

VERBUM CARO FACTUM EST: J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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Whether we discovered the works of J.R.R. Tolkien at a young age or came to know Middle-earth later in life, most readers are drawn into this world for similar reasons. Many readers are attracted to the completely fantastical world of Elves, Goblins and Dragons. Others identify with the struggle of the common man overcoming impossible odds or the never-ending battle of good versus evil. However, few casual readers will identify Tolkien's use of language as their primary source of affection for his works. Yet, Tolkien was a philologist before he was a storyteller. In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien writes, "To ask what is the origin of stories [. . .] is to ask what is the origin of language and of the mind" (44). It appears that something much more than children's fantasy is at work in the creation of these stories. According to Tolkien, the source of his work is within the language itself. Yet, what does this mean exactly?

At the same time Tolkien was publishing his tales from Middle-earth, another important writer was at work in Germany. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger is most famous for his work on existentialism and perhaps less famous for his groundbreaking work on language. When Tolkien asks about the origin of language and the mind, he sounds reminiscent of Heidegger who said, "Language is the house of being." Although no evidence has come to light that Heidegger and Tolkien ever talked with or knew each other, it is hard to imagine that they were not familiar with the other's work. Both men were about the same age and published material around the same time. Heidegger and Tolkien were both critics of the "technological age," and most important, they were two of the world's leading philologists.

However, it is not my intention to compare the lives of Tolkien and Heidegger. Rather, I will demonstrate the importance of Tolkien's fictional works as exercises in the type of linguistic phenomenology Heidegger espoused. It is common knowledge that Tolkien loved language and even invented original dialects for his own use. Yet, most scholars never progress further than the idea that language was a mere hobby or "secret vice" of Tolkien. However, if we study Tolkien with a Heideggerian frame of mind, we will notice that language is something greater than just a hobby for Tolkien. This becomes evident by examining the role of Tolkien as a creator of language, the unique speech patterns of Tolkien's characters, and the linguistic significance of Tolkien's poetry. These three aspects of his fiction attest to the greater role of language in his work. With Heidegger as a reference, Tolkien shows himself to be a member of a larger philosophical tradition. After understanding Tolkien's appreciation of language as more than a hobby, we can begin to read Tolkien in an entirely new light.

In 1956, Tolkien answered a letter from one of his readers. From his reply, we can gain insight into Tolkien's own philosophy of language,

I made the discovery that legends depend on the language to which they belong; but a living language depends equally on the legends which it conveys by tradition. (For example, that the Greek mythology depends far more on the marvelous aesthetic of its language and so of its nomenclature of persons and places and less on its content than people realize. So being a philologist by nature and trade I began with language, I found myself inventing legends of the same taste. (*Letters* 230)

The idea that language came before the story can be a difficult one to understand. According to Tolkien, however, the word "Quenya" came before the world of Elves had been created. In fact, it

was a word like Quenya that gave birth to all the stories and heroes of his creation. It may be helpful to imagine the writing process of most other authors and compare it to Tolkien's process. The typical novelist will create a plot and design characters to fit within that plot. However, Tolkien seems to have written in the opposite direction. He would think of an aesthetically pleasing word and create a story based on that word. Tolkien wrote, "To me a name comes first and the story follows" (*Letters* 219). Thus, Tolkien might argue that true fantasy can only be written in this way. From such a perspective, Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*, for example, would not be considered a truly original fantasy tale because it is based on a pre-existing language. Therefore, nothing will be lost in any translation of a *Discworld* book. The right language was essential to Tolkien when saying what needed to be said. At times, Tolkien appeared to be cheating himself by writing in a language that the majority of readers would understand. For instance, Tolkien commented in a letter that English might not have been the best language for *The Hobbit*: "I am very pleased to know that an Icelandic translation of *The Hobbit* is in preparation. I had long hoped that some of my work might be translated into Icelandic, a language which I think would fit it better than any other I have any adequate knowledge of" (*Letters* 430).

Since a word alone can set off a story, a created word similarly can create a story. In fact, Tolkien created at least a dozen languages for Middle-earth. If anything took him more time than the vast plot devices, character developments, and geographical descriptions of Middle-earth, it was the creation of these languages. Other than being the inspiration for the story, these languages serve a purpose within the text as well. In the essay "On Translating Beowulf," Tolkien reveals his conviction that only by reading the text in its original language can the reader fully appreciate the story:

No translation that aims at being readable in itself can, without elaborate annotation, proper to an edition of the original, indicate all the possibilities or hints afforded by the text. It is not possible, for instance, in translation always to represent a recurring word in the original by one given modern word (*Monsters* 50).

