The Philosopher and the Philologist: J.R.R. Tolkien, Martin Heidegger, and Poetic Language

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During the First World War, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and Martin Heidegger stood on opposite sides of the trenches. Later on, during the Second World War, the two thinkers would not face each other on the battlefield, but they were ideologically opposed, Heidegger having joined the Nazi party and Tolkien becoming increasingly dismayed with what the Nazi party did to Germany. Nationalism aside, however, Tolkien and Heidegger were similar in several ways. Although both were enlisted during the First World War, neither man saw much action in the trenches; illness kept both out of combat for much of the war, and when they did serve, both had posts behind the lines. Both completed their education in 1915 – Heidegger completing his habilitation dissertation and Tolkien graduating from Oxford in that year.[1] But more importantly for the history of ideas, Heidegger and Tolkien held similar views on the nature of language.

It is a fairly simple matter to figure out where to look for Heidegger's philosophy of language; the books *Poetry*, *Language*, *Thought*, and *On the Way to Language* are good places to start. It is less easy to find Tolkien's theories on language. The casual reader of *The Lord of the Rings* will not pick up on them. Indeed, Tolkien likely spent proportionally little time working out such theories. A philologist by training, he was professionally concerned largely with the history of language and the way language changes over time. While there is some evidence that Tolkien did give some thought to the philosophy of language, fiction is not where he expounds on such thought. Instead, his fiction is where he puts theory into practice. This much is clear from his letters in which he talks about his work and about language in general. From his comments on language, and taking into consideration the influence of his friend Owen Barfield, it is possible to tease out an idea of just what Tolkien's views on the nature of language are.

Tolkien's academic writing and his fiction are generally distinct from each other, the one by Tolkien as scholar, the other by Tolkien as storyteller. While the stories are rich in detail, they are not peppered through with old forms of words from various languages accompanied by meditations on their meanings the way that Tolkien's academic works are. His two modes are different in execution (although he never seems to kick the habit of digressing), due in part to these modes having different purposes, but likely also due to a need to separate the serious work from the work that was essentially a hobby for Tolkien.

There is, however, one exception to this trend. The short piece "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," divided into three sections, falls between Tolkien's modes of writing. The title section (the second) is introduced with a summary of *The Battle of Maldon*, the Old English poem fragment that inspired Tolkien to write a continuation. The third section, called "Ofermod," delves into the source of this inspiration, revealing it to be philological. This section is very much a scholarly piece; here, Tolkien meditates on a single word from the original Old English poem. This last section Tolkien seems to have written in order to justify the writing of the accompanying story – he says, "But to merit a place in *Essays and Studies*, it must, I suppose, contain at least by

[1] Incidentally, both worked with medieval material. Tolkien specialized in Old and Middle English language, and Heidegger wrote his dissertation on medieval philosopher Duns Scotus.

implication criticism of the matter and manner of the Old English poem" (21). But whether this scholarly section was written to justify the fictional section or not, Tolkien could hardly have written "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" without having in mind the ideas he expresses about the word "ofermod" because the piece deals with the results of "ofermod," or pride, on Beorhthelm's part. As a whole, it demonstrates that although Tolkien kept his academic work and fiction separate once finished, they were not so clearly delineated in earlier stages.

In Tolkien's published fiction, there is very little evidence of the process of linguistic invention that produced it. Yet the linguistic invention is an essential part of Tolkien's creation. He began inventing languages during his undergraduate years, using two languages which fascinated him as starting points, and continued to refine them for the rest of his life. These invented languages – that is, the two forms of Elvish – became the basis for his works of fiction. Tolkien essentially wrote *The Lord of the Rings* in order to give his languages a world in which to exist.

Under Tolkien's view, it is essential for living languages to have such a world. He considered invented languages such as Esperanto more dead than dead languages because such languages have no accompanying mythology (*Letters* 231). Those languages that have come down to us "dead," such as Latin, Sanskrit, etc., have some life in them still because there is a body of literature written in those languages which we are still able to read, provided we have studied the language. Sanskrit has its mythology (the most important thing Tolkien thought a language can have), and Latin, though its mythology is largely co-opted from the Greeks, has its own literature. For these languages, the mythology and literature they record are organic, arising out of a community of speakers with their own culture. Even if a person were to attempt to write myths in a language such as Esperanto, such an effort would not give the language the kind of authenticity Tolkien appears to be after, as such myths have no background behind them, unless the writer undertaking this task were to invent one. Even so, it seems that such a background would be arbitrary, as it was not agreed upon by the community of Esperanto speakers. Tolkien's invented languages belong in a different category, somewhere in between living or once-living and deader than dead. These languages have a mythology behind them, which was written for the languages to exist within. Yet this background escapes the charge of arbitrariness that Esperanto carries, because the Elvish languages were not intended to have a community of speakers in the same way as Esperanto and languages like it were. Tolkien was engaged in a private game, not a project to create a culturally-neutral lingua franca. The speakers of his invented languages exist within his mind, and in our minds when we read his fiction. Likewise, the world in which these speakers live exists in mental space.

