

THE PATH TO FAËRIE

Part 1: The Man Who Was Inside Language

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This post grew in the writing until it became obvious to me that I needed to write it in two parts. They both have their foundation in the earlier post [The Other Side of Reality](#).

I would like to dedicate this post to my late friend Dr. Tom Malloy; for many years my best friend, co-conspirator, companion on the path to the other side of reality, and someone who loved the works of Tolkien as much as I.

THE PATH TO FAËRIE

*O see ye not yon narrow road
So thick beset wi' thorns and briers?
That is the path of Righteousness,
Though after it but few inquires.
And see ye not yon braid, braid road
That lies across the lily leven?
That is the path of Wickedness,
Though some call it the road to Heaven.
And see ye not yon boony road
That winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland,
Where thou and I this night maun gae.*

As spoken by the queen of the Elves to Thomas of Erceldoun,
13th century Scottish poet and seer (On Fairy-Stories, pp. 28-29).

Preface

In 1996 the British bookshop chain, Waterstone's, and the BBC channel Book Choice commissioned a reader's poll to determine the most important book of the 20th Century. Some 26,000 readers replied, and the winner was J.R.R. Tolkien's fairy-story, *The Lord of the Rings*. Professional critics and journalists were horrified by this result, and so the Daily Telegraph repeated the poll among its readers, and *The Lord of the Rings* came in first again. The television program, *Bookworm*, then conducted a poll that was responded to by 50,000 readers, and again *The Lord of the Rings* came in first. When a subsequent poll of English-speaking readers changed the question to ask what book ever written had had the greatest influence on the reader's life, *The Bible* came in first (of course), and *The Lord of the Rings* came in a respectable fourth. How could, the critics bemoaned, a fantasy book be so many people's selection as the most important book of the century, or the most influential book in their lives?

I can answer that question!

Well, I have *an* answer to that question. And the answer includes the answers to other, related,

questions: Why is this important? What does it have to do with getting us out of our current, sticky, situation on the planet? What does it have to do with [*salka*](#)?

To be of value this answer must travel through both the heart and the intellect. Relying on just the intellect, whether it be our natural intellect or the new, dehumanizing, artificial intelligence, will simply leave us where we are now, with a world that hardly seems capable of supporting human life, let alone otters, lions, bees, whales, healthy forests, clean rivers, and oceans teeming with fish. Intelligence operating without heart got us here in the first place and it now offers a path of least resistance to a future where computer algorithms will be more important than life. But I digress. No, I really don't.

It is going to take me two, lengthy, posts to weave the thoughts of my answer. The second post, *Cracks in Reality that Let the Light Shine Through* (adapted from a quote by Tolkien), will present the actual answer. This first post, *The Man Who Was Inside Language*, is about Tolkien himself. This first post is like a train journey to the second post. You could, potentially, just beam to the second post (when it is completed) and skip the train journey there. But this journey, in my eyes, travels through some beautiful territory. My including it may not be *necessary*. It is, more than anything, really, a loving tribute to a man whose writings have brought so much to my life.

Before we proceed, I have a few structural things to say. First, when quoting a source I use the practice of indicating with '...' places within the quote where I deleted words, and square brackets '[']' to indicate where I am paraphrasing within the quote. Second, I am neither an expert on philology nor am I an expert on the life of Tolkien. I will be sharing in this post primarily what authors who *are* experts have to say about both. In academia this is called *relying on secondary sources*, which means that I am relying upon their expertise and knowledge rather than upon my own. From what they have written I have cherry-picked the most delectable fruit. A list of the sources I cite is provided at the end of the post. Third, the things I have to say about *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* refer specifically to Tolkien's books, and not to the movie adaptations of his books. From the perspective of the nature of fairy-stories there are some important differences between the books and the movies. Fourth, and finally, on this train of thought a treat cart will occasionally come down the aisle in the form of links (within curly brackets) which connect to endnotes.

Introduction

The Hobbit and *The Lord of the Rings* are my favorite books. *The Lord of the Rings* in particular, although it is hard to separate the two books in my heart, has had a major influence on my life and on my view of reality. The latter is an important point. While I know that archaeologists will not one day uncover, beneath the mountains, the ruins of dwarven kingdoms, or find the foundered land of Númenor beneath the waves, the words *Tolkien's stories are unreal* stick in my throat and seem a lie. There is, for me, something about Tolkien's fairy-stories that lead them to seeming more real than reality itself. This is an experience that I have discovered many other (but by no means all) readers have as well. Rather significantly, it is also the experience that J.R. R. Tolkien had while he was writing his books. How this *could be*, and what this tells us about the relationship between reality and our perception of it, will be covered in the second post. In this post I would like to talk about how this *came to be*.

For many, many years, after my first reading of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (and I have read them both many, many times, including aloud to my children) I chose not to delve into Tolkien himself. I was afraid that I would discover things about Tolkien, particularly his own views of his work, that

would break the spell of the enchantment of his stories. He was, after all, an academician, as am I. I know very well how academia eschews the magic and beauty of the world, and in doing so, slays it. Then I read Tolkien's essay, *On Fairy-Stories*, based upon a lecture he gave in 1939, where he laid out his views on fairy-stories and their relationship to our experience of being human, and to our relationship with the Cosmos. This essay opened the cellar door in Tolkien's view of reality to me to reveal mysterious depths from which wafted hints of beauty and meaning. I decided to explore. These two posts are about what lies beyond Tolkien's cellar door.

