewis (Coard 319).

In the final chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo reminds Sam of the hobbit custom of giving flower names to "maidchildren" (VI.9.1026), and the hobbit genealogies in the appendix bloom with Primula, Gilly, Lobelia, Myrtle, Salvia, Pansy, and Camellia. Sinclair Lewis novels pop with ladies named Peony, Petal, Iris, Orchid, Verbena, Daisy, Jonquil, Hibisca, Narcissa, Arbuta and Gladiola.

The name that Tolkien conjures from *Babbitt* for his Dante Society audience is the harsh double-monosyllable name of Babbitt's coal dealer Verge Gunch. The phonological category of the affricate, the fusion of a plosive and a fricative, only has two exemplars in English, named by phonologists the *dezh* and the *tesh*, and Sinclair Lewis packed them both in this short name, Verge (ending in *dezh*) Gunch (ending in *tesh*), making the combination a mouthful.

The reason Tolkien invoked Gunch involved his continuation of the rhetorical pose of deference, the Northren Man bowing to the thirteenth-century Tuscan poet. The scene as Sinclair Lewis crafted it already served Tolkien's situation: the brash American representative of "low culture," Verge Gunch, bowed before the image of Continental "High Culture," Dante. Gunch himself recognized that his first name was a colonial contraction of another High Culture poet, the Roman Virgil, who was Dante's guide through hell and purgatory. The scene is in Chapter Nine of *Babbitt*. Babbitt's friends, Gunch among them, are spicing up a party by staging a séance, in which they attempt to conjure the spirit of Dante. Tolkien remembered, and quoted, the lowbrow response to the name of Dante—"What, the Wop poet?" but he mistakenly attributed the slur to Verge Gunch; it was actually voiced by a minor character, Orville Jones. Counter-intuitively, I find the misattribution a sign of Tolkien's familiarity with Lewis's novel: he was calling up the scene from memory.

And a scene it was, in the visual sense. Tolkien cited this passage not for the quote, or a cheap laugh at the lowbrow insult of "Wop poet," but for Babbitt's point of view. For Babbitt does receive a momentary vision of Dante, and it is a Dante who is not amused at the profane prank of a séance. Tolkien's paraphrase speaks of "a fleeting vision of a noble and grim face looking darkly down upon such 'lewedness'" (folio 170). It is a visual image, and it reminds Tolkien of a pictorial version of the same deference to Dante's scowl: a 1904 Max Beerbohm cartoon with direct reference to the highbrow atmosphere of the sort

of Oxford learned society Tolkien was addressing. The cartoon was entitled "Dante in Oxford," and it depicts a lanky Dante towering above a modern Oxford proctor. The caption has the proctor officiously demanding, "Your name and college?" Tolkien presents himself as the proctor here, the difference being Tolkien's modest awareness of what he calls "the altitude of the poet" (f. 170).

The tonal effect of these lowbrow pop cultural references is a delicate rhetorical balance. By allowing George Babbitt and Max Beerbohm to puncture the gravity of Dante, Tolkien was able to inject a lighter tone while still respecting Dante's stature; he could quote the vulgarisms of a Verge Gunch while excusing it with a Chaucerian "blame nat me." Most importantly he could maintain his self-presentation as a *northren man*, identifying with Babbitt (who, Tolkien pointed out, was more respectful of Dante than Gunch was) and with Max's cartoon proctor.

Figure 1. Max Beerbohm, "Dante at Oxford," 1904. Tolkien referred to this image in his Dante Society lecture as "Max's cartoon."

3. DANTE'S *AERE BRUNO*

Although he told his audience "*lozenge* […] is my theme," characteristically promising a full-length paper on a single word from *The Divine Comedy*, Tolkien digresses, right after his digression on *Babbitt* and Beerbohm, to another of Dante's presumed Tuscanisms, which Tolkien's historical philology reveals is actually a Germanicism. The phrase Tolkien selects appears at the end of the first line of *Inferno* Canto 2: *l'aere bruno*, "the brown air." Well, not really brown, maybe; Dante seems to be trying to capture, like an early impressionist painter, that moment when the sun has set, but the blackness of night has not yet settled. So the atmosphere is—what? What is the color word for "darkling," for a dimming that is not yet black? Well, in kindergarten the palette is limited, as is one's color vocabulary: in the eight-crayon box of Crayola Jumbos, the one next to black is brown. Thus it may well be that the kindergartener can understand Dante's line better than the art school graduate, or the paint mixer at Sherwin Williams.

