

Beauty in Language: Tolkien's Phonology and Phonaesthetics as a Source of Creativity and Inspiration for the Lord of the Rings

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Grožis kalboje: Tolkienu fonologija ir fonetinė estetika kaip „Žiedų valdovo“ kūrybiškumo ir įkvėpimo šaltinis

Summary

J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is one of the most popular works of the 20th C. Its popularity is due in part to the linguistic depth, the artistry of style, and the unity of worldview displayed therein. Tolkien's position on beauty in languages, his delight in individual words – especially names, and his specialty in Old English were addressed in his research, and also incorporated in his mythology and stories of Middle-earth. Elements of Tolkien's linguistic aesthetics include aesthetic sensitivity and appreciation for the sounds of words, phonetic fit-

ness between their sound and their meaning, ancient semantic unity in the words of old languages and the mythology embedded in them, and our sensitivity or aesthetic responses to sound patterns in language. His views in phonology and phonaesthetics were applied directly to his invented languages, to his mythology of Middle-earth, and to the various prose styles of English used in writing *Lord of the Rings*.

Keywords: *mythology, literary art, ancient semantic unity, language, professional, scholarship, aesthetics, phonetic fitness, phonaesthetics.*

Santrauka

J. R. R. Tolkienu „Žiedų valdovas“ yra vienas populiariausių XX a. literatūros kūrinių. Jo populiarumą iš dalies lemia lingvistinė gelmė, stiliaus meniškumas ir jame pateikta pasaulėvokos vienovė. Tolkienu požiūris į kalbų grožį, jo žavėjimasis atskirais žodžiais, ypač vardais, ir jo profesinis domėjimasis senąja anglų kalba buvo pasitelkti tiek jo moksliniuose tyrinėjimuose, tiek įtraukti į Viduržemio pasakojimų mitologiją. Tolkienu lingvistinės estetikos elementai apima estetinę pajautą ir žodžių skambesio svarbą, garso fonetinio arti-

mumo reikšmei pripažinimą, senųjų kalbų žodžių pirmąpradį semantinį glaudumą su į juos įrašyta mitologija, taip pat ir mūsų jautrumą arba estetinį reagavimą į kalbos garsines struktūras. Tolkienu pažiūros į fonologiją ir fonetinę estetiką buvo tiesiogiai pritaikytos jam kuriant kalbas, Viduržemio mitologiją ir įvairius anglų prozos stilius kūrinyje „Žiedų valdovas“.

Esminiai žodžiai: *mitologija, žodinis menas, pirmąpradė semantinė vienovė, kalba, profesionalas, estetika, fonetinis atitikimas, fonetinė estetika.*

1. Introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien has been called the “author of the century” (Shippey, 2002, xvii). This is not due merely to the immense popularity of his works as demonstrated in opinion polls and sales figures. Nor is it due to his having satisfied a hugely popular taste

for fantasy and thus unwittingly having become the springboard for a new genre in popular fiction and for a new medium of entertainment in role-playing and computer games. Rather, many critics and commentators attribute Tolkien's popularity to his ability to address many of the central questions of the 20th century in a way that is thoroughly modern

in idea and at the same time mythical and timeless in style.

Tolkien was born in 1892, and started learning foreign languages as early as age 6, learning Latin, French, and German from his mother, who died when he was 12 years old. He studied Anglo-Saxon and Gothic as a schoolboy, and first encountered Welsh and Finnish as an undergraduate at Oxford University. After the war he worked for two years on the Oxford English Dictionary, and then became a professor of Anglo-Saxon, teaching at Oxford University for over 30 years. Two other relevant facts that give a significant orientation to understanding Tolkien are that he was a Roman Catholic Christian, which shaped the concepts and principles operant in his mythology and in *Lord of the Rings* (hereafter referred to as *LOTR*); and that he fought in WWI in the Battle of the Somme. Thus he was familiar with the horrors of modern industrialized warfare, with genocide, addiction, environmental destruction, genetic engineering, the corruption following lust for power, and they all appear in *LOTR*.