J.R.R. Tolkien

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973) was a professor of Philology, and of Old English and Middle English literature, at Oxford University. Old English (also known as *Anglo-Saxon*) was the language of Britain from approximately 450 to 1150 AD. It is such an old language that in its early years it was written in runes. Tolkien could read, write, and speak Old English, and he taught the literary works that were written in that language (most notably the epic poem *Beowulf*). Tolkien also taught the literature of Middle English, which was in use from approximately 1150 to 1500 AD (Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English). Tolkien's *A Middle English Vocabulary* and his translation (from Middle English) of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were considered to be the definitive editions of their time.

Tolkien approached Old English and Middle English as a philologist, and to understand his path to Faërie we need to know a little about the intellectual side of Tolkien's work, specifically, we need to know a little bit about philology. For this I will rely heavily upon the writings of Dr. Tom Shippey. Shippey taught at Oxford while Tolkien was there, and they taught some of the same classes. He also held the Chair of English Language and Medieval Literature at Leeds University, a post that Tolkien had held earlier in his career. According to that convenient font of knowledge, Wikipedia, Shippey is widely considered to be one of the world's leading academic scholars on the works of Tolkien. His books *The Road to Middle Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* and *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* both approach Tolkien and his works from an academic, philological, perspective. From those books I gleaned a great deal of useful (and interesting) information about philology, and about Tolkien, and about Tolkien's works. Almost everything I share below about philology I extracted from Shippey's books.

The Study of Language

The term *philology* comes from the Greek word *philología*, which is most commonly translated as *the study of language*. Philology emerged as an academic discipline in the late 1700's when scholars realized that Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, the Germanic languages, and the Celtic languages had all evolved from one, ancient, common, tongue; an extinct and previously unknown language that was spoken in the Stone Age, and of which no records exist. Scholars named this language *Proto-Indo-European*. It has subsequently been determined that 445 languages in use today evolved from that one, ancient, tongue.

The major contribution of philology was the discovery, by the early philologists, of the patterns that underly the evolution of languages. The first of these (known as *Grimm's Law*) was discovered by Jacob Grimm who, along with his brother Wilhelm, collected and published the folklore that became

known as *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. An understanding of how languages evolve may seem like a boring and technical branch of the tree of knowledge. It was. It proved, however, to be an incredible useful tool for understanding the ancient world.

With their understanding of how languages evolve, philologists could arrive at educated guesses about what a language was like in earlier stages of its evolution before its first appearance in writing. An example of this is the English word *dwarf*. Philologists have determined that *dwarf* is the 'same' word as the German word *zwerg*, and the Old Norse word *dvergr*. All three words refer to a mythological race of diminutive, human-like, beings who are skilled in smithing and mining. Philologists have also determined that this word did not travel from one of those languages to the others, but that instead the origin of the word lies in the much older language from which all three languages have evolved. While there is no known writing from that language, given the laws of how words evolve, the original word was probably **dvairgs*. In philology, the use of an "*" denotes a word or concept that has never been recorded but must surely have existed or the word would not have the meaning and form it has today. That the origin of the word *dwarf* lies back in that ancient tongue also told philologists that a mythology containing dwarves goes back at least to that time as well.

Here is where things get interesting. Philology could not only make educated guesses about "*words" and "*concepts" that existed in earlier times, they could also make educated guesses about "*reality", aspects of the world that must have existed for languages to be the way they are. Philology shone light for the first time into the Dark Ages of Europe. Philologists could, for example, determine that two cultures must have come in contact with each other in prehistory, and roughly when that occurred. They determined that the English word "daughter" comes from the ancient Sanskrit *duhitar*, which means "little milker", which sheds light on what family life was like in that prehistoric society. From a language that was almost extinct philologists deduced the existence of a hitherto unknown, and now vanished, civilization in Siberia. A study of Germanic languages led to the realization that there must have been early trade routes across the great forest of Northern Europe, *Myrkviðr inn ókunni* (*the pathless Mirkwood*). That these findings could then be verified by evidence gathered from other disciplines led to philology becoming the *Crown Jewel* of the humanities. In its heyday in the late 1800's philology served as the cutting edge of literature, history, sociology and anthropology all at once.

Philology also opened the door to understanding dead languages. An example of this can be found in one of Tolkien's academic papers. The word *hós* in the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* was not found elsewhere in the Old English literature, and scholars would have been forced to guess its meaning from context, had not philology been able to show that it was the 'same' word as Old High German *hansa* which philologists had already established meant 'band of people connected by mutual oaths.' The ability of one dead language to help in the understanding of another dead language suddenly made the old languages much more useful and interesting. Ancient languages that were up until then largely ignored by academia suddenly became relevant, and philologists became spectacularly better at reading and understanding them. Philologists could now understand what the words in the ancient manuscripts meant to the authors who wrote them.

So, what happened to philology? You might have noticed that I refer to it in the past-tense, although it has not completely disappeared. My answer to that is a bit long and a bit dry and I have decided to put it at the end of this essay (just in case you are interested).

Tolkien and Beowulf

This, then, takes us to J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien was a professor of Old English literature. The most famous work in Old English is *Beowulf*, an epic poem consisting of 3,182 lines of alliterative verse. The earliest extant written copy of the poem dates from around 1000 AD, but the poem itself was probably written much earlier (Tolkien dated it to the 8th Century). The poem describes events that took place in the 6th Century in Scandinavia, and archeologists have since determined that the people and places recounted in the poem actually did exist at that time and place (minus, perhaps, the monsters and the dragon).

Before Tolkien, the only value academicians saw in *Beowulf* was as a source for Old English vocabulary. The actual content of *Beowulf* was a disappointment to them. As they viewed it, the poem *could* have been a window into the ancient world, but instead the author wrote a story about monsters and dragons. The poem was essentially dismissed by academia as being a poor excuse for history.

