

Living in the Word

From an early age Tolkien was interested in words for their own sake, fascinated by their sound and musicality. He loved to recite words regardless of their meaning, so much so that one can start to gain a feeling that they took the place of music in the child's mind. Languages fascinated him. During his days at King Edwards, while learning Greek, he was enthralled by the contrast between its fluidity, its hardness, and its "surface glitter." In his college days he took up the study of Old Welsh, whose sound he deeply appreciated, just as a child he stood spellbound by the Welsh place names on coal trucks: Nantyglo, Senghenydd, Blaenrhondda, Penrhiwceiber.

Invented Languages

When referring to his writings Tolkien once said that

it is not a hobby [writing and publishing fairy-stories and romances], in the sense of something quite different from someone's work, taken up as a relief-outlet. The invention of languages is the foundation. The "stories" were made rather to provide a world for the language than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows. I should have preferred to write in Elvish.¹

Statements like these are not isolated. In fact something of this very same nature was stated by Tolkien in relation to *The Lord of the Rings*. And when, around 1930, Tolkien jotted down almost without thinking, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," he was writing a sentence that only later would take him in the direction of the celebrated *The Hobbit*. At the time he still had to discover the nature of a Hobbit.

To see how all of this is possible, let us take a look at Tolkien's love affair with languages. During secondary school while immersed in the official Greek and Latin studies, he turned his interest to Gothic, Anglo-Saxon, and Welsh. This study fed his early taste for inventing his own idioms, particularly his early Elvish language, about which one of his eulogist comments, "This was no arbitrary gibberish, but a really possible tongue, with consistent roots, sound laws, and inflexions, into which he poured all his imaginative and

¹ Carpenter, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 219.

philological powers.”² It is very indicative that Tolkien first developed languages for his beings (particularly the Elves) and then developed a mythology for them. Verlyn Flieger, who has devoted much of her life to an understanding of Tolkien, concludes, “Language came first, and his development of it forced him to realize that there can be no language without a people who speak it, no people without a culture which expresses them, no culture without a myth which informs and shapes it.”³

The reader will remember that Tolkien first wrote his own dragon story when he was seven. His mother pointed out that he could not say “a green great dragon” but only “a great green dragon.” This puzzled him and moved him from stories to language. On a later occasion, upon reading the *Crist* he came across two lines about Earendel: “Hail Earendel, brightest of angels / above the middle-earth sent unto men.” Referring to the time of the discovery Tolkien later commented, “There was something very remote and strange and beautiful behind these words, if I could grasp it, far beyond ancient English.”⁴ This offered him the motivation to start working on his own *Lay of Earendel*.

In order to understand the importance of Tolkien’s invented languages, we will first look at his biography and letters, then to some of his unfinished work. He delivered his lecture *A Secret Vice* to the Johnson Society, Pembroke College, Oxford, in 1931.⁵ It could be argued this was the first time Tolkien spoke publicly, though in a very veiled fashion, about his work in “sub-creation.” Tolkien calls his secret passion both a “new game” and a “new art.”

In chronological order Tolkien first mentions Nevbosh (the “New Nonsense”) a language that he invented together with his cousin Marjorie Incledon. The language phonetically distorted words from common languages (English, French, Latin); it was closer to a code than an invented language and was only shared by the two inventors.

Soon after Tolkien turned his energies to Naffarin, based on Latin and Spanish. He felt it was a step forward because through it he attempted to fulfill “the instinct for linguistic

² Quoted in Pearce, *Tolkien, Man and Myth*, 33.

³ Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 60.

⁴ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 64.