The mythology behind the language, however, is not articulated in the works Tolkien published during his lifetime. The full stories are told only in works assembled from his notes and published posthumously as *The Silmarillion* and the *History of Middle-earth* series. The mythological stories of Middle-earth were another lifelong project of Tolkien's and they changed in accordance with the changes he made to his languages. In *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the mythology is merely hinted at, giving the reader an impression of the depth of the world of Middle-earth and its history and mythology. Without the invented languages, Middle-earth would have remained locked within the real-world mythology from which Tolkien borrowed.

In his own way, Heidegger also created his own language. Heidegger's language is not the same kind of private linguistic game Tolkien's is, and it is not as elaborate, but it is also derived using linguistic principles. In addition, it is an integral part of Heidegger's philosophy. For instance, in *What Is Called Thinking?*, Heidegger meditates on the word "thinking." Perhaps it would be more accurate to cite here the word "denken," as the original text is in German. However, in his ruminations on the word and concept of thinking, Heidegger dwells for a while on Old English words. In this particular instance, little damage is done in insisting on the modern English equivalent.

These particular Old English words are *thencan*, to think, and *thancian*, to thank, and *thanc/thonc*, thought (*Thinking* 139). Heidegger's analysis depends on the resemblances of these words to add a dimension of meaning to "thinking." Heidegger's ultimate goal in *What Is Called Thinking?* is to arrive at a definition of "thinking" that says something different than what we usually think of when we hear the word. To achieve this, Heidegger looks at the aforementioned Old English words, as well as bringing Latin and Greek etymology into the analysis. With Greek in particular, Heidegger delves into a quotation from Parmenides, re-translating it by considering each word one at a time. This process results in a definition of thinking that could be found only in a Heideggerian dictionary.

Heidegger uses similar methods in other works as well. Throughout *Holderlin's Hymn "The Ister"* he applies his characteristic translation technique to both Holderlin's poetry and passages from *Antigone.* In "What Are Poets For?" he engages in etymological word play (*Poetry* 102-3); in "Building Dwelling Thinking" he considers the etymology of "bauen" (146-7). These are only two examples of many discussions of word origins throughout Heidegger's works. Such discussions generally serve the purpose of looking at a particular word in a different way, getting at something in the meaning of the word normally obscured by the ordinary meaning that immediately presents itself. We grasp first one meaning then the other in the same way that in looking at the duckrabbit figure we see first a duck and then a rabbit.

The way that Heidegger re-examines words comes into play in "A Dialogue on Language." In this dialogue "between a Japanese and an Inquirer" (*On the Way* 1) – the Inquirer is clearly Heidegger himself – Heidegger and his Japanese friend discuss the nature of language, with Heidegger eventually asking what the Japanese word for "language" is. The Japanese friend eventually answers with a word that only approximates the meaning "language" – *koto ba.* The second portion of the word is easily translated; *ba* means "petal." But *koto* requires more work and a couple of pages of dialogue to translate. The definition of *koto* that arises is "the happening of the lightening message of the graciousness that brings forth" (47). It is, or seems to be, the place where the world worlds. There are particular reasons why both of the participants in the dialogue choose to use the word "graciousness" rather than "grace" in the definition. Chief among these reasons is that "the word 'grace' easily misleads the modern mind" (45). Once again Heidegger is up to his usual trick of going beyond the ordinary connotations of a word in order to get at something more precisely in line with his philosophy.

This definition is only half of the term, however. So far, *koto* and *ba* are separately defined. The term as a whole means something like "language." The translation, pivotal to the dialogue, says something about the nature of language. The phrase as a whole means "the petals that stem from *Koto*" (47). Thus the nature of language is that it is the outgrowth of something, namely *koto*. As the Japanese participant in the dialogue says, "the nature of language does not fasten upon the phonetics and the written forms of the words" (35). Nor is language merely an "image of a nerve stimulus in sounds" (Nietzsche 43). The essence of language lies beyond forms of words. Juxtaposing languages and comparing them can reveal something about the way languages develop and change, but this method of investigating languages cannot even begin to lead us to any insights about language itself; it is too wrapped up in the outward forms of particular words. The Japanese term *koto ba* names the essence of language; it is that which "brings what is, as something that is, into the Open" (*Poetry* 73).[2] In the place where the world worlds, it is the unconcealing force.