When Tolkien read *Beowulf*, however, he found it to be one of the most extraordinary poems of all time. In 1936 he delivered a lecture about the poem, which was later published as an essay. The lecture and essay were entitled *Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics*. This essay by Tolkien is generally considered to be the most significant and influential of the thousands of essays that have been written about *Beowulf*. In the essay Tolkien argued that most scholars had missed the main point about *Beowulf*, that it was not poor history, that it was, instead, literature, in fact it was a great work of art, addressing in a most powerful way the human condition. This led to a major shift in academia's view of the poem. It is mainly because of Tolkien that *Beowulf* is now a landmark work in English Literature.

Tolkien thought that one of the reasons that *Beowulf* had been under appreciated as a work of art was that most of its critics were monoglots and had to rely on translations of the poem from Old English to Modern English (Old English is unintelligible to Modern English speakers). As the anthropologist Gregory Bateson pointed out, "It is the folly of the deaf linguist to believe that translation is commonly possible" (Bateson, p. 292). Something is almost always lost, or fundamentally altered, when a word is translated from one language to another, and this is particularly true of poetry. Tolkien, as a philologist and expert in Old English, could, of course, read and appreciate the poem in its original language.

{[Stalactites](#)}

Philology is a particularly (actually...mindbogglingly) intellectual pursuit. Tolkien said that he liked philology because it appealed to his historical and scientific side. He also stressed that all of his work, including his created mythology, was rooted in philology. But, he added, that while he was a philologist by nature and trade, he was always primarily interested in the *aesthetic* rather than the functional aspects of language (Letters, pp. 213, 219, 231). Tolkien brought his heart into his intellectual pursuits.

One of the reasons that Tolkien was so effective as a teacher was that in addition to being a philologist he was a writer and a poet. In the words of C.S. Lewis, Tolkien's friend, this led to Tolkien's "unique insight at once into the language of poetry and the poetry of language" (cited in Carpenter, p. 138). As a result, when Tolkien taught classes on *Beowulf*, he could show his students not only what the Old English words meant, but "why the author had chosen that particular form of expression and how it fitted into his scheme of imagery" (Carpenter, p. 138).

When Tolkien would begin a series of lectures on *Beowulf*, "He would come silently into the room, fix

the audience with his gaze, and suddenly begin to declaim in a resounding voice the opening lines of the poem in the original Anglo-Saxon... It was not so much a recitation as a dramatic performance, an impersonation of an Anglo-Saxon bard in a mead hall, and it impressed generations of students because it brought home to them that *Beowulf* was not just a set text to be read for the purposes of examination, but a powerful piece of dramatic poetry.” Decades later, the famous poet W.H. Auden wrote to his former professor, “I don’t think that I have ever told you what an unforgettable experience it was for me as an undergraduate, hearing you recite *Beowulf*. The voice was the voice of Gandalf” (Carpenter, pp. 137-138).

Worldviews

In addition to being translated as *the study of language*, *philologia* can also be translated as *the study of words*, *the study of meaning*, and *the study of knowledge*. For Tolkien, *Beowulf* was not just a data point in the study of language, the poem was a doorway into understanding how the poem’s author perceived and understood reality. Tolkien wrote that he felt a very special affinity, even a sense of identity, with the author of *Beowulf*. For Tolkien, *Beowulf* was a portal for entering into the worldview of 8th Century Europe. There he found much beauty and meaning.

I would like to pause and say a little more about worldviews. In my book [*The Andean Cosmivision: A Path for Exploring Profound Aspects of Ourselves, Nature, and the Cosmos*](#), and in this [Salka Wind Blog](#), I have written extensively about the worldview of the indigenous people who live in the high Andes of Peru. One of the more important points I have tried to convey in my writings is that the Andean worldview (the [*Andean Cosmivision*](#)) is not a primitive version of our modern, Western, worldview. It is, instead, fundamentally different, and as such it cannot be translated into, nor understood from, the perspective of our Western view of reality.

When I contemplated that Tolkien had entered the worldview of the author of *Beowulf*, I had an “Aha!” moment. I realized that I had assumed that older Western worldviews *were* primitive versions of our modern worldview, that they were essentially the same worldview we have now but filled with a lot more superstitions and a lot less accurate knowledge about reality. In retrospect it appears obvious to me that this might not be the case, that the worldview of *Beowulf*’s time may have been fundamentally, qualitatively, different than our modern worldview, not just a less sophisticated version of our own.

Consider that our modern, Western, worldview has been greatly influenced by Christianity. When the author of *Beowulf* wrote the poem, the older European, pre-Christian, beliefs were still prevalent in society. That worldview would have given the people a very different way of perceiving, understanding, and interacting with reality—particularly with Nature—than we have now. It was a worldview with which Tolkien could deeply identify, and I believe that it informed his later, fantasy, writings.

{[Dragons](#)}

The Love of Language

The term *philologia* can be translated in yet another way as *the love of language*. Tolkien loved languages. He knew English, Latin, French, German, Middle English, Old English, Finnish, Gothic,

Greek, Italian, Old Norse (Old Icelandic), Spanish, Welsh, and Medieval Welsh. He was also familiar with Danish, Dutch, Lombardic, Norwegian, Russian, Serbian, and Swedish. Tolkien's path to Faerie had its origins in his love of languages, and we will turn to that now.