⁵ Tolkien, *A Secret Vice*, xii.

invention—the fitting of notion to oral symbol, and *pleasure in contemplating the new relationship established*.”⁶ At the time of the lecture he outlined what he thought were the essential elements for language invention:

- the creation of aesthetically pleasing sound forms
- a sense of fitness between symbol and meaning
- an elaborate and ingenious grammar
- a fictional historical background that gives “an illusion of coherence and unity to the whole”

There had been various invented languages before Tolkien. Examples include those of Thomas More, Bishop Godwyn, Cyrano de Bergerac, and Jonathan Swift. Specimens of invented languages also appeared in the works of Edward Bulwer (Lord Lytton), Edgar Allan Poe, and Percy Greg. In addition, the late 1920s and early 1930s saw the development of so-called International Auxiliary Languages and language experimentation in art, mainly through the literary movement of Modernism. Among the International Auxiliary Languages were Volapük, Ido, Novial, and the more well-known Esperanto. Interestingly, Tolkien was a patron of the 24th British Esperanto Congress in 1933. Although he lent his support to the development of the language, he judged the newly invented language, and all the other ones, dead because thoroughly deprived of a past, real or fictional.⁷

Tolkien finally broke through to a more productive experiment when he turned his attention to what would become Quenya, which had much of its rooting in Finnish. The language was in Tolkien’s mind derived from an earlier form—from which a second Elvish language was later added—and used by the Elves of Middle-earth. A second language, Sindarin, was more closely modeled around Welsh.

Tolkien set the basis for his Quenya language in the spring of 1915 in his *The Quenya Lexicon* and the *Quenya Phonology*. The language was inspired by Tolkien’s love of Finnish and his reading of the *Kalevala*. Here too love of language and mythology go hand in hand:

⁶ Tolkien, *A Secret Vice*, 15–16.

⁷ Tolkien, *A Secret Vice*, xlvi.

Quenya was used at length in *The Book of Lost Tales*. And by 1920 Tolkien had completed his *Quenya Grammar*. Tolkien expressed that in Quenya he found his “own most normal phonetic taste.”

Sindarin was originally called Gnomish or Goldogrin. It was associated with the Elves exiled from Valinor, also originally called Gnomes or Noldoli. Tolkien used Welsh sounds to build the second language. He used a system of mutation (how words are affected when they are close to other words) almost identical with Welsh mutations. This second language also appeared in *The Book of Lost Tales*. It was finally called Sindarin, the language often used in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien associates Quenya with the highest Elven race, and with the highest and purest of his imagined beings. Quenya had more open vowels, as in Finnish, than his Sindarin.

Around 1937 Tolkien wrote *The Lhammas* (“Account of the Tongues”) in which he created a “Tree of Tongues” showing how each language is related to older ones and contemporary ones, and how the language of Elves related to that of Men and Dwarves.⁸ Out of an original root language he derives twelve Elvish languages or dialects. The splintering of these languages occurred when the Elves went separate ways. At first some decided to join the Valar (the gods) in the West, and others remained behind. Later some of the Elves left the West to return to Middle-earth. The language splintered at each step of the way.

Tolkien’s Love of Language

In his legendarium Tolkien took great care in the determination of his names. He gave a lot of attention to them and wrote with a certain pride to Stanley Unwin his publisher: “Personally I believe (and here believe I am a good judge) they are good, and a large part of the effect. They are coherent and consistent and made upon two related linguistic formulae, so that they achieve a reality not fully achieved to my feeling by other name-inventors (say Swift or Dunsany).”⁹

Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien’s biographer, has retraced how the author would form the names with great care by first deciding on a meaning, then developing the form first in

⁸ In *The Lost Road*, quoted in Tolkien, *A Secret Vice*, xxix.

⁹ Carpenter, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 26.

one language then in the other (most often he used Sindarin as the last version). At other times, however, he would construct a name that seemed appropriate to the character without regard to linguistic roots. Over time Tolkien came to look upon his languages as real ones. In this mood he would approach contradictions or unsatisfying names not as problems to be fixed, but something to be discovered, leading Carpenter to conclude, “In part it was an intellectual game of Patience . . . and in part it grew from his belief in the ultimate *truth* of his mythology.”¹⁰

So much for the official Tolkien. Something more appears from the Tolkien of fiction, the Tolkien that speaks through his characters, especially in two works of science fiction, or rather time-travel, that remained incomplete: *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers*.

The Lost Road, which meanders through various historical ages, was to end with the hero at the drowning of Atlantis. Time travel is what occurs in consciousness through the intermediary of unusual personal experiences, rather than resorting to time machines or other technological devices. The book spans epochs of time through the thread of serial identity of father-son pairings. A closely tuned father and son pair dream themselves back in time and carry the thread of their folk memory, through serial identity of their preceding ancestors. In other words there is a collective memory running through the bloodlines.