Still, "brown" to the modern English ear seems wrong to describe the color of twilight. *It must come from the romance poetic tradition, as good European poetry does*, is the all-too-common assumption of literary historians, even in England. There is no defense for the prejudice of the ear trained in romance poetics that ignores English poetry before the Norman Conquest, or considers it "harsh." All the *northren man* can do is assert that he finds Old English poetry beautiful; he can but counter one subjective judgement with another. But the sources and histories of individual words are a matter of greater certainty (and objectivity): when Tolkien tells his audience that *aer bruno* wafts in from the North Sea rather than the Mediterranean, it is no conjecture, but a philological fact confirmed by a written vernacular poetry (English) that preceded the earliest Romance poetry by several centuries.

In looking for English parallels to Dante's tercet, Tolkien begins not with the phrase, *aere bruno*, but with the general image of the poet being left alone in the dark. Tolkien points out that three lines in Chaucer's Proemium to *The Parliament of Fowles* match Dante's three lines precisely in every respect *but* the phrase "brown air." First Tolkien quotes the tercet from Dante.

> Lo giorno se n'andava, e l'aere bruno
> toglieva li animai che sono in terra
> da le fatiche loro […]. (Canto II.1-3)

This time Tolkien does not offer a translation. When he quoted the *Edda* and *The Seafarer,* he used the stealth translation that the ancient Greeks called *parecthesis*, paraphrasing both passages just before he quoted them in the original language. Readers of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* are familiar with the technique; virtually every time he uses an Elvish or Dwarvish phrase, Tolkien will follow it with a translation or paraphrase. But on 11 November 1947, most of Tolkien's listeners knew more of Dante and of the Italian language than he did. When he describes himself as "tongue tied" Tolkien does not resort to the false humility of claiming ignorance of the language. "My knowledge of the language of Tuscany," Tolkien tells them, "is too slight for any converse with its inhabitants." He also reveals that he "glimpsed" the *Comedia* "in the embracing curiosity of my earlier days" (f. 170).

Having quoted Dante's lines, he then turns to what he implies is a gloss on the same lines in the Proem of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles.*

> The day gan faylen, and the derke nyght
> That reveth bestes from her besynesse,
> Berafte me my bok […]. (ll.85-87)

Tolkien, as we expect, was quite right: there is little doubt that Chaucer had these very lines of Dante before him, at least in memory, even though he conspicuously avoids the phrase in question, "the brown air."[4] Chaucer's sentence follows Dante's phrase by phrase: *Lo giorno se n'andava*, "the day gan failen"; *e l'aire bruno*, "and the derke night"; *toglieve gli animai* "that reveth bestes"; *da le fatiche loro* "from her besinesse." Chaucer leaves out the unnecessary modifier for "bestes," *che sono in terra*, "that are on the earth," but Tolkien makes us aware of the curious absence of the phrase "brown air." In fact "derke night" is only an approximate equivalent, as *bruno* suggests the air is not completely "derke." Why did Chaucer omit the phrase?

"It certainly was not," Tolkien answered his own question, "because it would not do in English." He cites Milton's *Paradise Lost* 9.1088, "brown as evening," and Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's *Odyssey* 17.215, "ere brown evening spreads her chilly shade." These, Tolkien says, "may be held suspect"—I assume he means suspect of merely quoting Dante—but he rules out such a source of the word by saying that the phrase "brown night" is already old in English when the Pearl Poet uses it in the 14th century. Tolkien doesn't give a specific reference in Old English, but brown twilight appears in the Old English poem *Andreas*, a poem Tolkien taught at Oxford. In Trinity term of 1938 Tolkien taught a whole course on *Andreas*;[5] the standard modern Oxford edition of the poem began as a thesis Tolkien directed. Lines 1305-6 of *Andreas* read *Niht helmade // brunnwann oferbræd / beargas steape* ("night covered the steep mountains, dark-brown overshadowed"). But the citation from *Pearl* was Tolkien's prize.