As a professional philologist, Tolkien addressed his scholarly research into Old Norse, Old English, Gothic, and other old European languages and the literature in these old languages. (His works will be cited by abbreviated title, following the tradition in Tolkienian scholarship; other sources will be given standard citations.) His private amusement was to invent languages, along with speakers for them, and histories for the speakers, which became his mythology of Middle-earth. The two enterprises were intimately entangled with each other, but Tolkien's philology preceded his mythology. The mythology had scholarly and philological roots. Tolkien worked on his private languages and legends for over 60 years, and *The Hobbit* and *LOTR* are something like islands in a vast sea of his legendary output. This output was posthumously edited and published as *The History of Middle-earth* in twelve volumes by his son, Christopher Tolkien.

Tolkien himself said that the object he aimed for with *LOTR* was to produce a work to be *enjoyed* as such: to be read with literary pleasure. So that any reader whom the author has (to his great satisfaction) succeeded in 'pleasing' (exciting, engrossing, moving, etc.), should, if he wishes others to be similarly pleased, endeavor to induce them to read it with literary pleasure (Letters, 1981, 414).

Literary pleasure was, for Tolkien, tied up with his professional interests as a philologist. In fact Tolkien consistently made no distinction between his

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so-called hobby and his professional work (Shippey, 2002, xvi).

Accordingly, my aim here is to show that the linguistic beauty of *LOTR* is not accidental, but is a demonstration of Tolkien's professional views of language and art, and of his philological skill. First, philology is the main source of Tolkien's creativity and means of mythical invention. Second, Tolkien's tastes in phonology and phonaesthetics as applied in *LOTR* give the flavour and appeal of the invented 'elvish' languages, and all the names and other applications of these languages to the story. Third, Tolkien takes his own aesthetic taste with regard to language, inserts it into the story and gives it to some of the characters, especially elves, and creates a corresponding prose style in English such that readers of *LOTR* can experience this beauty for themselves.

2. Philology and Literary Artistic Invention

I begin by presenting Tolkien's aesthetic sensitivities, his philological expertise, and the exercise of these skills for *LOTR*. There are three points to be made in this section. The first is to note is that Tolkien thought all languages had an aesthetic flavour and could be appreciated in their own right apart from any utilitarian purpose they might be put to. They can be "tasted" like poetry or music and some are beautiful and give great aesthetic pleasure. Being a philologist, getting a large part of any aesthetic pleasure that I am capable of from the *form* of words (and especially from the *fresh* association of word-form with word-sense), I have always best enjoyed things in a foreign language (*English and Welsh*, 191).

It is in encountering foreign languages that this aesthetic pleasure is best felt. Tolkien remarks that both English and Latin (as his first-learned foreign language) "seemed so *normal* that pleasure or distaste were equally inapplicable" (*English and Welsh*, 191). Greek, Gothic, Welsh, and Finnish all had this aesthetic effect on him. In his essays and letters he comments that "Gothic was the first to take me by storm, to move my heart" (*English and Welsh*, p. 191). Elsewhere he says, "There is a purely artistic pleasure, keen and of a high order, in studying a Gothic dictionary from this point of view" (*A Secret Vice*, 207). Of his first encounter with Finnish he wrote in a letter to W.H. Auden, Most important, perhaps, after Gothic, was the discovery in Exeter College library <...> of a Finnish Grammar. 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*, 214).

Tolkien later writes that Welsh “was bound to win in the end, though long baulked by sheer lack of opportunity. . . . it pierced my linguistic heart. . . . Welsh is of this soil, this island, the senior language of the men of Britain; and Welsh is beautiful” (*English and Welsh*, 192, 189). This aesthetic pleasure Tolkien felt reading grammars and dictionaries encouraged him to think that the invention or construction of purely made-up languages could be a valid art-form, as opposed to merely a game children amuse themselves with. He had been inventing languages since childhood, but after encountering Gothic, Welsh, and Finnish in college, he took the development and construction of them much more seriously. Two of them, one modelled on Finnish and the other on Welsh in phonetic pattern and grammatical structure, became the elvish languages that appeared in *LOTR*.