The book was initially meant to have a series of historical settings, culminating backwards in the Atlantean episode. Among these: a Lombard story, a “Norse story of ship-burial,” a “Tuatha-de-Danaan story,” a story concerning “painted caves,” and others before the flood of Númenor. The book’s narrative is interrupted at the fourth chapter, at the place in which the main characters would have entered the exploration of the fall of Númenor. Carpenter estimates that Tolkien’s *The Lost Road* was written sometime after the completion of the legend of Atlantis/Númenor, which corresponds to “Akallabêth,” a part of *The Silmarillion*.¹¹ We will return to the importance of Atlantis soon.

Tolkien’s son Christopher indicates that *The Lost Road* is a kind of idealized autobiography.¹² It is in this attempted time travel that Tolkien portrays the history

¹⁰ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 95.

¹¹ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 170.

¹² Tolkien, *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, 53.

professor Alboin who hears words rise in his consciousness “that seem to be fragments of ancient and forgotten languages.”

The father and son pair, Oswin and Alboin, are the main characters in the first part of the plot, and Alboin closely conveys much of the autobiographical flavor. The dates penciled in for his birth—February 4, 1890/1891—correspond to only one or two years earlier and one day after Tolkien’s birthdate.¹³

Like Tolkien, Alboin has to learn Greek. However, on his own he decides to study Old English, Norse, Welsh, and Irish, though these are not encouraged in his curriculum—another autobiographical parallel. “Alboin liked the flavour of the older northern languages, quite as much as he liked some of the things written in them. . . . sound-changes were a hobby of his, at the age when other boys were learning about the insides of motor-cars.”¹⁴ And he had an intuitive grasp of these languages, of what he calls “language atmosphere”:

You get echoes coming through, you know, in odd words here and there—often very common words in their own language, but quite unexplained by the etymologists; and in the general shape and sound of all the words, somehow; as if something was peeping through from deep under the surface.¹⁵

At one point Alboin tells his father: “But I got a lot of jolly new words a few days ago: I am sure *lomelinde* means *nightingale*, for instance, and certainly *lome* is *night* (though not *darkness*).”¹⁶ Notice here that the words come, and then they are interpreted as for their meaning; contrary to the process of artificially creating a language. It seems that Tolkien is revealing here—in the comfort of an unpublished book—something more about his passion for languages.

We get a feeling of how the themes of mythology, culture, and language are part and parcel of the whole search of Alboin, who says “I like to go back—and not with race only, or culture only, or language; but with all three.”¹⁷ Surveying his life Alboin says something that

¹³ Tolkien, *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, 53.

¹⁴ Tolkien, *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, 39.

¹⁵ Tolkien, *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, 40.

¹⁶ Tolkien, *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, 41.

¹⁷ Tolkien, *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, 40.

Tolkien could have related to: that the purpose or mood of his life has been one of traveling back in time, an experience that he equates to walking on long-forgotten roads, echoing the title of the book.

The Notion Club Papers portend to report the meetings of an Oxford discussion group called the Notion Club, that resembled in spirit much of the Inklings. Many of the members of the club carry parts of Tolkien's persona. The published part of the story revolves around Númenor/Atlantis, or Tolkien's Great Wave dream.

Among the characters who bear some resemblance to Tolkien are Ramer, professor of Finno-Ugric philology; Alwin Arundel Lowdham, interested in Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic, and comparative philology; and Wilfrid Trewin Jeremy, who specializes in escapism and writes about time travel and imaginary lands. An interesting addition is that of Rupert Dolbear, who acts a little like Tolkien's consciousness, alerting us when something relevant is about to happen, or offering seemingly far-off, but quite to the point, insights.

In the story Lowdham, who receives words in his sleep consciousness, explains: Most of these "ghost-words" . . . began to come through as I said, when I was about ten: and almost at once I started to note them down. . . . But later on, when I was older and I had a little more linguistic experience, I began to pay serious attention to my "ghosts", and saw that they were something quite different from the game of trying to make up private languages.¹⁸

Note that here Tolkien brings together two elements; the desire to craft a private language, and the inspiration through which he receives words in his sleep. This too seems to mirror Tolkien's evolution in relation to languages that he first invents and later discovers.