Martin Heidegger wrote on this same subject in *A Dialogue on Language*. Heidegger believed it was impossible to appreciate another culture fully without knowing the language of that culture. For example, an English-speaking man from Britain could never fully appreciate the culture of a Japanese man without knowing Japanese fluently. The English-speaking man only has rough translations of Eastern thought that do not relay the full meaning of what is written. It is for this reason that Tolkien may insert a sentence of an Elvish language without bothering to translate for the reader.

It was also important for Tolkien to have so many invented languages to give his races a uniting force to their community. In *Author of the Century*, Tom Shippey discusses Tolkien's idea that his language inspired his story and traces the roots of nationalism between competing languages:

The real root was the relationship between them (Elvish languages) with all the changes of sound and semantics which created two mutually-incomprehensible languages from one original root, and the history of separation and different experience which those changes implied. (Shippey 230)

Tolkien's realism is magnified by the creation of so many languages. Dwarves speak a different language than Men and Light Elves speak a different language than Dark Elves. Language binds the community together and separates each community from outsiders.

Tolkien was not only a master at creating his own languages, but also he had such a firm grasp of the English language that he could write in almost any style of his choosing. Tolkien could write an epic creation story, such as *The Silmarillion*, that stylistically could be placed beside any of the world's religious texts. Tolkien could also write narratively simple children's stories, such as *Roverandom* or *Mr. Bliss*. In addition, Tolkien was able to write a unique voice for each of his characters. Many writers retain the same voice in most of their characters. However, Tolkien was able to capture the personality and lifestyle of a character through his use of language. Because of his felicity with language patterns, readers feel that Tolkien's Hobbits talk exactly like Hobbits

should talk. Similarly, Denethor and Théoden sound exactly like the kings they are. A good example of this variation in speech patterns occurs in the passage in *The Two Towers* where Sam and Faramir discuss the fate of Boromir:

"If you think my master murdered this Boromir and then ran away you've got no sense; but say it, and have done! But it's a pity that folk as talk about fighting the Enemy can't let others do their bit in their own way without interfering. He'd be mighty pleased, if he could see you now."

"Patience!" said Faramir. "Do not speak before your master, whose wit is greater than yours. And I do not need any to teach me of our peril. Even so, I spare a brief time, in order to judge justly in a hard matter." (*Two Towers* 650)

Sam and Faramir have distinct speech patterns that reveal much about their characters. Faramir reveals an educated, royal personality while Sam demonstrates a more common, uneducated frame of mind. Yet, Tolkien still faced many critics that accused him of writing too archaically or too unrealistically. Tom Shippey refutes this claim:

There is a kind of presumption, however, in literary critics, usually utterly ignorant of the history of their own language, telling Tolkien what to think about English. Tolkien could at any time, and without trying, have rewritten any of his supposedly archaic passages either in really archaic language, in Middle English or Old English, or in completely normal demotic contemporary slang. (Shippey 224)

It is Tolkien's ability to write in multiple styles and formats that makes him both a target for critics and so intriguing for millions of readers.

Another of the characteristics of Tolkien's works that distinguishes it from other fantasy is the use of poetry. Whether it is a song by Bilbo or an Elvish incantation, Tolkien's fiction is not lacking in poems. Once again, the simple explanation for the presence of poetry, such as its beauty or its addition to realism, is not a sufficient explanation for a philological thinker like Tolkien. Every word Tolkien writes down has a philological purpose, yet the philological purpose of the poetry in *The Lord of the Rings* is often ignored. For many readers, the poetry seemingly has no bearing on the overall story or plot. However, Tolkien's poetry could be the most important linguistic as well as literary device he used. Heidegger again grants us further insight into Tolkien's use of poetry, when he writes:

The poet names the gods and names all things in that which they are. This naming does not consist in merely something already known being supplied with a name; it is rather that when the poet speaks the essential word, the existent is by this naming nominated as what it is. So it becomes known as existent. Poetry is the establishing of being by means of the word. (*Existence* 281)

Heidegger claims that the poet is the ultimate creator. He would place the poet even above himself, the philosopher. The poet is the most authentic creator because of the beauty that is verbalized, and the meaning that is not mentioned. Heidegger believes that once a thing is named it has lost much of its meaning. The poet is able to avoid defining something by speaking in imagery or metaphor, thus preserving its meaning.

