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How to Do Things with Words: Tolkien's Theory of Fantasy in Practice

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Introduction

In Middle-earth the magic of human words was wrought in material form. The idea of such a magical art arose in J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy in the wake of his 1939 lecture on fairy stories. In the lecture, human fantasy had been identified as the product of a particular kind of linguistic operation. Now Tolkien began to describe a fantastic form of art, analogous to mortal fantasy but freed from human limitations and so no longer bound to linguistic practice. The earlier account of what the human sub-creator does with thought and uttered sound now became a model for what magical beings in Arda may do with spirit and matter. Sauron's forging of the One Ring was conceived, as Fëanor's making of the Silmarils was re-conceived, as a fantasy image of the operations of human fantasy.

In terms of its own art, the present essay is an exercise in intellectual history. The empirical basis of the argument is set out in the first section, which compares Tolkien's accounts of the making of the world, the Silmarils, and the Ring before and then after the 1939 lecture. The aim here is to identify the nature of the changes that occurred, not to explain them. The second section shows how Tolkien, in a famous letter composed around 1951, associated each of these acts of making with a form of incarnational art. The third section argues that the very idea of an incarnational art was first formulated in Tolkien's 1939 lecture and in relation to human fantasy. Embracing Occam's razor, it is suggested in conclusion that the observed changes to the legendarium arose as this incarnationalist theory of fantasy was projected into Tolkien's fantasy.

An intellectual historian may appear a trespasser in the fields and forests of Tolkien Studies, which have long been cultivated by specialists in words. But when ideas are lost words become merely empty sounds or signs, as Tolkien knew well. And new occupancy might foster renewed conversation between older tenants. Today one may observe philologists mining the marches of Tolkien's *Beowulf*, students of literature tasting the cauldron of story on the borders of Faërie, and, deep within a seemingly impenetrable wood, linguists analyzing the changing tongues of immortal speakers. Yet in Tolkien's mind these various facets of language were surely all of a piece, or at the very least inextricably connected. The historian of ideas disrespects contemporary boundaries only when they obscure the thought of the past; in the case at hand, such thought may teach us all something about the magic of words.[1]

Before and After 'Fairy Stories'

In November 1937, Tolkien delivered a new (but unfinished) version of the 'Silmarillion' to Allen and Unwin (LR 119). These stories predate the writing on the sequel to *The Hobbit* that would become *The Lord of the Rings*, which Tolkien began the following month. They also predate the work on fairy stories, which began sometime after October 1938, when Tolkien was invited to deliver the annual Andrew Lang lecture. The lecture was delivered in March 1939, after which Tolkien resumed work on the early chapters of his new story about hobbits. In 1943 he worked up his St Andrews lecture material into publishable form, although the essay

itself only appeared in 1947, by which date, in addition to being far advanced in the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was again turning his attention to his creation story, the *Ainulindalë*. By the early 1950s he was engaged in a reworking of the main body of the 'Silmarillion.'

The lecture on fairy stories thus falls neatly within two bursts of creative work on the 'Silmarillion' separated by at least a decade.[2] Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson reckon that Tolkien worked on the lecture from December 1938 – that is, a year after beginning composition of the new hobbit story – through to March 1939, in which month the lecture was delivered (OFS 122). Thanks to Christopher Tolkien's painstaking editorial work on his father's papers it is possible to identify changes in both the 'Silmarillion' material and the draft chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* that were made after delivery of the lecture.[3] Three such changes are compared below. The aim of these comparisons is simply to establish correlations, not to discover the reasons behind them, which latter task will occupy us in subsequent sections.

(a) Before 'Fairy Stories'

The *Lost Road* version of the *Ainulindalë* is very similar in form to that composed around 1918-20 and now published in the first volume of *The Book of Lost Tales* – although, as Christopher Tolkien notes, the text is rephrased "at every point" (LR 170). What concerns us here is the reiteration of the idea that the world is made by the music of the Ainur but is given being by the secret fire that is with Ilúvatar and now burns "in the heart of the World" (LR 174). Crucially, after the music the Ainur see the actual world, and then those who wish enter into it.