By the time Tolkien reached high school he knew Greek, Latin, German, French and a smattering of Old English. At that time he purchased from a friend a primer on the Gothic language. He was immediately enchanted. With Gothic he experienced “for the first time the study of language out of mere love: I mean for the acute aesthetic pleasure derived from a language for its own sake, not only free from being useful but free even from being the ‘vehicle of literature’” (Letters, p. 213).

Gothic was spoken by the Goths of ancient Europe. By the 6th Century the use of the language was in decline and by the 8th Century the language had become extinct. What is known of the language now primarily comes from a 4th Century Gothic version of the Bible. Around the time Tolkien was introduced to Gothic he had also scraped up enough money to purchase two books on philology, written in German, which he described as being “dry-as-dust” but still, the topic interested him.

Part of his fascination with Gothic was that while enough of it had survived in the old texts to understand its sentence structure and grammar, there were large gaps in its vocabulary. Using philology, and his ear for language, Tolkien turned to inventing some of the missing Gothic words. He began showing up at his school's debating society, representing himself as an envoy from Goth, and delivering orations in Gothic. I can imagine his fellow students, after Tolkien had delivered a speech in a language that had been extinct for 1300 years, turning to each other and saying “Now who can argue with that?”

Tolkien continued to work for a while at expanding the Gothic vocabulary, and he composed the only extant poem in that language, *Bagme Bloma (Flower of the Trees)*, later published in the book *Songs of the Philologists*. The poem, both in Gothic and English, is available online at www.jrrvf.com/glaemscrafu/english/bagmebloma.html. He eventually tired of working on Gothic and decided to create, from scratch, a whole, new, “undiscovered” Germanic language. He was making progress on that when Finnish happened.

As an undergraduate student in Oxford, when he was supposed to be studying for his honor exams, Tolkien discovered, in the college library, a primer on the Finnish language. Finnish is a “remarkably musical language, composed of long, loping words that sound like a river rushing over rocks” (Jones, p. 31). Tolkien fell in love with it, “It was like discovering a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind and flavour never tasted before. It quite intoxicated me.” (Letters, p. 214).

Tolkien dropped his work on his Germanic language and turned to creating an entirely different language inspired by what he found so beautiful about Finnish. It was a project that he found to be both intellectually and aesthetically pleasing, and he continued to work on the language for the rest of his life. He eventually named this language *Quenya*. After he had developed Quenya to a fair degree of sophistication he applied his knowledge of philology to create the earlier version of the language, a *proto-Quenya*, from which Quenya had evolved.

Shortly thereafter, Tolkien was introduced to the Welsh language. Welsh is a beautiful language that is “in love with its own sounds” (paraphrase of Jones, p. 31). It was the beauty of Welsh that captivated Tolkien, the appearance and sound of the words, more than their meanings. He later wrote, “Most English-speaking people, for instance, will admit that *cellar door* is ‘beautiful’, especially if dissociated from its sense (and its spelling). More beautiful than, say, *sky*, and far more beautiful than *beautiful*.”

Well then, in Welsh for me *cellar doors* are extraordinarily frequent.” (cited in Carpenter, p. 64).

Tolkien began to create another language, this one informed by his love of Welsh. He eventually named this language *Sindarin*. Like Quenya, Sindarin had also evolved out of proto-Quenya, but the two languages were quite different, and so obviously had been spoken by different ‘people’.

The creation of new, aesthetically satisfying (i.e. beautiful), languages was not particularly part of Tolkien’s “day job”. He had to work these projects into his life as he went off to fight in World War I, graduate from college, get married, pursue a career in academia, and raise a family. He did not, however, consider his creation of languages to be a “hobby”, for as he pointed out, hobbies are things we usually do outside of our work, as a diversion from our work. For Tolkien, his creation of these new languages was the ultimate expression of his deep engagement with philology.

When Tolkien developed a new language, he did not *invent* words or names at random, he *constructed* the language based upon his knowledge of philology. Philology, however, could only provide the intellectual framework of the endeavor, specifically the patterns that connected the words into a meaningful language. But Tolkien’s creative endeavors were driven by his love of language, by the aesthetics of certain languages in particular, such as Finnish and Welsh. The languages he created were beautiful, and that was the point.

[{Grace}](#)

As he worked on his languages Tolkien began to realize that for his languages to really come to full fruition, for them to come alive, that they needed to have people who had spoken them, and they needed a mythology.

The Emergence of a Mythology

At Oxford, while he was a student in the Honour School of English Language and Literature, Tolkien was introduced to an Old English poem entitled the *Crist of Cynewulf*. The poem contained the following two lines:

*Eala Earendel engla beorhtast
ofer middangeard monnum sended.*

(translation)

Hail Earendel, brightest of angels
above the middle-earth sent unto men.

There was something about these lines that affected Tolkien greatly. “I felt a curious thrill”, he wrote, “as if something had stirred in me, half wakened from sleep. There was something very remote and strange and beautiful behind those words, if I could grasp it, far beyond ancient English” (cited in Carpenter, p. 72).

Tolkien was particularly enchanted by the word *Earendel*. “I was struck by the great beauty of this word... Its form strongly suggests that it is in origin a proper name and not a common noun... To my mind its Anglo-Saxon uses seem plainly to indicate that it was a star presaging the dawn... that is what we now call *Venus*: the morning-star as it may be seen shining brilliantly in the dawn, before the actual rising of the Sun” (Letters, p. 385).