The second point concerns Tolkien’s views of the relation between philology and mythology. All languages have a history. Languages grow and develop; they also wear down. Words wear down, so does the structure of the languages. They begin by being highly inflected: Lithuanian and Latin have seven cases. By contrast English has been worn down to the point of no case endings at all. Languages also borrow from one another, and words can be traced from language to language, following the movement of the things or ideas they represent from place to place (Lobdell, 1975, 30–31). The very earliest uses we have of language are in the myths and poems told in those languages. The early literature gives us a feel for the history of the languages, as well as for the mythical consciousness of the cultures that spoke and wrote in these languages. Tolkien replicated this feel in his legends of Middle-earth.

It is especially in names and place-names that one can see the past alive in the present. “Out of these languages are made nearly all the names that appear in my legends. This gives a certain character (a cohesion, a consistency of linguistic style, and an illusion of historicity) to the nomenclature” (*Letters*, 143). Every real language has a history; so constructed languages must have a hypothetical or feigned history also, if the invention is not to be merely a code (*A Secret Vice*, 210). It is because an invented language requires the illusion of historicity that Tolkien claims, “For perfect construction of an art language, it is necessary to construct at least in outline a mythology concomitant. The making of language and mythology are related functions . . . a mythology is necessary to give your language an individual *flavour*”

(*A Secret Vice*, 210). The history and mythology of Middle-earth is referred to in *LOTR* nearly a thousand times. Since Tolkien worked nearly 60 years on the languages and their history, the worn down words, the loan words, the names and place-names together give Middle-earth the consistency and feel of reality, foreign and familiar at the same time.

The third point deals with Tolkien’s demonstration of academic philology in the use of Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Old High German and other old northern European languages, that gives a feel of familiar antiquity to many of the peoples and creatures of Middle-earth. As Shippey has shown, Tolkien’s wargs, for example, were constructed from combining both the sounds and the ideas of the Old Norse word *vargr* which means both ‘wolf’ and ‘outlaw’, and the Old English words *wearh*, which means ‘outcast’ or ‘outlaw’ but not ‘wolf’, and *awyrgan*, which means ‘to condemn’, or ‘to strangle’ or ‘to bite to death’ (Shippey, 2002, 30).

Dwarves, too, are the product of Tolkien’s professional discipline. Modern English ‘dwarf’, modern German *Zwerg*, and Old Norse *dvergr* all could have a common source in **dvaigrs*, a word from which the later ones might have been derived. Tolkien insisted that his publishers retain the archaic plural ‘dwarves’ even though the only correct plural in English at the time was ‘dwarfs’ (*LOTR*, 1136). Old words that end in –f that are still in use retain the –ves ending in the plural, such as wolf/wolves, leaf/leaves, calf/calves, and wife/wives. Modern words such as proof(s) do not. So to avoid the worn down, comical concept that we find in a tale such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Tolkien retained the –ves plural to indicate the dignity, strength and formidable character of the ancient concept (Shippey, 2002, xiv, xv, 15).

Ents, orcs, hobbits, mathoms, smials, éored, woses, to mention only a few, are all actual Anglo-Saxon words or modernized from Anglo-Saxon words or Anglo-Saxon *words. Tolkien explicitly says these are not purely invented words. They are applications of his philological scholarship; words that might have survived to our time but unfortunately did not (*Guide*, 175). His philological method was to look for gaps, errors, or contradictions in Anglo-Saxon poetry, and painstakingly reconstruct the words, the notions they refer to, and their place in the ancient poems and in the imaginative landscape of the authors of those ancient poems. Sometimes Tolkien invented a mythical reality for old words whose meaning has been lost in the intervening years between the time when it was part of commonly known vocabulary and our time.

Perhaps the most important example of the past becoming alive in the present is in the invention of the Ringwraiths. 'Wraith' is a very old word, given two conflicting meanings in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. One is the ghost of someone who has died; the other is an apparition of a living person. The word has its origin in the Anglo-Saxon word *writhan*, 'to writhe', which is also the root of our words 'wrath', and 'wreath' (Shippey, 2002, 123). Tolkien combines all these elements in his Ringwraiths. They are ghostly figures, riding real horses and wearing real cloaks and armor, but completely invisible and as intangible as smoke. They are embodiments of wrath, twisted by cruelty and malice, and their primary weapons are not their swords or maces but the terror, panic, and despair they inflict on their opponents. They were seduced by Sauron's offer of power through the rings, and are so ensnared to his will that they have no individual sense of self left.