An abbreviated version of this story is found in the *Quenta Silmarillion* of the late 1930s, which begins:

> §1 In the beginning the All-father, who in Elvish tongue is named Ilúvatar, made the Ainur of his thought; and they made music before him. Of this music the World was made; for Ilúvatar gave it being, and set it amid the Void, and he set the secret fire to burn at the heart of the World; and he showed the World to the Ainur. And many of the mightiest of them became enamoured of its beauty, and desired to enter into it; and they put on the raiment of the World, and descended into it, and they are in it. (LR 224)

Turning now to the crafting of the Silmarils, we find in the *Annals of Valinor* an account of how Fëanor devised these great jewels, which "shone of their own light, being filled with the radiance of the Two Trees, the holy light of Valinor, which was blended therein to a marvellous fire" (LR 125). This brief notice is expanded in section 46 of the *Quenta Silmarillion*, where we read of the three great jewels made by Fëanor:

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[2] In *The Lost Road*, Christopher Tolkien states that the whole 'Silmarillion' remained unchanged for some thirteen years (LR 220), but in *Morgoth's Ring* he revises this claim in light of his discovery that his father had reworked the *Ainulindalë* probably as early as 1946 and certainly by 1948 (MR 3). For a systematic and seemingly exhaustive account of changes made to the legendarium (which was kindly drawn to my attention by an anonymous reviewer who noticed that I had not consulted it), see the second volume of Wayne and Hammond 2006. A preliminary chapter of the same authors' *Reader's Companion* (2005) provides a concise history of the composition of *The Lord of the Rings*.

[3] In general, interest in the twists and turns in the development of the legendarium seems to have taken its cue from Noad (2000), and so focused, either upon the changing connection to England – in the form of both the place of the land itself and the proposed source of transmission of the mythology (e.g. Flieger 2004), or upon the mature Tolkien's cosmological struggles with the shape of his secondary world (e.g. Fimi 2009, pp. 123-130). Some separate attention has been paid to the relationship between the essay on fairy stories and the legendarium (e.g. MacLachlan 2013 and Saxton 2013a, 2013b) but, so far as I am aware, such studies have not attempted to correlate this essay with changes in the legendarium and have also passed over the linguistic account of fantasy given in the early part of Tolkien's essay.

> A living fire burned within them that was blended of the light of the Two Trees. Of their own radiance they shone even in the dark; yet all lights that fell upon them, however faint, they took and reflected in marvellous hues to which their own inner fire gave a surpassing loveliness. (LR 249)

By December of 1937 – that is, a month after delivery of 'The Silmarillion' to Allen and Unwin – Tolkien had begun work on the first chapters of his intended sequel to *The Hobbit*. In *The Return of the Shadow* we can follow the twists and turns through which emerged the leading ideas, character, and plot of what would become the first book of *The Lord of the Rings*. Of interest to us here is the gradual emergence, through successive drafts of the story of the journey from Hobbiton to Rivendell, of the nature of the Ring.[4] Starting from the idea inherited from *The Hobbit* that Bilbo's ring made its wearer invisible, we see how, by way of the seminal introduction of the Black Riders, the idea emerged that the ring also confers the ability to see the unseen world (RS 173-189). In the same period, Tolkien developed the idea that the ring bestowed a sort of stretched longevity, that moral will was required to resist it, and that this ring was not only made by the Necromancer, but was the one missing ring of all those he had made, and by means of which he could control all the others (RS 226). This was the conception of the Ruling Ring that Tolkien had arrived at by the early summer of 1938. One more idea remained to be added before the Ring that we know today had fully emerged.

(b) After 'Fairy Stories'

Tolkien delivered the Andrew Lang lecture in March 1939. In August 1939 he engaged in some rethinking of his new hobbit story (RS 370), and a new element was soon added to the conception of the Ring. On one side of a paper composed in the wake of these reflections we find Elrond explaining that if the Ring is destroyed the other rings will lose their power: "But we must sacrifice that power in order to destroy the Lord" (RS 396). Just why destruction of the Ring spells the doom of the Necromancer is explained on the other side of this page. Gandalf is said to tell the history of the Ring, and concludes with an explanation of why the Dark Lord so desires to regain it: "without the Ring he is still shorn of much power. He put into that Ring much of his own power, and without it is weaker than of old" (RS 397). On another of these pages, from the same period, Elrond states that the Ruling Ring "belongs to Sauron and is filled with his spirit" (RS 403).[5]

We now move forward to some point between 1946 and 1948, when Tolkien revised the *Ainulindalë* (MR 3). Where previously the Ainur after making their music are shown the world, now they are shown but a vision. Ilúvatar then speaks and sends the sacred fire into the void, and the world is actually created. In addition, the life of the world is now said to be bound up with the Valar who enter into it.

