A Secret Vice: The Desire to Understand J.R.R. Tolkien's Quenya Or, Out of the Frying-Pan Into the Fire: Creating a Realistic Language as a Basis for Fiction

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In a letter to his son Christopher in February of 1958, Tolkien said "No one believes me when I say that my long book is an attempt to create a world in which a form of language agreeable to my personal aesthetic might seem real" (*Letters* 264). He added that *The Lord of the Rings* "was an effort to create a situation in which a common greeting would be *elen síla lúmenn' omentielmo,*[1] and that the phrase long antedated the book" (*Letters* 264-5). Tolkien often felt guilty about this, his most secret vice. Even as early as 1916, he confessed as much in a letter to Edith Bratt: "I have done some touches to my nonsense fairy language—to its improvement. I often long to work at it and don't let myself 'cause though I love it so, it does seem a mad hobby" (*Letters* 8). It wasn't until his fans encouraged him, that Tolkien started to

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[1] Later, Tolkien decided that Frodo's utterance of this phrase was in error as he had used the exclusive form of we in the word "omentielmo," but should have used the inclusive form to include Gildor and his companions, "omentielvo." The second edition of *Fellowship* reflected this correction despite some musings on leaving it to signify Frodo being treated kindly after making a grammatical error in Quenya (*PE* 17: 130-131).

let his cat out of the bag to the general public, though he did let the whiskers show among close friends like the Inklings and family and at a Philological conference around 1931 or 1932. The talk he gave that day, now known as "A Secret Vice," is the key to understanding the success of Tolkien's mythologies, centered primarily around his "mad hobby."

That Tolkien's work started with language is not surprising given his career as a philologist and his fascination with language from a young age. What is surprising (and was so even to Tolkien himself) is that so many of the fans of the book fell in love with the languages and lore and felt an intense need to understand them. The publication of *The Hobbit* brought many questions that pleased Tolkien's inner desire to construct languages in this way. In December of 1937, he asked Stanley Unwin if he should provide a runic alphabet for publication as he'd already had to sketch it out for several people (*Letters* 27). He also answered other questions about language in response to fan letters. Many of the inquiries he got from readers were answered with "there's more to come." By this, he meant the sequel he was working on for *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, but also the publication of *The Silmarillion* which Tolkien felt should precede the sequel because it answered so many of the questions in those early fan responses to his work.

The constant inquiries asking for more information caused Tolkien much distress. After an ultimatum, Allen & Unwin declined to publish both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* in 1950 (*Letters 143*). Tolkien turned to Milton Waldman who had promised the publication of both books in a timely manner through Collins, but the sheer length of these books made them hesitant. Tolkien's justification of dual publication is captured in an important letter written late in 1951 (*Letters* 143-161). Therein he described the essential quality of his writing, that the languages and mythologies were developed simultaneously and provide the bases for the

all the tales he was telling at the time. He felt strongly that the two needed to be published at the same time because they were of a piece. Eventually, Collins declined to publish the books (*Letters* 161), so sheepishly, Tolkien turned back to Allen & Unwin. Rayner Unwin's reply was encouraging: "We do *want* to publish for you—it's only ways and means that have held us up" (*Letters* 163-164).

But the questions generated by the fans of *The Hobbit* proved to be just the tip of the cat's ears, so to speak. Even while *The Lord of the Rings* was in page proofs, Tolkien was fielding questions (*Letters* 174-180). But it was the public reception of *The Fellowship of the Ring* that thoroughly surprised Tolkien and his publishers. Letters poured in at a rapid rate, and the need for some sort of explanatory materials became evident. Tolkien started work condensing some of his earlier materials into appendices for the third installment, *The Return of the King*. Though the first two volumes were published in rapid succession (*Fellowship* on 29 July 1954 and *Two Towers* on 11 November 1954), the appendices delayed the publication of the final volume for nearly a year. In March of 1955, Rayner Unwin wrote to say that if he didn't get the appendices in, Allen and Unwin would have to "yield to the intense pressure that is accumulating and publish without all the additional material" (*Letters* 209). Tolkien's reply was more of a lament:

> I now wish that no appendices had been promised! For I think their appearance in truncated form will satisfy nobody: certainly not me; clearly from the (appalling mass of) letters I receive not those people who like that kind of thing—astonishingly many….It is, I suppose a tribute to the curious effect that story has, when based on very elaborate and detailed workings of geography, chronology, and language, that so many should clamour for sheer "information" or "lore." But the demands such people make would require a book, at least the size of Vol. I. (*Letters* 210)

Published accounts of Tolkien's insistence that the linguistic nature of the work was its very core encouraged more and more letters begging for clarification of the language and lore. Fan groups, conventions and fanzines popped up in the early 1960's. Some of the publications were scholarly, but many emphasized role-playing and fan fiction. Tolkien became inundated with fan visits and calls and had to remove his phone number from the directory and move to the coast.