These wraiths, Shippey point out, are completely plausible, because the examples of Ohlendorf, Eichmann, and the henchmen of Mao and Stalin give evidence that dedication to some cause or ideology, justifying everything they do, can destroy all moral consciousness and human fellow-feeling in them. "The spectacle of the person 'eaten up inside' by devotion to some abstraction has been so familiar throughout the twentieth century as to make the idea of the wraith, and the wraithing-process, horribly recognizable, in a way non-fantastic" (Shippey, 2002, 125). The dreadful believability of the Ringwraiths, Shippey concludes, comes not from their medieval literary origins but from the twentieth century experience of evil displayed in them (Shippey, 2002, 128).

One more example comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *smygels* 'a burrow', and the Germanic word *smugan* 'to creep' (Gilliver et al, 2006, 191). From this Germanic verb came another Anglo-Saxon verb *smeagan* 'to scrutinize or investigate'. The name of Smeagol, the creature who came to be known as Gollum, was derived from this verb, and he had the habit of living in dark caves and tunnels under the Misty Mountains. Tolkien began his earlier book *The Hobbit*, with the sentence "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit", and tells us that hobbits called their holes 'smials'. Tolkien philologically constructed the word 'smials' as an authentic modern English form of *smygels*, as if it had it survived to our time. The dragon Smaug also acquired his name from these roots: *smaug* is the past tense of the Germanic verb *smugan* 'to creep through an opening', and Tolkien called it "a low philological jest" (*Letters*, 31).

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Shippey notes that because so many of Tolkien's inventions come from old, lost words of northern European languages, Tolkien didn't think he was entirely inventing it all out of his own imagination. Since much of scientific etymology is based on the process of reconstruction, Tolkien was practicing his specialty in much of his invention (Shippey, 2002, xiv-xv). This is why Tolkien can say that *LOTR* is "fundamentally linguistic in inspiration" and that it is "largely and essay in linguistic aesthetic" (*Letters*, 219–220).

3. Phonetic Fitness and Ancient Semantic Depth in Tolkien's Invented Languages

There are two strands of development in Tolkien's views concerning the close connection between words and things. The first is the counter-tradition of philosophers such as Owen Barfield and Ernst Cassirer in the 1920s. It is called a counter-tradition because it counters the prevailing views of Saussure and Chomsky, who held that the word or sound was purely arbitrary and completely unrelated to any referent connected with it. Wilhelm Humboldt, Sapir and Whorf, Otto Jespersen, Roman Jakobson and C. S. Peirce, who all researched sound symbolism, were part of this counter-tradition. More recently, other scientists such as Margaret Magnus and Vilayanur S. Ramachandran have carried out detailed experiments to prove a clear relationship between sound and meaning (Smith, 2011, 57).

Tolkien was certainly familiar with the work of the early 20th century theorists in sound symbolism, but was most influenced by Barfield. He commented that Barfield's concept of ancient and original semantic unity had modified his whole outlook on language (Flieger, 2012, 243–244). Among other things that Tolkien and Barfield agreed upon was that language is at the root of human consciousness. He says, "Language – and more so as *expression* than as communication – is a natural product of our humanity" (*English and Welsh*, 190). Tolkien also thought that the natural environment of a people had a direct influence on the sounds of the ancient language spoken there.

The second source for Tolkien's views comes from his Christian faith. Although Middle-earth in *LOTR* has no overt religious practice, no churches or temples, no ceremonial worship, and only traces of prayer in hymns and invocations, it still has a clearly Christian setting and ethos. This religious element, Tolkien told a friend, "is absorbed into the story and

the symbolism” (*Letters*, 172). This is a line widely quoted and interpreted by many commentators, but I understand it to mean at the least that since *LOTR* is also essentially linguistic in inspiration, that Tolkien understood his philological investigations to shed light on the real world, and that the real world is in fact the one created by God as told in Genesis and the Prologue to the Gospel of John. Furthermore, Middle-earth is modeled on the real world in several ways, all of them linked to his professional views and philological expertise.