The following year...this is all related...he went on holiday to the coast of Cornwall. Tolkien had a great love of nature, and on this trip he had a deeply moving experience of the sea. In a letter he wrote, “We walked over the moor-land on top of the cliffs to Kynance Cove. Nothing I could say in a dull old letter would describe it to you. The sun beats down on you and a huge Atlantic swell smashes and spouts over the snags and reefs..., and everywhere you see black and red rock and white foam against violet and transparent seagreen” (cited in Carpenter, p. 78).

After leaving Cornwall he spent some quiet time at a relative’s farm. While there he wrote a poem inspired by his experience with the sea, which he titled *The Voyage of Éarendel the Evening Star*, or in Old English, *Scipfæreld Éarendeles Áfensteorran*. Over the years Tolkien wrote five versions of the poem. The fifth version, written substantially later than the first, can be found in *The Book of Lost Tales – Volume II*, one of several books of Tolkien’s work published after his death and edited by his son Christopher Tolkien. In the book Christopher indicates the changes that were made from the earlier versions. I used that information to recreate, as well as I could, the first version of the poem, written right after his experience in Cornwall, which I present below. I invite you to read the poem slowly and let its imagery take shape in your mind.

The Voyage of Éarendel the Evening Star

*Éarendel sprang up from the Ocean's cup
In the gloom of the mid-world's rim;
From the door of Night as a ray of light
Leapt over the twilight brim,
And launching his bark like a silver spark
From the golden-fading sand
Down the sunlit breath of Day's fiery Death
He sped from Westerland.*

*He threaded his path o'er the aftermath
Of the glory of the Sun,
And went wandering far past many a star
In his gleaming galleon.
Of the gathering tide of darkness ride
The argosies of the sky,
And spangle the night with their sails of light
As the Evening star goes by.*

*But heading he dips past these twinkling ships,
By his wandering spirit whirled
On a magic quest through the darkening West
Toward the margent of the world;
And he fares in haste o'er the jewelled waste
To the dusk from whence he came*

*With his heart afire with bright desire
And his face in silver flame.*

*For the ship of the Moon from the East comes soon
From the Haven of the Sun,
Whose white gates gleam in the coming beam
Of the mighty silver one.
Lo! with bellying clouds as his vessel's shrouds
He weighs anchor down the dark,
And on shimmering oars leaves the skiey shores
In his argent-orbéd bark.*

*And Éarendel fled from that Shipman dread
Beyond the dark earth's pale,
Back under the rim of the Ocean's dim,
And behind the world set sail;
And he heard the mirth of the folk of earth
And hearkened to their tears,
As the world dropped back in a cloudy wrack
Of its journey down the years.*

*Then he glimmering passed to the starless vast
As an isléd lamp at sea,
And beyond the ken of mortal men
Set his lonely errantry,
Tracking the Sun in his galleon
And voyaging the skies
Till his splendour was shorn by the birth of Morn
And he died with Dawn in his eyes (Lost Tales, pp. 267-269).*

{[Beauty of Words](#)}

Tolkien shared the poem with his good friend, G. B. Smith (who died shortly thereafter in World War 1). Smith responded that he liked the poem and asked Tolkien what it was really about. Tolkien said that he didn't know, but that he would try to find out. As his biographer Humphrey Carpenter emphasizes, Tolkien did not say he would 'invent' an answer, he said he would 'try to find out'. As Tolkien explored the inner world whence the story of Éarendel had arisen he discovered the 'people' who spoke Quenya and Sindarin (Éarendel meets them in his journey): they were Elves. This was the beginning of Tolkien's mythology.

He continued to develop his mythology (published after his death as *The Silmarillion*) along with Quenya and Sindarin and other languages that arose as the mythology unfolded. Rather than writing his languages to fulfill a need in his mythology, the process usually worked the other way around, the evolution of his languages would lead to new stories in his mythology. The resulting, quite extensive,

mythology was unique in that it was centered around the history of the Elven race, rather than being Human-centered. Nothing like it existed in literature...and publishers showed no interest in it.

After working on his mythology for roughly 15 years, one day, while Tolkien was grading exam papers (a very weary task), he opened an exam to see that the student had left one of the pages blank. He picked up a pen and without knowing why, wrote on the page, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." Tolkien didn't know what a hobbit was, or why it was living in a hole in the ground, or what kind of hole it was. He decided to find out.

So much fantasy writing has emerged since the publication of *The Hobbit* that it is hard to appreciate just what a revolutionary book it was. It was a story without an existing genre. The chairman of the publishing company to which Tolkien had submitted it, handed the book to his 10-year-old-son to read. When the son gave *The Hobbit* a positive review it was published.

The Hobbit was a surprising success and Tolkien was encouraged to write a sequel, which became *The Lord of the Rings*. Both books take place at the end of Tolkien's mythology, and have that foundation to give them profound depth. It took Tolkien about 15 years to write *The Lord of the Rings*. When it was submitted the publisher once again gave it to his son to read (who by then was in his twenties). After reading it the son wrote to his father that it would be big gamble to publish the book, that they might very well lose money in doing so, but that it was a work of genius. His father wrote back that if it was a work of genius then they had better well publish it.

The Tapestry of Tolkien's Work

While Tolkien's mythology arose out of his creation/discovery of the Elvish languages there were many more threads that were woven into that tapestry. Tolkien reflected on the origins of his mythology in a letter to his former student, W.H. Auden. "To turn, if I may, to...the matter of when I started...It has been always with me: the sensibility to linguistic pattern which affects me emotionally like colour or music; and the passionate love of growing things; and the deep response to legends (for lack of a better word)." (Letters, p. 212).