But a shift started in the mid 1960's. By 1966, Dick Plotz had started the Tolkien Society of America[2]. The Mythopoeic Society also saw its start in 1967 when Glen GoodKnight threw a birthday picnic for Bilbo and Frodo. Books attempting to fathom the languages started to appear. Jim Allan produced the privately published *A Glossary of Elven Tongues* in 1971, closely followed by Ruth Noel's *The Languages of Middle Earth* in 1974. Julian Bradfield (later editor of *Quettar,* the bulletin of the Linguistic Fellowship of The Tolkien Society) also published *A Dictionary of Quenya and of Proto-Eldarin and Ante-Quenya with an Index* in 1982. Given that these works relied only on the materials published so far, their attempts to make sense of Tolkien's languages was laudable. One thing was clear though: The fan fascination with language was leading to deeper thought on a number of levels.

In the 1970's, the Mythopoeic Society started to emerge as an important player in Tolkien studies. Their Linguistic Fellowship started publishing a journal called *Parma Eldalamberon* in 1971. The writers of this group took the linguistic work more seriously and sought to publish a revision of Jim Allan's *Glossary.* Together, this group published *An*

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[2] Plotz published an interview with Tolkien in *Seventeen Magazine* (January 1966), and is most famous for the Plotz Declension, a chart Tolkien sent the young man for his interest in Elvish"Teen Talk," *Times Daily*, August 30, 1966. Plotz declension first published in *Tolkien Language Notes 2,* edited by Jim Allan in 1974 for the Mythopoeic Society. The Plotz declension also appeared in Beyond Bree (March 1989) and Vinyar Tengwar #6 (July 1989).

Introduction to Elvish in 1978. The Mythopoeic Society absorbed Dick Plotz's Tolkien Society of America in 1972, and the *Tolkien Journal* was subsumed into *Mythlore.*

All of this intellectual stimulation came from Tolkien's then very limited published works on Middle Earth: *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil, The Road Goes Ever On* with Donald Swann,"Guide to the Names in *The Lord of the Rings*" in Jared Lobdell's book *A Tolkien Compass,* and *A Map of Middle Earth* by Tolkien, his son Christopher and Pauline Baynes. The corpus was small and manageable, and the emerging scholarship was difficult, but not impossible. There was a storm on the horizon, however. Tolkien's plan to publish *The Silmarillion* was moving ahead, and the impact of the book would make for yet another explosion in this new world order. Then the unthinkable happened. J.R.R. Tolkien died on September 2, 1973 leaving *The Silmarillion* unready for publication.

After his father's death, Christopher Tolkien set out at once to publish the extant manuscripts. He started with the nearly completed *Sir Gawain* translation (1975) then moved to *The Silmarillion.* The disorder of the manuscript meant a delay in publishing, but it finally saw print in 1977. The Mythopoeic Linguistic Fellowship was about to publish *An Introduction to Elvish* when the notice for *The Silmarillion* came out. In the forward to that book, Jim Allan noted that though some people thought he should wait six months to publish until after the material from *The Silmarillion* had been analyzed and incorporated, he intuited the enormity of the book's impact and decided to go ahead and publish. He gave a number of excellent reasons for this decision: 1. That it would take longer than three months to incorporate material from *The Silmarillion;* 2. that the demand for his glossary indicated a need for this book now; 3. that an outdated book would allow readers to make their own discoveries; 4. and that *The Silmarillion*

would mostly impact the elvish tongues, not the other languages covered in the book, still giving it some value.

The first reaction to the publication of *the Silmarillion* was a shocked silence. The Mythopoeic Society's *Parma Eldalamberon* went into hiatus after the monumental effort to produce *An Introduction to Elvish*. Meanwhile, Christopher Tolkien was busy adding to his father's work. *The Unfinished Tales* (1980), Humphrey Carpenter's *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1981) and *The Monsters and the Critics* (1983) all pushed the budding Tolkien scholars to new conclusions and new ideas, but nothing could prepare them for Christopher Tolkien's next 13 years of activity producing the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle Earth* (1983-1996). While Christopher Tolkien left out a number of very detailed philological essays on the development of the invented languages, he left in quite a lot of information for language and lore enthusiast. Christopher Gilson picked up *Parma Eldalamberon* again in 1983 and started to publish again. The tenor of the debate had shifted subtly however. That first issue covered Tolkien's letter to Rhona Beare on Thrór's map, Welden's analysis of the impact of Telerin on Sindarin's development, and a glossary of high elven by Gilson. The most important of Tolkien's posthumous works for people studying the languages was *The Lost Road*, published in 1987. The Lhammas and the Etymologies greatly expanded the views about the linguistic and mythic core of Tolkien's Middle Earth.