Tom Shippey also notices the importance of Tolkien's poetry in a specific scene from *The Lord of the Rings*. Before the Black Rider tracks the Hobbits in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, they are depicted singing the "Walking Song." Later in Rivendell, the Elves sing the same song in their native tongue:

A Elbereth Gilthoniel,
Silivren penna miriel
O menel aglar elenath
Na-chaered palan-diriel
O galadhremmin ennorath
Fanuilos, le linnathon
Nef aear, si nef aearon! (*Fellowship* 230)

Frodo listens to the words, and Tolkien doesn't translate the verses for the reader. Shippey comments on this scene:

Frodo merely stands and listens while "the sweet syllables of the elvish song fell like clear jewels of blended word and melody." Tolkien is here carrying out a rather daring exercise on his readers' patience, first by not translating the Sindarin song and second, by explaining nothing in either case about the subject of the song. His belief seems to be that the sound of poetry on its own will convey (some) meaning. (Shippey 200)

Indeed, Tolkien was often more concerned about the sound of a word than the meaning of it. "Clear jewels of blended word and melody" certainly captures how Tolkien felt about poetry and language in general. Tolkien tried to do more than tell a good tale; he wished to create a symphony with language. Even if all the stories and words are unintelligible, in Tolkien's view, the sound of the words should still be pleasing to the listener. It is this power of the sound of language and the authenticity of poetry that Tolkien demonstrated with his poetic verses.

While Shippey and other Tolkien critics are quick to point to Tolkien's originality, they often never consider that he was part of a larger philosophical movement of the professional lifetime. Embodied by Heidegger, a movement of philosophical linguistics was taking root during Tolkien's time. Writers in Europe who had survived both World Wars began to think about the power of language. Another leader in philosophical linguistics was actually a good friend of Tolkien since his days at Oxford. Owen Barfield, one of the famed Inklings, wrote some of the most influential books on philosophical linguistics. Barfield was even described once as "Heidegger disguised as an English solicitor" (Hipolito). In his revolutionary book, *Poetic Diction*, Barfield argues that over time, humanity has evolved mentally as well as physically. Humanity's consciousness has changed throughout history, and it is evident in the language of the literature left behind through the ages. Barfield also puts faith in the power of language and sees language as an essential part of our being.

Tolkien may never have conversed with Heidegger, but he certainly had a relationship with Barfield. Evidence also exists that Tolkien was not only familiar with Barfield's post-graduate work but also struggled to understand it. Among his comments on *The Hobbit*, Tolkien writes, "The only philological remark (I think) in *The Hobbit* is on page 221: an odd mythological way of referring to linguistic philosophy, and a point that will be missed by any who have not read Barfield, and probably by those who have" (*Letters* 22). Here Tolkien hints at the importance of Barfield's writing to his own work. Tolkien implies that some subtleties in his work may be lost on those readers who have not studied linguistic philosophy.

As Tolkien asserts in his essay entitled "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," "There is no better medium for moral teaching than faerie story" (73). Yet, no moral code or ethical structure is ever outlined specifically in Middle-earth. Gandalf does not give the peoples of Middle-earth a list of commandments in *The Lord of the Rings*. Ilúvatar does not even say what is right and wrong at the creation of Arda in *The Silmarillion*. But we know from just reading the texts that these are highly moral tales. Tolkien said that his fictional works were largely Catholic, yet there is no mention of God or Jesus anywhere in his writing. This unspoken morality is what Heidegger means when he says that the true meaning of something can never be talked about with mere language. The closest we ever arrive to authenticity of meaning is within poetry.

From this viewpoint, we can label all of Tolkien's work as poetry. He wanted to write a meaningful story while making it sound beautiful at the same time. He wanted to hint at a larger morality without preaching it to us. If we can read Tolkien from this linguistic point of view, we may discover an entirely fresh approach to his work. After all, Tolkien called his work "primarily linguistic in nature." By keeping the philosophies of Heidegger and Barfield in mind, we can read Tolkien in a way much closer to the author's true intentions.

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