We have already looked at Tolkien's love of language. Regarding the effect of Tolkien's life-long work at creating languages on the quality of his stories, C. S. Lewis wrote in his obituary of Tolkien, "Strange as it may seem, [his creation of his languages] was undoubtedly the source of that unparalleled richness and concreteness which later distinguished him from all other philologists. *He had been inside language.*" (emphasis mine, cited in Carpenter, p. 138). Tolkien once wrote that he would have preferred to have written his stories in Elvish (Letters, pg. 219). Language was Tolkien's path of heart.

His stories were also shaped by his other loves, including his "passionate love of growing things." Tolkien loved Nature. This is evident in his writing where his stories are as much about the land of Middle Earth—the rivers, the mountains, the trees—as they are about its inhabitants. This love of Nature, I suspect, is the connection, in my own heart, between Tolkien's writings and the Andean Cosmovision. Perhaps it is impossible to have a path of heart that does not include a love of Nature. It requires an overactive intellect, or a thirst for power over nature, to build a wall between Nature and our hearts.

{[Trees](#)}

Tolkien's mythology was also strongly shaped by his "deep response to legends (for lack of a better word)." I have noticed that Tolkien often put quote signs around the word "legend" when he used it in his writing. I believe this has to do with a belief that legends should not be dismissed as being unreal just because they are fictitious. I'll have a lot more to say about that in the second essay.

The legends to which Tolkien deeply responded were the old fairy-stories of Europe. This takes us briefly back to the topic of philology. The most noted of all philologists was Jacob Grimm. Jacob and his brother Wilhelm gathered together a collection of German folk tales—some recorded in the field by the brothers and some pulled from other collections—and published these in 1812 in a work that was eventually titled *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

One hundred years later, when Tolkien turned his attention to fairy-tales, all that was available was a relatively small number of stories from a small number of collections (such as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*). These fairy tales have two severe limitations. The first is that the stories are all disconnected from each other. "There may be a vague sense that they all take place in something like the same world, a dimly-perceived far past which, as Bilbo says of Gandalf's stories, is all about 'dragons and goblins and giants and the rescue of princesses and unexpected luck of widow's sons.'" (Author of the Century, p. 12). There is, however, no connection between the tales, and they provide only narrow glimpses of the land from which they arose.

The second problem with the extant fairy-tales is "one which Tolkien sensed very keenly. This is that from their very beginning, from the time, that is, when scholars began to take an interest in them and collect them, they seemed already to be in a sense in ruins. The Grimm brothers, in the nineteenth century, quite certainly had as a main motive...the wish to do a kind of literary rescue archaeology. They were convinced that the tales they collected, as brief as they were...still preserved fractions of some older belief, native to Germany but eventually suppressed by foreign missionaries, foreign literacy, and Christianity...What could those old tales have been like, before the whole mythology had been downgraded to children and their nursemaids?" (Author of the Century, pg. 13).

Tolkien believed that it was possible to work backward in time from the existing remnants of fairy-tales and recreate the mythological worldview from which the fairy tales had arisen. "However fanciful Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth was, he did not think he was *entirely* making it up. He was 'reconstructing;' he was harmonizing contradictions in his source-texts; sometimes he was supplying entirely new concepts (like hobbits), but he was also reaching back to an imaginative world which he believed had once really existed, at least in a collective imagination: and for this he had a very great deal of admittedly scattered evidence." (Author of Century pp. xiv-xv). It was a task he inherited from Jacob Grimm, and one for which he was uniquely qualified. "Tolkien was very used to scrutinizing old texts and drawing from them surprising but rational conclusions about history and language and ancient belief." (Road to Middle Earth, p. 48). One of the things that made Tolkien's work on this mythology so powerful was his mastery of the topic. "On some subjects Tolkien simply knew more, and had thought more deeply, than anyone else in the world" (Author of Century xiv-xv). His mind was a subtle one, and not without a bit of guile.

{[Hey Diddle Diddle](#)}

Tolkien had another consideration, one close to his heart, that came to flavor his mythology. In his early college years he read a paper to a college society on the *Kalevala* (a compilation of Finnish oral folklore and mythology). In the paper he said, "These mythological ballads are full of that very primitive undergrowth that the literature of Europe has on the whole been steadily cutting and reducing

for many centuries...I would that we had more of it left – something of the same sort that belonged to the English.” (cited in Carpenter, p. 67). Tolkien liked Old English, but he did not find it as ‘delectable’ as Finnish or Welsh. His attraction to Old English was largely that it was the language of his ancestry. Tolkien cared a good deal about his ancestry. As an expert on ancient languages and manuscripts, he felt a keen sense of loss that Britain did not have its own mythology, like the *Kalevala*, and he set about in his mythology to remedy that.

In a letter to W.H. Auden Tolkien wrote, “In any case if you want to write a tale of this sort you must consult your roots, and a man of the North-west of the Old World will set his heart and the action of his tale...with the Shoreless Sea of his innumerable ancestors to the West, and the endless lands (out of which enemies mostly come) to the East. Though, in addition, his heart may remember, even if he has been cut off from all oral tradition, the rumour all along the coasts of the Men out of the Sea.” (Letters, p. 212).

{[The Heart Remembers](#)}

Reality and Truth

What was Tolkien’s own experience of writing the stories that constituted his mythology? Over the years Tolkien increasingly had the feeling that his languages and mythology had some basis in reality, that he was discovering them rather than inventing them. “They arose in my mind as ‘given’ things, and as they came, separately, so too the links grew. An absorbing, though continually interrupted labour (especially since, even apart from the necessities of life, the mind would wing to the other pole and spend itself on the linguistics): yet always I had the sense of recording what was already ‘there’, somewhere: not of ‘inventing’” (Letters, pg 145).