With all this new information, talk of revising *An Introduction to Elvish* started anew, which led to some changes. The Mythopoeic Linguistic Fellowship became the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship (ELF) and started producing a second journal (in addition to *Parma Eldalamberon*) for the Mythopoeic Society, *Vinyar Tengwar,* in September of 1988. It only took debate over the first three issues, however, for the group to decide that the endeavor was too

ambitious though *Vinyar Tengwar* continued to publish. The ELF produced some high level scholarship during this time, and requested more manuscripts from Christopher Tolkien. In 1991, ELF was awarded the permission to print and edit some of J.R.R. Tolkien's more esoteric pieces on languages. This started with small manuscripts sent from Marquette and the Bodleian Library of Oxford University. *Vinyar Tengwar* produced a number of articles analyzing these small pieces. Starting with Volume 11 (1994), *Parma Eldalamberon* was dedicated to printing edited versions of larger unpublished linguistic works. That edition saw the publication of the complete Gnomish Lexicon, *I-Lam na-Ngoldathon.* By 1998, both journals were only publishing edited works by Tolkien.

This monumental shift in Tolkien language studies is at the core of my fascination with this aspect of Tolkien's work. Finally, the cat's eye peeps over the edge of the bag! My first impression of the books was this same intense curiosity about the language and lore so artfully created in Tolkien's work. I knew nothing of these other people's efforts, only of my own longing for Tolkien's gift, his ability to bring such wondrous things to life with such ease. I noticed a fullness to Tolkien's world that I didn't see in other fantasy or science fiction. George Lucas's *Star Wars* films lacked the depth in language and culture that Tolkien captured. He would throw in a smattering of words and cultural practices, but nothing with the consistency and realism that Tolkien achieved. Christopher Paolini's *Eragon* series attempted to emulate Tolkien, but failed. Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* came closer to the mark as it matured (especially in terms of the development of Klingons and Vulcans) but did not reach it either.

My driving question was "what did Tolkien do that these people did not?". The key for me came in reading what Tolkien said about the integral relationship between linguistic invention and mythic core in *A Secret Vice.* There he lays out some distinctions about language

invention. What we do as children, illustrated with his juvenile language Animalic, is code swap, exchange word forms in one language for notions in another, or switch around word forms and give them new meanings. The second dimension is more sophisticated, but still crude. For this, he uses another of the juvenile language experiments, Nevbosh (New Nonsense), to illustrate a new set of word forms that convey notions inherent in an existing language. Ultimately it was still a code swap though, an unsystematic, arbitrary alteration of an existing language. Tolkien seems to regret the lack of a background in phonetic knowledge used to create something like Nevbosh and suggests that using a knowledge base might have made it stronger. There is an attempt to create that in his tinkering with Neffarin, but its lack of circulation (it was not used for communication between people unlike Animalic and Nevbosh) did not allow it to become as strong as Nevbosh which had a number of speakers and writers.

Tolkien's creation of these categories in "A Secret Vice" shed light on the mistakes made by the other fiction authors I've mentioned. Lucas's attempts to denote culture are a start, but the languages he created are pure nonsense. They are more like Animalic. Paolini's world fails because the language he created was too crude, too simplistic, too like Nevbosh, a code without substance. Tolkien's own attempts do not succeed until he combines both a philological knowledge base with a true attempt at communication between people within the context of a specific culture. It is in developing his Elvish languages, especially Quenya, that Tolkien found a path to a more realistic culture/language formation.

In his musings in "A Secret Vice," Tolkien creates a recipe for achieving that depth. To be more sophisticated, he argued, "the making of a language and mythology are related functions; to give your language individual flavor, it must have woven into it the threads of an individual mythology—the converse indeed is true, your language will *breed* a mythology"

(*Monsters* 210-211). So, the first tenet is that any invented language is both linguistic and mythic. A successful language is created simultaneously with the mythology of the world. The second ingredient is word forms made through both personal interaction with language structures and usage and traditional interaction within the confines of a given group's use of the language in communicating with one another. The third ingredient is the consideration of philological aspects of word and grammar creation. This lends a precision in the deduction of forms from antecedents and helps to create rules that give the language a sureness of construction. The fourth ingredient is the use of grammatical and logical rules to understand the categories and relationship of words, to see how to express ideas in a variety of ways by using the machinery of expression in individualistic ways. Though Tolkien's recipe stops there, he goes on to say that one of the best ways to develop a language is to compose verses. In his own experiences, this led to real interchanges and struggles with the invented languages that only served to strengthen them.