This consonance between Middle-earth and the real world is first of all demonstrated by the Christian doctrine of creation by the spoken word. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” The world was not a pagan or even pre-Christian world in B.C. year X. Christ, as the Word, the Logos of God, was involved with the world from the beginning. “In the beginning was the Word . . . Without Him was not anything made that was made” (John 1, 1–2). Christ is the spoken Word that brought the world into being. Tolkien’s mythical story of the creation and ordering of Middle-earth is given in the *Silmarillion*, the backstory to *LOTR*.

But even more than the parallels of Tolkien’s creation myth with the Biblical account, is the significance of words and language and their intimate and essential unity with the things they designate. He remarks on the “peculiar keenness of the delight scholars have in poetry or fine prose in a foreign language” and says “it is the *contemplation* of the relation between sound and notion which is the main source of pleasure” (*A Secret Vice*, 206). This relation is neither random nor arbitrary: through all the vowel mutations and consonant shifts in the history of language, the fitness between notion and oral symbol can be perceived, in some languages more and others less, and the connections between mother and daughter languages can be traced thereby.

Naming, for Tolkien is not simply assigning at random an arbitrary vocable to the thing named. To name a thing is to capture in articulated sound something of its essence, some of its story. “Names both reflect and effect things in Middle-earth. . . . names are things, and names can make things happen” (Walker, 2009, 130). “Real names tell you the story of the things they belong to in my language,” Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin, and he mildly objects to the word ‘hill’, saying “it is a hasty word for a thing that has stood here ever since this part of the world was shaped” (*LOTR*, 465). Tolkien demonstrated the view expressed by Cassirer: “The notion that name and essence bear a necessary and internal relation to

each other, that the name does not merely denote but actually *is* the essence of its object, that the potency of the real thing is contained in the name – that is one of the fundamental assumptions of the mythmaking consciousness itself” (Cassirer, 1946, 3; Smith, 2012, 59). The original fitness between word and thing is expressed in the repeated line “And God saw that it was good.” This is the original source of the unity and intimacy of beauty, truth and goodness in the relation between word and thing in Christianity as well as in Tolkien’s mythology. Another illustration is found in the story of Adam naming the animals. He is the prototype for all linguistic invention, the first literary artist.

All ancient languages for Tolkien have this richness and depth because they are steeped in human experience and embedded in a mythology. “The potency of the word and the wonder of the thing” (*Stories*, 147) arise simultaneously and arise in a story. “The incarnate mind, the tongue and the tale are in our world coeval” (*Stories*, 148). He did not hold the reductionist view that language came first, and was followed by mythology like a disease. “Mythology is not a disease at all, though it may like all human things become diseased. You might as well say that thinking is a disease of the mind” (*Stories*, 121). In Barfield’s example, the Latin word *spiritus*, Greek *pneuma* and Hebrew *rauch* all mean wind-breath-spirit simultaneously (Wood, 2003, 34; Birzer, 2002, 30). To use such a word, for the ancients, would be to experience reality as nature, aliveness, and the divine together, without any separation or division or shifting from one to the other. Barfield argued that this ancient semantic depth revealed an ancient unified consciousness of the world, which has separated in modern times to separate consciousnesses, shown in our modern languages as separate meanings for the ancient word. A Lithuanian example would be a word such as ‘*dangus*’, which means, simultaneously and without division, both ‘heaven’ and ‘sky’. Owen Barfield, a philosopher and friend of Tolkien, argued that there is no distinction between spiritual reality (heaven) and physical reality (sky) for ancient speakers of such words. Accordingly, poets and linguists “find language growing more and more poetic as they trace it back into the past” (Barfield, 1973, 83). Tolkien’s example is *Thórr*, the Norse god of thunder who resembles a red-bearded, hot-tempered farmer. Tolkien thought it was not worthwhile to ask which came first, nature-allegories about personalized thunder or the experience of an irascible bellowing farmer in a rage. “It is more reasonable to suppose that the farmer popped up at the

very moment when Thunder got a voice and a face” (*Stories*, 124). In Tolkien’s own experience, the work on the invented languages fueled the story, and the story continually prompted a return to work on the languages. Tolkien found as he went along, that one cannot abstract language from a culture or a people (*Letters*, 216; Birzer, 2002, 32). So in inventing a language as an art form, it is necessary to invent a mythology concomitant to give it something of the semantic depth and richness a real language has. Otherwise it is nothing but a code.