Further in what becomes very interesting in relation to Tolkien's life, the same Lowdham states:

As soon as I started looking out for them, so to speak, the ghosts began to come oftener and clearer; and when I had got a lot of them noted down, I saw that they were not all of the same kind: they had different phonetic styles, styles as unlike as, well—Latin and Hebrew. . . . Well, first of all I recognized that a lot of these ghosts were Anglo-Saxon, or related stuff. What was left I arranged in two lists, A and B, according to their style, with

¹⁸ Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, 238.

a third rag-bag list C for odd things that didn't seem to fit in anywhere. But it was language A that really attracted me; just suited me. I still like it best.¹⁹

The question of language preference too has a very biographical echo.

Concerning languages A and B Lowdham then realizes that they are related neither to any language ever heard nor with the languages he invented at an early stage. And then he adds that

they came through made: sound and sense already conjoined. I can no longer niggle with them than I can alter the sound of the word *polis* in Greek. . . . Nothing changes but occasionally my spelling. . . . In other words they have the effect and taste of real languages. But one can have preferences among real languages, and as I say, I like A best.²⁰

Lowdham calls the two languages Avallonian and Adunaic, and marks his preference for the older one of the two, Avallonian. Adunaic is in consciousness closer to the present. "But *Avallonian* . . . Seems to me more august, more ancient, and, well, sacred and liturgical. I used to call it Elven-Latin. The echoes of it carry one far away. Very far away. Away from Middle-earth altogether, I expect."²¹ The characterization of Elven-Latin renders Avallonian reminiscent of Tolkien's official Quenya, which he preferred over the later Sindarin.

Language: Science and Art

In his first attempt at college in 1913, Tolkien did not achieve First Class Honour Moderations (only a Second Class) but nevertheless achieved a "pure alpha" or a practically faultless paper in Comparative Philology. After being discharged from the army Tolkien's first job occupied him for a time at putting the finishing touches at one of the most comprehensive efforts ever to craft an English dictionary. Dr. Bradley, who supervised the work, said of Tolkien: "His work gives evidence of an unusual mastery of Anglo-Saxon and of the facts and principles of the comparative grammar of the Germanic languages. Indeed I have no hesitation in saying that I have never known a man of his age who is in these respects his equal."²²

¹⁹ Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, 238.

²⁰ Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, 240.

²¹ Tolkien, *Sauron Defeated*, 241.

²² Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 101.

In his early days at Oxford Tolkien wanted to reduce the gap between what were called Language (philology) and Literature. There were many factions and strong animosities. Undertaking this task was natural for Tolkien since his love for philology was firmly grounded in appreciation for literature. By 1931 he had achieved a remarkable success—thanks in part to the support of C. S. Lewis. He was the recognized architect of a revised syllabus that achieved a great deal of rapprochement between Language and Literature.

We have already explored Tolkien's *Beowulf* essay. In another essay, titled "Sigelwara Land," Tolkien concentrates on the meaning of the Old English word *Sigelwaran* or *Sigelhearwan* to stand for something like "black people living in a hot region." To recapture meaning and understanding of the consciousness of the times, the scholarly attitude has to be accompanied by a willingness to stimulate the imagination to enter a lost dimension of consciousness. Tolkien's scholarship allies here great precision with imaginative penetration. On the basis of all the above Carpenter characterizes Tolkien's philological writing as "forceful in its imagery . . . however abstruse or unpromising the subject might seem."²³ Thus Tolkien combined a scrupulous and painstaking concern for accuracy with an uncanny ability for unearthing patterns and relationships.