Tolkien has a similar view of the nature of language. In his essay "On Fairy-stories," he takes exception to a statement made by Max Mueller that mythology is a "disease of language." Tolkien says, "It would be more near the truth to say that languages... are a disease of mythology" (48).

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[2] From "The Origin of the Work of Art."

Language cannot flourish without mythology just as pathogens cannot thrive without a host, or as plants cannot grow without soil. Here again language is an outgrowth of something else. For Heidegger, language grows out of *koto* and for Tolkien it grows out of mythology, but the basic concept about the nature of language is the same. Tolkien also agrees that language is more than sounds and symbols, even though he is usually concerned with those same sounds and symbols. In his lecture "English and Welsh," Tolkien says that "language – and more so as an expression than as communication – is a natural product of our humanity" and goes on to distinguish "native language" from "first-learned" language (190). This "native language," while it informs phonetic aesthetics, goes beyond mere form to touch on the essence of language.

With these statements about language, we have made a nearly complete survey of what Tolkien says directly about the philosophy of language. He does not discuss the nature of language at any great length. The statements cited above are digressions within a larger discussion. Tolkien does not discuss their implications or even return to them to elucidate what he means, or elaborate on why exactly it is only "more near" the truth to say that languages are a "disease" of mythology. More often in talking about language he talks about the role of languages within his works of fiction, or particular features of particular languages, or linguistic/philological observations about language. However, Tolkien was not wholly unfamiliar with the philosophy of language, even if he did not write about it himself. What theories of linguistic philosophy he did know, and presumably agreed with, on one occasion snuck into his fiction work, if in an oblique way.

Tolkien mentions this one occasion in his letters. He says that in *The Hobbit* there is "an odd mythological way of referring to linguistic philosophy, and a point that will (happily) be missed by any who have not read Barfield (few have), and probably by those who have" (*Letters* 22). The person Tolkien references here is Owen Barfield, fellow Inkling,[3] philosopher, and author of *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*. In this work, Barfield writes about the nature of poetic language and metaphor. He also, like Tolkien and Heidegger, uses philology as a basis for his work.[4]

The section of *The Hobbit* Tolkien refers to in the letter quoted above is this: "To say that Bilbo's breath was taken away is no description at all. There are no words to express his staggerment, since Men changed the language that they learned of elves in the days when all the world was wonderful" (*Hobbit* 234, quoted in *Letters* 435). This refers to Barfield's theory of how metaphor changes along with changing language, which he discusses in chapter 3 of *Poetic Diction*. His basic picture of the way metaphor works is that a word is applied to something it had not previously been associated with and thus reveals something. The metaphor then becomes incorporated into the language and becomes commonplace. The process then begins again with a fresh, new collocation. In the quotation from *The Hobbit* cited above, "breath-taking" is in the middle of the cycle. It has lost its freshness and become inadequate to describe true astonishment.

In his philosophy, Heidegger uses similar notions of the way metaphor works. As noted above, Heidegger often pursues uncommon meanings for ordinary words. These meanings are intended to illuminate or unconceal something about the matter at hand. In essence, Heidegger coins new metaphors. These metaphors are the basis of his distinct philosophical language. If these metaphors were to gain enough of a foothold in less specialized discourse they would have a profound impact on language. According to Barfield, new metaphors (and their assimilation into common expression) are the driving force behind language change.

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[3] The Inklings were a group of scholars who would meet at The Eagle and Child pub in Oxford to share their work, usually fiction. The group included J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams; Owen Barfield was an irregular member.

[4] Also like Tolkien, Barfield accuses Max Mueller of getting things backwards, though on a different point and much more overtly than Tolkien.

From the quotation from Tolkien's letters concerning Barfield's work, it is obvious that Tolkien knew it and apparently accepted it. Heidegger and Barfield probably did not have direct knowledge of each other's work; *Poetic Diction* was first published in 1928, only a year after *Being and Time*. However, both thinkers were familiar with Nietzsche's work; they develop the idea that metaphors become worn out like "coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal" (Nietzsche 47). In addition, both Barfield and Heidegger (and Tolkien, for that matter) take a decidedly philological approach to language, examining the history of language and even individual words. By doing so, they were doing something decidedly different than the analytical philosophers of the time.[5]

This is far from an exhaustive examination of the ways in which Tolkien's and Heidegger's ideas touch, but I hope it is sufficiently clear by now that these two men thought of language in similar ways, due in large part to the methods they used to look at language. These few pages merely scratch the surface. There are still other linguistic issues and other works by both Tolkien and Heidegger to explore.

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[5] Both Barfield and Heidegger overtly acknowledge their opposition to analytical philosophy, Heidegger in *What is Called Thinking?* p. 21 and Barfield on pp. 30-1 of *Poetic Diction.*