In the Pearl Poet, a 14th century writer to whom he had given a great deal of attention, Tolkien knew he had a genius of middle English letters attempting something similar to Dante's imaginative vision of the eternal realms on the other side of death. *Pearl* was something *northren* that matched Dante's theme and temperament, albeit, Tolkien admitted to his hosts, in a lower register. E.V. Gordon's edition of the Middle English classic, posthumously seen through the press by his wife Ida, should have been a Tolkien-Gordon edition like that other great poem by the same author, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Tolkien continues the parallel by observing that the narrator in *Pearl*, like Dante, braved the foreboding landscape of the other side for the love of a young maiden—usually conjectured to be the narrator's daughter—and that the

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[4] Tolkien was not the first to suggest the parallel, though he must not have been aware of a precedent, or he would at least have cited it marginally, as he did with other references in this manuscript, such as the citations from Milton, Pope, and the Pearl Poet. See J.M.B, "Chaucer's Knowledge of Dante," *Notes and Queries* 187 (May 8, 1853), 517-518.

[5] The Tolkien collection at the Bodleian Library at Oxford holds 39 pages of Tolkien's notes on *Andreas*, Tolkien A16/2 folios 63-102.

maiden, like Dante's Beatrice, rebukes him for his too-worldly vision. The description of the fading light in *Pearl* Tolkien finds in lines 537-538.

> Sone þe worlde bycom wel broun;
> Þe sunne watʒ down and hit wex late.
>> ("Soon the world became quite brown,
>> The sun was down and it grew late.")

So Dante's *bruno* was not the source of the Pearl-poet's *broun*, but rather the other way round: Dante borrowed it from his beloved Provençal troubadours who called the time just after sunset *bruna* (Honnorat 351).[6] Those troubadours in turn borrowed it from the Germanic invaders of Northern Gaul. It was a *northren* word that drifted south.

4. ANOTHER MIGRATION FROM THE NORTH: *LUSINGHE*

Tolkien's word-sleuthing with *aer bruno* was only a warm-up for the main event: tracing Dante's word *lusinghe* from *Paradiso* Canto 1, line 92. This analysis constitutes the remainder of the paper, which, as Merlin DeTardo pointed out in his *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* entry on Dante (116), anticipates Tolkien's paper before the Congrès Internationale de Philologie Moderne in 1951. In fact, it reads like a dress rehearsal for the paper, published two years later as "Middle English *lozenger*."

As that 1953 publication is more readily available than the Dante Society manuscript, I will here only give a tracing of its logic, for it can be seen in greater detail in "Middle English *lozenger*." As in the study of *l'aer bruno* that precedes this final section of Tolkien's "Neck Verse," the trail begins in Dante. Tolkien describes encountering a passage in the first canto of *Purgatorio*, lines 91 to 92—confirming that Tolkien had read the Italian text with sufficient attention to be arrested by a single word—which, after all, is the only way that Tolkien reads. Arrested by one word at a time. At this point in Purgatory, Dante and his guide Virgil encounter the Roman statesman Cato, who tells them,

> *Ma se donna del ciel ti move a regge*
> *Come tu di', non c' è mestier lusinghe.*
>> (But if a heavenly lady moves and rules you
>> As you say, there is no need for flattery.)

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[6] Tolkien refers to "Old French *nuit brun*," but I could not find that precise form in Old French; the French Romantic poet Musset's *Ballade à la Lune* (1830) begins, "C'était, dans la nuit brune."

It's the last word, *lusinghe*, which leapt out at Tolkien. For him it was an old friend, and not at all "foreign." He recognized it the way Farinata recognized Dante in hell: as a familiar sound of home—not a home in thirteenth century Tuscany, but fourteenth century England. *Lusinghe. Lusinghe.* "This word brought me of course back to the *losengenum* that I knew at home, in 14ᵗʰ c. England, and recalled to me a chase that I once began after these elusive creatures, so busy about the courts" (folio 175).

The 14ᵗʰ c. "home" Tolkien had in mind was a couplet in the prologue to Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*:

> For in youre court ys many a losengeour
> And many a queynte totelere accusour (ll.352-353)
> > (For in your court is many a flatterer
> > And many a quaint tattling accusor.)