Here is how his biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, describes Tolkien’s view of the reality of his creation. “[Tolkien] did not suppose that *precisely* such peoples as he described, ‘elves’, ‘dwarves’, and malevolent ‘orcs’, had walked the earth and done the deeds that he recorded. But he did feel, or hope, that his stories were in some sense an embodiment of a profound truth.” (Carpenter, p. 99, emphasis mine). This description of Tolkien’s experience with his stories is remarkably similar to how I described my experience with his books at the beginning of this essay, thoughts I had long before I read Carpenter’s biography. There are two concepts here, and both are valid and important: 1) it is not *really* the case that elves and dwarves once walked on this earth; and 2) Tolkien’s stories seem somehow more real than reality itself. Of the two, the second concept rather overwhelms the first.

An understanding of the second concept can be addressed through an examination of the relationship between fairy stories, our experience of reality, and reality itself. This will be the theme of the second essay. For that I will draw heavily from Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories”—where he addresses this issue—and work in a liberal amount my own thoughts about the Other Side of Reality (partially expressed in the earlier posts that constitute [Thread A](#) of this blog).

But I have strayed a bit from my concluding question, “What was Tolkien’s experience when writing his mythology?” For that I would like to turn again to Tolkien himself.

“The Land of Fairy Story is wide and deep and high, and is filled with many kings and all manner of men, and beasts, and birds; its seas are shoreless and its stars uncounted, its beauty an enchantment and its peril every-present; both its joy and sorrow are poignant as a sword. In that land a man may (perhaps) count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very mystery

and wealth make dumb the traveller who would report. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates be shut and the keys be lost. The fairy gold (too often) turns to withered leaves when it is brought away. All that I can ask is that you, knowing all these things, will receive my withered leaves, as a token at least that my hand once held a little of the gold.” (On Fairy-stories, Manuscript B, p. 207).

Conclusion

For many years I had feared to look into Tolkien’s life and into his own views about his mythology. The enchantments of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* lie so beautifully on me and I was loth to break the spell. I was afraid that, as in the Wizard of Oz, if I looked behind the curtain, I would find the magic was only a man operating a machine. What I found behind the curtain, to my everlasting delight, was a window looking out upon Faërie:

“And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise” (Return of the King, p. 1007).

A Promise is as Promise

I did say earlier that I would share some thoughts about “what happened to philology” at the end of this essay for those who might be interested.

{[What Happened to Philology?](#)}

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ENDNOTES

{Stalactites} Compared to literary critics, philologists “were much more likely...to consider not only what a word was doing in its immediate contexts, but also its roots, its analogues in other languages, its descendants in modern languages and all the processes of cultural change that might be hinted at by its history. It might be said that to Tolkien a word was not like a brick, a single delimitable unit, but like the top of a stalactite, interesting in itself but more so as part of something growing.” (Road to Middle Earth, p. 28). I believe Shippey meant *stalagmite* rather than *stalactite*. [{back}](#)

{Dragons} “Tolkien felt more than continuity with the Beowulf-poet, he felt a virtual identity of motive and of technique...But what did the dragon, for instance, mean to the Beowulf-poet? For him, Tolkien argued, dragons might have been very close to the edge of reality; certainly the poet’s pagan ancestors could have thought of dragons as things they might one day have to face...Dragons had to the poet not yet become allegorical, as they would to his [Christian] descendants...[The poet] was phenomenally lucky in his freedom to balance exactly between...pagan and Christian worlds...Tolkien didn’t want dragons to be symbolic, he wanted them to have a claw still planted on *fact*...Tolkien was very used to scrutinizing old texts and drawing from them surprising but rational conclusions about history and language and ancient belief. In the process he developed very strongly [an] instinct for validity, one which enabled him to say that [some word, like *beadurin*] was true, even if unrecorded, meaning by ‘true’ a genuine fragment of older civilisation consistent with the others. All his instincts told him that dragons were like that—widespread in Northern Legend, found in related languages from Italy to Iceland, deeply embedded in ancient story. Could this mean nothing? He was bound to answer ‘No’, and hardly deterred by the thought that ‘intelligent living people’ would disagree with him.” (Road to Middle Earth, pp. 47-48). [{back}](#)

{Grace} My favorite 20th Century thinker, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, had this to say about the integration of the intellect and the heart.

“I argue that art is a part of man’s quest for grace; sometimes his ecstasy in partial success, sometimes his rage and agony at failure.

I argue also that there are many species of grace within the major genus; and also that there are many kinds of failure and frustration and departure from grace. No doubt each culture has its characteristic species of grace toward which its artists strive, and its own species of failure.

Some cultures may foster a negative approach to this difficult integration, an avoidance of complexity by crass preference either for total consciousness or total unconsciousness. Their art is unlikely to be “great.”