He applied all of these ideas to Quenya in its development. The language arose simultaneously with the mythologies Tolkien was creating for *The Silmarillion*. The origin myth of the awakening of the elves, the tale of the Kinslaying, the Fall of Gondolin, Thingol's banishment of all things Quenya when he finds out about the kinslaying, all of these things put the language into a context that made it stronger. Secondly, word forms were seen as evolving from Eldarin roots through Qenya and then to a more developed Quenya into Sindarin as Quenya is banished. This evolution included personal changes to the language within a perceived group of speakers. This can be seen clearly in the development of Quenya verbs. Some words remain the same through time or change little. Some are strong influences on the sister language Sindarin. Some fall out of favor altogether. All mimic the actions of a living language.

Quenya also incorporates many philological considerations. There is an aesthetic to the language, the way vowels and consonants are used and worked, but also the ways that words can be deduced through patterns established in the language. Tolkien's best linguistic works show not only the words and their meanings, but how they were derived philologically. The grammar and logic of the language is highly developed with intense constructions of verb tenses, prefixes, suffixes, pronomial endings, noun declensions, comparative and superlative formations, syntactical structures, and pronunciation. He developed writing systems, elaborate alphabets to capture the languages in their cultural contexts. He also conceived of verses, lines and snatches of language in ways that helped him clarify how people could communicate in such a language. Clearly, the long work on the Elven languages transcends codification. It rises out of and simultaneously creates a culture, a mythology within which it can realistically exist.

But the study of a language, even within its mythic core, still produces stagnation. Like the experiments with Naffarin, Tolkien's vision, though much fuller and more realized than the languages from his juvenalia, lacks an interaction, a sharing of language that goes beyond his imagination. There is some interaction in his tales. He sees this as the place where his language is shared and evolves, but it is limited like Nevbosh. Communication is limited to the interactions he fabricated and edited. Tolkien was obsessive about making everything work in the world logically even when the creation of a word or structure was completely arbitrary. The players are bound by the rules as with Vulcan and Klingon when it was first introduced by James Doohan and Marc Okrand. When the language became popular among fans, the copyright holder, Paramount, attempted to stop it. Later, the studio decided to allow fan use of the language. This difference made a big difference between Tolkien's language and Okrand's. Fans could take Klingon and Vulcan and bring more of the personal into their use of it,

something Tolkien and his son Christopher actively discouraged with Tolkien's invented

languages. The translation of Shakespeare into Klingon is a point of expansion that frowning on

neo-Quenya, neo-Sindarin, neo-Black Speech, and neo-Khuzdul does not allow. But the fact that

people like David Salo are moving beyond the confines of Tolkien's creation and looking for

fuller ways to express themselves in his languages demonstrates the realization of Tolkien's

secret goal—to create a language with its own life. His Middle Earth languages seem so very real

to those who try to speak them or use them to enhance filmic representations of Middle Earth.

But Tolkien himself stopped there. He had to. The next evolution of the language meant

letting people share it and that meant ceding control of its development. Marc Okrand and

Paramount felt they could do that and thus let the pressure from fans overcome their earlier

objections. But this was something Tolkien, ever tinkering with the languages, could not do, and

something that Christopher Tolkien felt would disrespect his father's legacy. Suddenly,

Tolkien's cat was being held tightly in the bag, wriggling to get out. And I understand the

feeling. The same has happened to me in my own quest to develop a world as real as Tolkien's.

I've gotten stuck in merely watching and admiring him from afar. What is helping me let my cat

out of the bag is my shared vice with Tolkien. My efforts at creating simultaneously a linguistic

and mythic core for my own world has led to me adopting his recipe for success. Mythology and

word forms come from my personal relationship with language. My love of French (not shared

with Tolkien), my Latin studies at Mythgard, my intense studies of Quenya and Sindarin all give

me a different personal relationship to this new language I am inventing, this new world I am

creating. But like Tolkien, I need time to develop and establish this new world order before I

allow others in. My cat is out of the bag, but hiding in a corner waiting for you all to leave. Once

I finish the core work, once my world is as firmly established as Tolkien's Middle Earth, then I'll

let the cat romp around and play with others. The example of Klingon is very heartening. The fans didn't tromp on the language. They took it somewhere Marc Okrand had no desire to go. If I truly want a world as full as Tolkien's, I can use language and culture creation as a start, then let it grow in the hands of other practitioners. Only then can it take on a life of its own beyond me. The same life that Middle Earth has taken on now because of fan pressure and co-creation.

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