Mythic experience gives way to expressing the association of words and things. Upon reaching Lothlórien “Frodo stood awhile still lost in wonder. . . . He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful” (*LOTR*, 350). For Tolkien a major response to the perception of beauty is philological, making new and wonderful names that phonetically fit the things named.

This is high art, and Tolkien gives the artistic temperament and ability primarily to the elves. Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin that “Elves made all the old words; they began it, . . . waking up the trees and teaching them to speak, . . . They always wished to talk to everything, the old Elves did. . . . It was the Elves that cured us of dumbness long ago, and that was a great gift” (*LOTR*, 468). Elvish names for natural things and things they have made are sprinkled throughout the story: *athelas*, *mithril*, *crebain*, *ithildin*, *hithlain*, *lembas*, and *mellon*, are only a few. They show Tolkien’s ties to Welsh as the model for this elvish language in the prevalence of consonants such as *th*, *l*, and *n*. Tolkien was highly skilled in Welsh; he taught Medieval Welsh both at Leeds and at Oxford, and considered that the study of Welsh was necessary for English philologists (Phelpstead, 2011, 13–14).

A contrast is shown in his description of the Orcs. They “spoke as they would, without love of words or things.” To love words is also to love the things they denote, and to love a thing means to treat its name with care. Without such love the Orc talk is “dreary and repetitive with hatred and contempt, too long removed from good to retain even verbal vigour, save in the ears of those to whom only the squalid sounds strong” (*LOTR*, 1134). For Tolkien, beautiful language is strong; there is no “verbal vigour” in squalid language. A philologist, then, is one who loves words; and loving words leads the philologist into appreciation for the natural world, history, culture, and myth. Abuse of language in Tolkien’s view

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is part and parcel of abuse of both scholarship and the physical world.

4. Literary Pleasure and Phonaesthetics in Tolkien’s Prose

Concerning phonetic pleasure, Tolkien followed his own instincts and aesthetic tastes, and came very close to the same results that scientists in neuroaesthetics such as Ramachandran are now uncovering. He claimed, “I am personally more interested perhaps in word-form in itself, and in word-form in relation to meaning (so-called phonetic fitness) than in any other department [of language construction]” (*A Secret Vice*, 211). Phonetic fitness is inextricably linked to aesthetic pleasure in his view. “Certainly, it is the contemplation of the relation between sound and notion which is the main source of pleasure” (*A Secret Vice*, 206).

Tolkien’s ideas of what sounds in language are pleasurable corresponds fairly closely with some observations of David Crystal. In an article called “Melodious Velvet” Crystal describes a poll of British readers’ favorite words by the *Sunday Times* in 1980. Coming in first and second place were *melody* and *velvet*, with *gossamer* and *crystal* tying for third. A poem by John Kitching, “Sunday Words”, that includes most of the high-ranking words of the *Sunday Times* poll, is then given with Crystal’s analysis of the vowels and consonants in the words of the poem. Crystal concludes that there is the strongest preference for the consonants /l/ and /m/, with /s/, /k/, /r/, /t/, /d/, and /n/ coming in very close. Seventy-three percent of all the consonants in the poem consist of these eight. He shows that the most common are frictionless continuants, followed by plosives. There is an analysis of the vowels also. Kitching’s poetic intuitions about what is pleasing to native English speakers is about 80% accurate compared with the poll. Crystal concludes, “This analysis perhaps explains why a romantic poem about London Underground stations would very likely include *Pimlico* and *Colindale*, which closely reflect these intuitions, and exclude *Goode Street* and *Wapping*, which do not” (Crystal, 2003, 414). Tolkien’s Elvish languages reflect the same intuitions. A comparison of some of the poems in Quenya and Sindarin, the two most prominent invented languages in *LOTR*, with these findings, yield similar results. Tolkien was reluctant to explain in detail his phonetic preferences, considering them to be idiosyncratic and purely subjective. But phonetic analysis and immense popularity among the reading public show this not to be the case.