I shall argue that the problem of grace is fundamentally a problem of integration and that what is to be integrated is the diverse parts of the mind—especially those multiple levels of which one extreme is called ‘consciousness’ and the other the ‘unconscious.’ For the attainment of grace, the reasons of the heart must be integrated with the reasons of the reason.” (Steps, p. 129) [{Back}](#)

{Beauty of Words} I found in Tolkien’s letters this little gem that give us a feeling for how he experiences the beauty of words. I inserted it here as the word *argent* appears in the Éarendel poem. Tolkien wrote a letter to his aunt about the appearance of the words *plenilune* and *argent* in one of his Tom Bombadil poems. They were discussing whether the poems were too advanced for children. Tolkien said, “As for *plenilune* and *argent*, they are beautiful words *before* they are understood – I wish I could have the pleasure of meeting them for the first time again! – and how is one to know them till one does meet them? And surely the first meeting should be in a living context, and not in a dictionary like dried flowers!” (Letters, p. 310) [{Back}](#)

{Trees} In a letter Tolkien wrote, “There are of course certain things and themes that move me specially. [The ennoblement of what is simple or common I find particularly moving.] I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals” (Letters, p. 220). And in another letter, “Every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate. (Too often the hate is irrational, a fear of anything large and live, and not easily tamed or destroyed, though it may clothe itself in pseudo-rational terms)” (Letters, p. 321). [{Back}](#)

{Hey Diddle Diddle} In addition to fairy-stories, Tolkien also believed that nursery rhymes were the tattered remnants of older, more complete, and interesting works. He would occasionally apply his talents to the reworking and expansion of a nursery rhyme. His expanded version of *Hey Diddle Diddle* appears in *The Lord of the Rings* (Frodo sings it at the Prancing Pony). [{Back}](#)

{The Heart Remembers} When Tolkien wrote, “Though, in addition, his heart may remember, even if he has been cut off from all oral tradition, the rumour all along the coasts of the Men out of the Sea,” he was referring to his thought that it might be possible for information to be passed down from generation to generation, not verbally, but heart to heart. He went on to say,

“I say this about the ‘heart’, for I have what some might call an Atlantis complex. Possibly inherited, though my parents died too young for me to know such things about them, and too young to transfer such things by words. Inherited from me (I suppose) by one only of my children, though I did not know that about my son until recently, and he did not know it about me. I mean the terrible recurrent dream (beginning with memory) of the Great Wave, towering up, and coming ineluctably over the trees and green fields.” (Letters, pp. 212-213).

In writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien (in his words) “bequeathed” this dream to Faramir:

“‘It reminds me of Númenor,’ said Faramir...’ of the land of Westemnethe that foundered, and of the great dark wave climbing over the green lands and above the hills, and coming on, darkness unescapable. I often dream of it.’” *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, 941.

This nightmare had followed Tolkien since his childhood. After writing the dream into his mythology of Middle-Earth, he never had the dream again. [{Back}](#)

{What Happened to Philology?} When I first began to read about Tolkien and his life, I had to look up what *philology* was. Despite my long career in academia I had never heard of it, and I was surprised to discover that it was once the Crown Jewel of the Humanities. By the time Tolkien came along, it was evident (including to Tolkien) that the tide was flowing out on philology in academia. Shippey states that its decline, in the early 1900’s, was as rapid as had been its ascent. I believe that there were three reasons why this occurred.

1) Shippey states that the short answer for why students stopped majoring in philology was that it was such a tremendous slog to study. Students wishing to learn philology were faced with “thousands of pages of dry-as-dust theorems about language-change, sound-shifts and ablaut-gradations” (Road to Middle Earth, p. 13). And that students of philology faced “Grimm’s Law, Verner’s Law, Grasmann’s Law—rising in successive terraces of horror—and then were overwhelmed.” (Road to Middle Earth, p. 21).

With his elan for languages, and his excellence as a teacher, Tolkien was able to stem that tide for a while. As a young professor, he and a colleague (E.V. Gordon) formed the *Viking Club* for undergraduate students. They would meet weekly at a pub, make up rude verses about their colleagues, translate nursery rhymes into Old English, and sing drinking songs in Old Norse. The number of students majoring in philology, which had been in a steady decline, began to rise under their influence, but in the long run the tide could not be stemmed.

2) Philology reached its peak influence in the late 1880’s, part of its decline in the early 1900’s was due to its identity as a primarily German discipline. Tolkien lamented in 1924 that “Philology is in some quarters treated as though it were one of the things that the late war was fought to end.” Three years before that “the British Board of Education had printed a report that said that philology ought not to be taught to undergraduates, that it was a ‘German-made’ science...that by contributing to German arrogance it had led in a direct way to the outbreak of World War 1.” (Road to Middle Earth, p. 9).

3) In Tolkien’s time philology was housed within an English Studies department, cohabiting with English Literature. The two disciplines did not get on very well, and they competed over resources and students. The problem, I believe, is that philology is a science and English literature is an art, and that science and art go together like oil and water. According to Shippey, English literature viewed philology as an “anti-literary science kept up by pedants (like Professor Tolkien) which ought to be stopped as soon as possible.” (Road to Middle Earth, p.13).

My google search for the role of philology in academia today reveals that, at the least in the United States, philology is usually listed as a sub-discipline of the field of linguistics. Linguistics is a scientific discipline, and thus should provide a good home for philology, but philology appears to play but a minor role in linguistics. The problem here, I believe, is that while philology is *scientific* (if we define science as a methodical and evidence-based endeavor) what it is studying is *meaning*. Modern science is simply not interested in, nor equipped to study, meaning. Meaning cannot be measured, thus it lies

outside the reach of the primary tool of the sciences, which is statistics. Meaning is also not amenable to being studied through analysis, for meaning is not an *attribute* of an object that can be studied in isolation. Meaning is a *relationship* between objects, the very same word may have different meanings to different people, or different meanings to the same person at different times or in different contexts.

I'm afraid that as I write this, I can see myself standing over in the field where I do all of the rest of my writing, using semaphore flags to signal me to head this discussion over there. In that field I speak extensively of worldviews (Western and non-Western), and of the importance of bringing more meaning and beauty and love back into the Western worldview, without abandoning science as our tool. I stand resolute, however, and will wait until the second essay to head in that direction. {[Back](#)}

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