The same attitude of scholarship and imagination penetrates all his fiction work. *The Lord of the Rings* is a *Beowulf* in reverse; here the artistic part takes the front seat, but the researcher isn't that far off, accompanying his characters and geography of Middle-earth with digressions, maps, and appendices. Here again the estimation of Verlyn Flieger is worth quoting in full:

Research into early forms and uses of words, the search after lost meanings and nuances—a scientific study in the truest sense of the word—led him through science into art, and from art into an almost spiritual realm wherein the word was the conveyer of primal truth, the magic vehicle not just of communication but of genuine communion. As such, words were for Tolkien not just a window onto the past but the key to that lost relationship between man and God of which our sense of the Fall is our only memory.²⁴

²³ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 134.

²⁴ Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 9.

We will return to this aspect of Tolkien's genius.

Tolkien was keenly aware of how words have lost great part of their meaning and magic in present time. He felt that farmers and tradesmen of old lived so fully in the experience of the word that they "savoured words like meat and wine and honey in their tongues. Especially when declaiming. They made a scrap of verse majestically sonorous: like thunder moving on a slow wind, or the tramp of mourners at the funeral of a king." They were able to pronounce them each in such a way as to evoke an experience from nature or from life. Tolkien was trying to complement modern scientific consciousness with the artistic perspective. This was not a return to the past, but an evolution that mirrored at a new level what was true in much earlier times. When he referred to the ancient times of his legendarium, Tolkien says, "The light of Valinor (derived from light before any fall) is the light of art undivorced from reason, that sees things both scientifically (or philosophically) and imaginatively (or sub-creatively) and 'says that they are good'—as beautiful"²⁵ It is this determination to newly unite science and art that forms a constant thread in Tolkien's work.

At the end of his life Tolkien's scholarly work was rewarded with a 1972 honorary Doctorate of Letters from Oxford University. It was specifically for his contribution to philology, not for *The Lord of the Rings* or other writings. And Carpenter goes as far as to say that he almost founded a new school of philology. How is this claim justified? In *On Fairy Stories* Tolkien argues against the positions of philologists like Max Müller and George Dasent and from evolutionary anthropology against the positions of Andrew Lang. He counters Müller's assertion that mythology was a disease of language thus: "Mythology is not a disease at all. . . . It would be more near the truth to say that languages, especially modern European languages, are a disease of mythology."²⁶ What he said in jest he then moderated by saying that language, myth, and the correspondent culture arose together and formed an indivisible whole. Dasent had focused on race. Tolkien countered by focusing on the story itself, rather than its cultural background. To Lang who argued that fairy tales in their savageness belonged to something like an infancy of human development, Tolkien replied that fairy stories were not for children alone, though not all adults may appreciate them. This

²⁵ Carpenter, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 148.

²⁶ Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *Monsters and the Critics*, 121–22.

is something he knew first-hand, since he had such a deep appreciation for them. In the same essay Tolkien predicates that the fairy tale is not an escape because it does not deny the reality of sorrow and failure; it just denies its final defeat. Tolkien was the first scholar of stature to concern himself with the theme after the brothers Grimm; both sustained the validity of the fairy tale genre. Until then the entire subject had been dismissed out of hand.

Part of this deep penetration of the Word came to Tolkien from innate faculties, and what amounted to spiritual experiences that accompanied the early part of his life, as we have seen more closely from his two time-travel books. Another important part came to him through the work of and acquaintance with Owen Barfield.

Verlyn Flieger points to Tolkien sharing very close lines of thought with Barfield, another member of the Inklings. Although he also wrote fantasy, Barfield shines most as a creative thinker and philosopher; one of his early and persistent interests lay in the relationship between myth and language. And his related thoughts on the matter seem to have had a lasting influence on Tolkien's outlook.

We know of the direct effect of Barfield's theories about language on Tolkien from a letter that C. S. Lewis sent to Barfield:

You might like to know that when Tolkien dined with me the other night he said, *a propos* of something quite different, that your conception of the ancient semantic unity had modified his whole outlook, and that he was always just going to say something in a lecture when your concept stopped him in time. "It is one of those things," he said, "that when you've once seen it there are all sorts of things you can never say again."²⁷

Note that Tolkien was not only taking in Barfield's ideas, but he was always casting other ones aside for good as the consequence of this. They deepened his scholastic perceptions.