> But when they were come into the Void, Ilúvatar said to them: "Behold your Music!" And he showed to them *a vision*, giving to them sight where before was only hearing; and they saw a new World made visible before them… and it *seemed* to them that it lived and grew.... Therefore Ilúvatar called to them and said: "I know the desire of your minds that what ye have seen should verily be, *not only in your thought*, but even as ye yourselves are, and yet other. Therefore I say: Let these things Be! And I will send forth the flame imperishable into the Void, and it shall be at the heart of the World, and the World shall Be; and those of you that will may go down into it." And suddenly the

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[4] In these early drafts Trotter (who would become Strider) tells the hobbits on Weathertop of the Silmarils, which he describes as "filled with power and a holy light" (RS 183).

[5] In the *Fellowship of the Ring* this idea is not stated in 'The Council of Elrond' but rather in 'The Shadow of the Past,' where Gandalf explains to Frodo that when Sauron made the Ring "he let a great part of his own former power pass into it, so that he could rule all the others."

Ainur saw afar off a light, as it were a cloud with a living heart of flame; and they knew that *this was no vision only, but that Ilúvatar had made a new thing*…. But this condition Ilúvatar made, or it is the necessity of their love, that their [i.e. the Valar's] power should henceforth be contained and bounded in the World, and be within it for ever, so that *they are its life and it is theirs*. (MR 11-14; emphases added).

In the late 1950s Tolkien revised the account of the creation of the Silmarils. In *The Annals of Aman* we now read:

As three great jewels they were in form…. Yet that crystal [substance] was to the Silmarils but as is the body to the Children of Ilúvatar: the house of its inner fire, that is within it and yet in all parts of it, and is its life. And the inner fire of the Silmarils Fëanor made of the blended Light of the Trees of Valinor which lives in them yet…. and yet, as were they indeed living things, they rejoiced in light… (MR 94-5)

Also in the late 1950s, in 'Notes on motives in the Silmarillion,' we find Tolkien projecting back onto the nature of Morgoth in the First Age the idea that Sauron had put some of himself into his Ring:

Melkor 'incarnated' himself (as Morgoth) permanently. He did this so as to control the *hroa*, the 'flesh' or physical matter of Arda. He attempted to identify himself with it. A vaster, and more perilous, procedure, though of similar sort to the operations of Sauron with the Rings…. But this way Morgoth lost (or exchanged, or transmuted) the greater part of his original 'angelic' powers, of mind and spirit, while gaining a terrible grip upon the physical world… Sauron's, relatively smaller, power was *concentrated*; Morgoth's vast power was *disseminated*. The whole of 'Middle-earth' was Morgoth's Ring… (MR 399-400; emphases in original)

Letter to Milton Waldman

Some of these post-lecture revisions are articulated in Tolkien's famous letter to Milton Waldman of 1951. For example, we have a very clear statement (if anyone today actually needs one) that Sauron "had been obliged to let a great part of his own inherent power (a frequent and very significant motive in myth and fairy-story) pass into the One Ring," with the consequence that "if the One Ring was actually *unmade*, annihilated, then its power would be dissolved [and] Sauron's own being would be diminished to vanishing point, and he would be reduced to a shadow, a mere memory of malicious will" (Letters 153). The comment in parentheses would seem to indicate a connection between the new idea about the Ring and Tolkien's wide reading of fairy-stories in preparation for his lecture. In fact, other parts of the letter bring out clearly the relationship between some of the new conceptions surveyed above and the (by now published) essay 'On Fairy-stories.' Specifically, Tolkien introduces into his account of his legendarium in the letter two themes from 'On Fairy-stories': sub-creation and enchantment.

In the essay, the linguistic invention of fantasy is described as sub-creation. In the letter, this term is now used to describe the art of the Elves, who are hailed as the representatives of sub-creation par excellence (Letters 146, note). "By the making of gems the sub-creative function of the Elves is chiefly symbolized, but the Silmarilli were more than just beautiful things as such" (Letters 148). The making of the Silmarils has become an archetypal illustration of sub-creation. Humans might mistake such Elvish art for "magic," but Tolkien explains to Waldman that Elvish sub-creation is really art "delivered from many of its human limitations" (Letters 146). He is also at pains to highlight the distinction between such Elvish art and the

evil operations of Sauron and Morgoth, with the former aiming at "sub-creation" and the latter at "domination and tyrannous reforming of Creation" (Letters 146).