It is shown in how Tolkien includes songs and poems, and invocations in both Elvish languages, sometimes without even translating them. Upon his arrival in Rivendell, Frodo hears an elf sing a song to Elbereth, the text of which is given without translation (*LOTR*, 238). Tolkien writes, “He stood still enchanted, while the sweet syllables of the elvish song fell like clear jewels of blended word and melody.” Evidently the “sweet syllables” of the song are meant to have the same effect on the reader seeing them in print. Translation isn’t necessary for the apprehension of beauty.

Legolas, being an Elf, also is sensitive to the nuances and connotations of a language he doesn’t understand. On their way to Edoras, after Aragorn chants a poem Legolas comments, “That, I guess, is the language of the Rohirrim, for it is like to this land itself; rich and rolling in part, and else hard and stern as the mountains . . . [and] laden with the sadness of mortal men” (*LOTR*, 508). Aragorn translates the poem for them, showing that Legolas is correct in his assessment.

It is not only in his invented languages that Tolkien displays his phonaesthetic skill and sensitivity to beauty in language. Tolkien also applies his aesthetic tastes and linguistic views to the immense variety of styles and registers he uses, as well as to the general quality of his English prose. One of the striking features of his prose is the semantic depth Tolkien built into it. In one chapter of *The Power of Tolkien’s Prose* called “The Potency of the Words,” Steve Walker gives a host of examples of Tolkien’s semantic depth through the use of allusion, irony in understatement and anticlimax, pun, emblem, simile, and nuance of diction and syntax (Walker, 2009, 115). The density is especially rich in packing double meaning into descriptive words. The “crafty” boats of the elves are clever as well as seaworthy; “spells of ruin” are both ruinous and runic; hobbits turn a “sharp” corner where swords are actually waiting; when Pippin is “curiously restless,” the restlessness is both odd and inquisitive. One of the best puns concerns fading and shadows. “When the Witch-king ‘passes into the shadows.’” He literally does everything that statement might intimate: he is sneaking away under cover of darkness; he is associating himself with the blackness of evil; he is becoming a wraith, a literal shadow” (Walker, 2009, 127). Both physical and spiritual meanings are realized in Tolkien’s prose; pun in Tolkien’s prose reinforces, confirms and actualizes Middle-earth reality through multiple levels of meaning, all of which are palpable, tangible.

The poetic feel to Tolkien’s prose is reinforced by his use of alliteration and assonance. Treebeard says to Gandalf, “Wood and water, stock and stone, I can master; but there is a Wizard to manage here” (*LOTR*, 570). Since Tolkien held the view that the farther back one goes, the more poetic the language becomes, he put his most poetic language in the mouths of Tom Bombadil, Treebeard, and the Elves.

Another feature of Tolkien’s prose that contributes to its beauty is his pacing, and the rhythm of his sentences. Ursula LeGuin notes that *LOTR* is “a wonderful book to read aloud. . . . Even when the sentences are long, their flow is perfectly clear, and follows the breath; . . . the cadences are graceful and inevitable. . . . The narrative prose . . . wants the living voice to speak it, to find its full beauty and power, its subtle music, its rhythmic vitality” (LeGuin, 2004, 95). Tom Bombadil’s language is “made up of free galloping dactyls and trochees, with tremendous forward impetus.” When Tolkien prints his speech as verse, Tom is actually singing. Frodo, after being with Bombadil for a while, also lapses into metered speech when it comes to saying good-bye. “My fair lady, clad all in silver green! We have never said farewell to her, not seen her since the evening!” (*LOTR*, 135).

Though Treebeard’s lament for the Entwives is presented in *LOTR* in prose, Walker restructures it as a poem to show its “rhythmic sensitivity, its conceptual integrity, and the lyric intensity of its elegiac sensuousness” (Walker, 2009, 140). He explains that writing the poetic passages in continuous prose encourages the reader to appreciate the actual poetry through the pulse and the ear, rather than the eye. We are too used to seeing poetry, seeing it printed on the page in lines and stanzas, with capitalization at the beginning of the lines, rather than hearing it. Since Tolkien’s prose is meant to be heard, even if only silently in the mind as we read, he makes certain that it goes at a contemplative, poetic pace. LeGuin remarks that “Tolkien must have heard what he wrote” (LeGuin, 2004, 95). In actual fact, *LOTR* was heard first, before it was read; Tolkien read it aloud, chapter by chapter, to the Inklings, an informal reading group led by C. S. Lewis. Perhaps its readability is one of the reasons so many people now read it aloud, to their children, to their spouses or partners, with their friends.