Although Tolkien and Barfield saw each other, they were both better friends of C. S. Lewis. Tolkien and Barfield shared a common interest in the history of language in relation to its myths. And Barfield felt that Tolkien's idea of sub-creation was very close to his "poet as world-maker," closer than Lewis had been to him. There is no evidence that Tolkien knew of the other works of Barfield. But for the two of them words were the instruments allowing the sub-creator to reunite with the divine.

²⁷ Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 35–36.

In *Poetic Diction* Barfield considered the evolution of words and the evolution of their meaning in the relations of perception to word, and word to concept. He proposed that three things are completely enmeshed into each other: language, myth, and the human being's perception of his world.

In language's infancy there was no separation between a literal and a metaphoric meaning, between abstract and concrete. There was in fact no such thing as a metaphor when the human being both perceived phenomena and lived in a kind of mythic participation within them. And words in the early stages of language enveloped a world of meaning, many interpenetrating layers. Thus, for example the word *pneuma* in Greek stood for wind, breath, and spirit all at once. The modern human being, when translating the word, by necessity splinters the meaning by considering only one aspect of the whole.

Over time, with human feeling separating from the phenomena, there was a greater differentiation of the phenomena themselves, with a consequent fragmentation of perception and word meaning. More percepts led to more words, and these led to the ability to perceive more differentiation and generate more words—a self-sustaining cycle.

Tolkien could see words as fragments of the Logos and part and parcel of how the human being sees the world. Tolkien wrote his essay "Sigelwara Land" six years after reading Barfield, and this explains how he could now immerse himself imaginatively in the reality that permeates and conditions the experience of the word. And Barfield could not have affected Tolkien the scholar without affecting Tolkien the sub-creator. In fact the whole of *The Silmarillion* exemplifies the process of splintering of language and perception, which Verlyn Flieger has so aptly brought to light.

Tolkien's sub-creation takes its departure from the lived experience of language. Tolkien characterizes the fantasy writer as the creator of the Secondary World, who does, on a minor scale, what God does with the Primary World. And words are the tools for this sub-creation; words which are an expression of the Logos. As one of many examples, in his essay "On Fairy Stories" Tolkien marvels at what it meant for the evolution of language to arrive at the concept of adjective thus:

The mind that thought of *light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift*, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into a swift water. If it could do the one, it could do the other; it inevitably did both.²⁸

In his unfinished poem *Mythopoeia*, Tolkien writes:

*Man, Sub-creator, the refracted light,
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sowed the seed of dragons, 'twas our right
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we're made.*

Tolkien sees the human being capable to create by the same law “in which we’re made.” And the law is the Word, the Logos, which once was whole. The material through which the sub-creator creates is now light, as Flieger points out, rather than the word. And Tolkien sees in this shift from word to light, a shift from literal to metaphoric. This harkens to Barfield’s ancient semantic unity. It is in the nature of the word to try to reach for “metaphors of light.” Both light and word are agents of perception allowing us to see phenomena. We say “clarifying an argument” or “we see” for we understand; a change in wording can “put things under a different light.” For Tolkien the word is light, enlightenment, as we will see later on.

It is interesting to note that *fantasy* and *phenomena* come from the same root; *phenomena* comes from *phainesthai*, “to appear”; *fantasy* from *phantazein*, “to make visible.” And their root is in the Greek *phainein*, “to show.” Here is another example of the fragmentation of word and light. This indicates that there was a time when “appearances perceived” closely matched “appearances shaped by the imagination.” And further linguistic research shows the linkage between “to speak” and “to shine,” between light and word, in

²⁸ Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *Monsters and the Critics*, 43.

the Indo-European *bha*. Tolkien thus sees the origin of truth, light, and word in God. And the sub-creator makes manifest fragments of this original truth.

Language and Mythology

It is very indicative that Tolkien first developed languages for his beings (particularly Elves) and then developed a mythology for them. It's as if the mythology was the justification and follow-through of the preceding languages.

The prevailing theories of language of the time derived myth from language, not vice versa. The leading German philologist, Max Müller, argued that mythology was a “disease of language.” Tolkien argued for the contrary: language as a “disease of mythology.” By *disease* he meant dis-ease or discomfort, one that leads to consciousness and from that to language.