Tolkien was struck by the semantic shift in the word, which seemed to refer to flattery in both cases, but with varying degrees of positivity. In Cato's usage, *lusinghe* refers to Dante's well-deserved praise of Cato's defense of liberty; in Chaucer, Alceste is scorning those *losengeours* whose empty flattery seeks to buy favors from Cupid.

The confusion of Chaucer's use of *losengeour* with the unrelated homonym referring to the design element *lozenge*, a flattened diamond shape in stained glass or heraldic designs, a discussion of which forms a major portion of Tolkien's 1953 article, is not mentioned in the Dante Society lecture. Instead, Tolkien offers a faint hint of his familiar method of realizing the interrelation of philology and Fairy Story. The history of *brown air* passing from Germanic to Romance languages is reflected in the passing of *lusinghe* from English to French to Italian, but along with Northern words came Northern heroes and Northern stories.

Tolkien begins the etymological trace by stating categorically that *lusinghe* in origin is "an English word or at least a Saxon." By "at least a Saxon" he means that it came to the French poets via Saxon settlers, whether those Saxons had come into Northern France from England or from the continent. He finds the word in Old French, in Wace's mid-12ᵗʰ century *Roman de Brut* (line 1730) in a passage about King Lear's flattering daughters—here the word is clearly negative—but half a century later it comes back to England with Laʒamon, priest of Areley Regis in his alliterative poem *Brut*. Tolkien confidently dates *Brut* "before 1200," and quotes lines 1514-1515:

> Cordoille iherde þa lasinge. þe hire sustren seiden þon kinge;
> nom hire leaf-fulne huie; þat heo liʒen nolden.
> > (Cordelia heard the flattery that her sisters told the king;
> > Took her faithful oath that she would not lie.)

This passage offers more than the record of a word that had passed from English to French back to English: to Tolkien it also tantalizes the aficionado of England's lost stories.

The hint of the lost or faded tales that may have come with the words from the Northern to the Mediterranean traditions leads to Tolkien's conclusion to his neck-verse—or maybe he just reaches the end of his rope. The truth is, the last folio (175) of Tolkien's MS has very few complete sentences, and only hints toward what the conclusion might have been. But the hints are clear enough for anyone who has read Tolkien's letters and his earlier lecture, *On Fairy-Stories.* Just as the words migrated from the North to the South, so too did the stories. The example Tolkien finishes with is the European folk-tale of "Patient Griselda." Students of Chaucer who encounter the story in *The Clerk's Tale*, learn that Chaucer's source was Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which ends with Griselda's story, and Petrarch's Latin summary of the story. It would appear to "source critics," then, that the Italian story had been Anglicized.

And yet the main characters, Walter and Griselda, are patently Germanic names. Walter, in fact, is a name out of German legend, Walter of Aquitaine, the subject of the Old English fragment *Waldere* and the monk Ekkehard's Latin epic *Waltharius*, both c. 1000 (*Waldere* may be earlier). The story as told by Boccaccio ("light, quick, but insensitive," Tolkien calls it) and Petrarch ("often unhappy") is "a fairy-tale and one in which the hero Walterus, [and] Griselda bear names of Northern heroic legend—as is often the case in fairy tales" (f. 175).

RECAP

Tolkien's "Neck Verse" shares with all of his academic writing (1) a carefully crafted *ethos* or persona of Socratic humility; (2) a "Niggling" focus on the individual word (two words in this case: *bruno* and *lusinghe*); (3) a conviction of the interpenetration of philology in every other aspect of literature. Along the way, the lecture reveals several truths about Tolkien's traffic with Dante. First, that he read Dante in his youth—or at least, as he put it, "earlier days" (f. 170). Second, as a mature academic he returned to the *Divine Comedy*, in Italian, though he felt "tongue-tied" in the language (f. 170). There is no reason to suspect excess modesty in this statement, but in calibrating the limits of Tolkien's knowledge of Italian, the expertise of his audience, and the loftiness of his own criteria for competency in a language ought to be kept in mind.[7]

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[7] One member of Tolkien's audience for "Neck Verse" in 1947 (Dionisotti) was a native of Italy; two (Dionisotti and d'Entreves) were professors of Italian, and one (Ewert) a professor of Romance Philology.

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