5. Conclusion: Beauty and the Experience of Reading LOTR

There was a great deal of controversy among reviewers when LOTR was first published in 1954–1955. But by the turn of the century, 45 years later, British readers, five different times, and by a wide margin each time, voted LOTR the greatest book of the century. One poll garnered 26,000 responses, and another 50,000 (Shippey, 2002, xx). These showed the huge popularity of Tolkien's works, even before the Peter Jackson films were produced. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, a huge industry of Tolkien scholarship also arose, with hundreds of books and articles being written every year. Most of them were written, as Shippey himself acknowledges, to attempt to “explain Tolkien's success, and to make out the case for his importance” (Shippey, 2002, xxvi). They do so mainly by elucidating Tolkien's themes, such as evil, addiction, slavery, love of nature, friendship, death and immortality, grace and providence, pity and mercy; or by tracing Tolkien sources in the myths, legends, and poetry of Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and other ancient Northern European languages. Very few, such as Smith, Caldecott, and Walker, deal with Tolkien's linguistic aesthetics, and his theme of beauty, or his prose style, but I have not found anyone who discusses them in terms of each other.

Perhaps this is because beauty is such an elusive thing that it defies analysis; it is not even definable. Alexander Nehamas explains that even if we analyze and thoroughly explicate all the features of a thing, its beauty is still not captured by such analysis. To call something beautiful is to sense that there is more to it than is met with in analysis, that it is more than the sum of its parts. Even if we “already know the features that account for the beauty of the object before us,” he says, this knowledge “doesn't acknowledge the fact that as long as we find something beautiful, we feel certain that it can still yield something of value” (Nehamas, 2003, 76). All our analytical knowledge is not enough to prove something is beautiful; the sad irony is that if we were successful in uncovering everything the object had to offer, it will have lost the quality that made it beautiful, the promise of more. Great and beautiful books are inexhaustible. We keep going back to them because they always have something new or deeper to convey.

Caldecott confirms this characterization of beauty, and on these grounds finds LOTR beautiful. He mentions the “many thousands of readers who return again and again to the book and film for refreshment of soul,” and says that the rereading “can be a medita-

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kaip „Žiedų valdovo“ kūrybiškumo ir įkvėpimo šaltinis*

tion,” a bit like praying (Caldecott, 2003, 9). Lewis, also, speaks of this quality of LOTR. “The book is too original and too opulent for any final judgment on a first reading. . . . And though we must ration ourselves in our re-readings, I have little doubt that the book will soon take its place among the indispensables” (Lewis, 1982, 90). Lewis also said elsewhere that readers of the great books, the classics, will read the same work ten, twenty or thirty times during the course of their life. LOTR invites that kind of rereading, and some of the commentators mention that they have known LOTR readers of that sort. Tolkien wrote in the Foreword of LOTR, “The prime motive was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them” (LOTR, xxiii). Tolkien was certainly successful in achieving this, although not all readers appreciate him.

One need not share Tolkien's linguistic views to appreciate the validity of C. S. Lewis' remarks about LOTR: “here are beauties which pierce like swords or burn like cold iron; here is a book that will break your heart, . . . good beyond hope” (Lewis, 1982, 84). But one will have to read it oneself to discover whether Lewis is right.

I conclude that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and the whole mythology of Middle-earth would not have been so successful had Tolkien not been a professional philologist. His linguistic knowledge and his acute phonaesthetic sensitivity were both necessary to the invention of the languages, the creation of the mythology of Middle-earth, and the writing of LOTR. The same kind of ancient unity between levels of meaning and consciousness that Barfield found in language Tolkien displayed in his own life. He consciously refused to make any distinction between philological science and mythology, philological reconstruction and linguistic creativity, and professional scholarship and personal aesthetic response. Tolkien has demonstrated in LOTR that the modern alienation of art and science need not prevail, that art can be scientific, and that the objects of scientific investigation can be beautiful and moving because the activities of both science and art are grounded in our humanity.

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