In *The Silmarillion* we see the fragmentation of Elvish language from the perception of the whole to many views reflected in languages, illustrating the splintering process of light and word. From this splintered light arise all the colors in their beauty through greater variety and narrower, more precise expressions. From unified light we move to colors; and from Word (Logos) to words. “The Logos [Word] is ultimately independent of the verbum [word].”²⁹

In *The Silmarillion* language arises with the awakening of the Elves in Cuiviénen, when their history begins. When the Elves awaken they behold the stars, saying “Ele!” which means “behold.” *Ele* is a primary percept on the way to becoming metaphor, as the Elves use it to shape and characterize their culture (Eldar). The primary act of speech is a response to the perception of the light of the stars, to the percept “to shine.” And from *quen* for “say, speak” comes their characterization of themselves, since they are the first ones to speak: the Quendi, “those that speak with voices.” The speech comes in response to the light [of the stars]. But the Valar gods see the Elves as *Eldar*, or “people of the stars,” a name that originates from light and speech, from *el*, related to *ele*.

Tolkien's scholarly work informed his artistic literary output down to the minutest details, as in the uses of regional, sociocultural variations of language in his characters: the more city-minded language of the Tooks and Bagginses in contrast with the rural dialect of

²⁹ Carpenter, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 269.

Gamgees and Cottons. Or the musicality of Elvish language in contrast to the guttural and harsh sounding Orc speech. Even in things as subtle as the difference between the enamored Eowyn addressing Aragorn with “thou” and the distant Aragorn responding with “you.”³⁰

Tolkien illustrated all these ideas about language in both an artistic and scientific fashion in his literary opus. He had understood first intuitively, then more consciously, through Barfield that poetry and science can be made to converge in the artistic creation.

Verlyn Flieger offers some examples, which follow, from *The Lord of the Rings*, the first of which concerns the understanding of the nature of Tom Bombadil. Frodo asks Goldberry, “Who is Tom Bombadil?” And Goldberry simply answers, “He is.” But she is not answering Frodo in the sense of “I am that I am.” She is meaning that “he is as you have seen him.” She adds, “He is the Master of wood, water and hill.”³¹ And Frodo misunderstands that all in Tom’s domain belongs to him, to which she replies negatively. Thus, the term *master* does not desire for possession; it is intended as “teacher” and “authority.” Then Frodo asks Bombadil directly, “Who are you, Master?” And Tom answers, “Don’t you know my name yet? That’s the only answer.”³² At the Council in Rivendell Elrond calls Tom “Iarwain Ben-adar,” oldest and fatherless. *Iarwain* means “old-young” in Sindarin. *Ben-adar* means “without father.” Since Tom has his origin before what is known as history, he can only be associated with himself. He existed before language itself. “Tom was here before the river and the trees. . . . He made paths before the Big people, and saw the little people arriving. . . . He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless.” This explains that in the end one can only simply say that he is.³³

In the book Tolkien also explores how experience and word interconnect and develop each other in the instance of Treebeard. The Ent lives in the consciousness that knowing someone’s name means being able to dominate them. He does not want to tell the Hobbits his name because it would take too long, and his name is growing all the time because “it is

³⁰ See Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 4–8, and “The Mind, the Tongue, and the Tale,” in *Green Suns and Faërie*, 242–49.

³¹ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 122.

³² Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 129.

³³ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 129 and 258–59.

like a story.” Just as the Hobbits are hasty and so is their language, the reverse is true of the Ents. This means that they live in different worlds and perceive the world’s unfolding in diametrically different ways.³⁴

Still within the context of fiction, Tolkien offers us another insight about language: a changed experience can preserve the word but obscure the meaning. Language can expand as well as contract. Lórien is also called Lothlórien, or in the longest terms *Laurelindórenan linderolendor malinorélion ornemalin*.³⁵ The full name means “The valley where the trees in a golden light sing musically, a land of music and dreams; there are yellow trees there, it is a yellow-tree land.”³⁶ When shortened we arrive at *Laurelinórenan*, “The land of the Valley of the Singing Gold.” The still shorter *Lothlórien* stands for “Dreamflower” and *Lórien* simply means “Dream.” Thus Lórien stands for the opposite of what we carry in our waking consciousness. The shortening of the name reflects the regressing relationship of the place towards time and change. It is a remnant of an old state of consciousness and is on its way out; for the time being it is artificially preserved, and in its shores time seems to be at a standstill. The Ents have another name for Lórien that means “There is a black shadow in the deep dales of the forest.” It’s a predictive name for what Lórien is on the way to becoming. This relates to the fact that the Elves try to embalm time and therefore stop change.

Time, and with it cultural change, can also change shape and sound and erode the meaning of a word. Gandalf cannot properly read what appears on the Doors of Moria: *pedo mellon a minno*. He first interprets it as “Speak, friend, and enter.”³⁷ But the meaning is only revealed by the possible variations of the word *speak* and how the punctuation is used. If instead of *speak* we use the word *say* the whole becomes “Say friend, and enter.” Which is to say that language depends on context for meaning. At a time of great cultural distress “friend” has acquired a less perceptible and immediate meaning.

The last example of how Tolkien mixes science and art in his *The Lord of the Rings* shows that the disappearance of the object can deprive language of the word. Loss of the

³⁴ Flieger, *Green Suns and Faërie*, 247.

³⁵ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 456.

³⁶ Carpenter, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 308.

³⁷ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 300.

thing leads to loss of the experience of the thing, and therefore of the word that expressed it. In referring to this example Tolkien expressly turns to Barfield's ideas. In chapter 12 of *The Hobbit* Tolkien refers to Bilbo's encompassing reaction to the sight of the dragon, an experience no longer to be had by those who cannot experience dragons: "To say that Bilbo's breath was taken away is no description at all. There are no words left to express his staggerment, since Men changed the language that they learned of the Elves in the days when the world was wonderful."³⁸ In being faithful to Barfield's ideas that he made his own, Tolkien comes up with the fictionally old word "staggerment" to express that for which there are no more words to express.

In all the above examples Tolkien has shown rather than explained to readers all the anomalies to which language is exposed when conveying consciousness that is different, belonging to the past, extinct, or otherwise modified.

Living in the Word

Tolkien's research into the evolution of words blended science and art to a high degree. Science and art ultimately led him to the realm of the Word/Logos, which conveys ultimate truths. This research became for Tolkien the avenue for an almost spiritual communion. Through words Tolkien returned to the Word, to the primeval relationship between the human being and God.

Listen to Tolkien comparing the synonyms *silver* and *argent*, taken as an example of how words could be taught in early education. He argues that the meaning of the words cannot be made obvious. And he recommends that people first learn to listen to the sound and realize that they don't have the same meaning, not only because they sound different. If one were to hear *argent* in a poetic context first, then "there is a chance then that you may like it for itself, and later learn to appreciate the heraldic overtones it has, in addition to its own peculiar sound, which 'silver' has not." And his conclusion is quite remarkable:

I think that this writing down, flattening, Bible-in-basic-English attitude is responsible for the fact that so many older children and younger people have little respect and no love

³⁸ Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 198.

for words, and very limited vocabularies—and alas! little desire left (even when they had the gift which has been stultified) to refine or enlarge them.³⁹

The above is a concrete illustration of the love for the musicality of the word that was inborn in Tolkien.

C. S. Lewis recognized Tolkien's "unique insight at once into the language of poetry and into the poetry of language." This led him to look at early texts both from the perspective of study of language and literature worthy of appreciation. Seeing this mastery over all aspects of language, Lewis saw what distinguished Tolkien from other philologists in the fact that "He had been inside of language."⁴⁰

This insight is confirmed and expanded upon by a certain Simonne d'Ardenne, one of Tolkien's Oxford students, who later became a philologist. At one time she asked Tolkien, "You broke the veil, didn't you, and passed through?" And she wrote that he recognized this assertion as true. This was meant in relation to language. This denotes that for Tolkien the word was the avenue to the perception of supersensible reality. In a sense, according to Flieger, the "word was the light through which he saw."⁴¹

³⁹ Carpenter, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 311.

⁴⁰ Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 133–34.

⁴¹ Quoted in Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 9.