Enchantment appears in this letter, as it were, between the lines. 'On Fairy-stories' invokes the idea of enchantment to point to the unrealizable aspirations of human fantasy. While mortal stories can induce "Secondary Belief," Elvish songs and stories produce a "Secondary World" into which the audience may enter (OFS 63-4). The creation of such a secondary world does not alter the primary world, and in reality one who experiences such a world from within merely enters a state of enchantment. In Tolkien's letter to Waldman, the transition from external spectator of human fantasy to enchanted audience within a "Faërian Drama" is mirrored in the two-step process of creation in the revised *Ainulindalë*. Tolkien explains to Waldman that the Ainur:

> were originally 'outside' and existed 'before' the making of the world. Their power and wisdom is derived from their Knowledge of the cosmogonical drama, which they perceived first as a drama (that is as in a fashion we perceive a story composed by someone else), and later as a 'reality' (Letters 146).

Of course, on entering the world (and becoming the Valar) the Ainur do not fall under an enchantment – the *Ainulindalë* is concerned with the primary not the secondary world, with God's creation and not Elvish fantasy. What the revised *Ainulindalë* provides is not a replication of the ideas of sub-creation and enchantment but rather their ideal (Platonic) form.

Drawing on the letter, the essay, and the revisions to the legendarium surveyed above we can posit the following relationships between divine creation and the creative acts of incarnated beings. Ilúvatar creates the primary world by a miraculous two-step process. The first step involves the transformation of thought and sound (music) into a vision seen from outside. This first step has its analogy in human fantasy (or sub-creation), which, by embodying thought in spoken words, generates in the minds of its audience a vision of a secondary world. In the second step of creation, Ilúvatar transforms vision into a real and living thing by placing the sacred fire at the heart of the world and the Valar within it. This second step has two Elvish analogies. On the one hand, Elves engage in sub-creation by an incarnational art that places a spiritual essence within a material body, thereby making a new living thing. On the other hand, Elvish fantasy produces a secondary world into which an enchanted spectator enters.[6]

Tolkien presents evil as rather imitating than engaging in sub-creation. In purely operational terms, however, sub-creation and its imitation are almost identical. Indeed, Tolkien repeatedly pointed out that our inherited language does not adequately distinguish between good and evil forms of magic (for example: Letters 146, OFS 139-45, and Galadriel's discussion of Sam's idea of "magic" in FR 'The Mirror of Galadriel'). Within his own stories there is one key operational difference: in contrast to Ilúvatar and Fëanor, Sauron and Morgoth reduce themselves in their incarnational act, passing their own (presumably finite) spirit into, respectively, the Ring and the matter of Arda. They do so because the intention behind their incarnational magic is to impose themselves on creation, to bring it under their control and possess it. This points to the real distinction between good and evil magic, which is teleological. In Plato's *Timaeus* the divine demiurge is said to be good, "and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be" (Benjamin Jowett's translation). In more overtly Christian terms, creation is an act of love. Hence, for Tolkien, sub-creational art is an act of giving; it is a good magic. Evil magic operates by the same 'mechanisms,' but is motivated by a desire to control and possess what is other.

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[6] On the difference between Elvish sub-creation and Elvish fantasy see Cook 2016, p. 11.

At the heart of these miraculous and magical activities is an idea of incarnation, although the incarnational nature of the work in question varies according to the work in hand and the nature of the artist. Ilúvatar performs the ideal act of incarnational creation. Mortal sub-creation involves the embodiment of thought in sound (words), and as such reflects the music of the Ainur. Elvish sub-creation embodies spiritual light within crystal substance, reflecting Ilúvatar's sending the sacred flame into the heart of the world (which makes it a real thing) and the incarnation of the Valar within it (which makes the world live). Elvish enchantment is not an incarnational art, but it imitates the effects of divine incarnation (generating a secondary world). Desiring domination of others, Sauron and Morgoth incarnate their own spirit into, respectively, the Ring and the matter of Arda. Taken together, these incarnational acts are a hallmark of Tolkien's legendarium as we have come to know it; and yet this fundamental theme of incarnation is worked into the stories of Arda only in the wake of the St Andrews lecture. It is time to turn to Tolkien's essay on fairy stories.

Language

In an earlier essay, 'Fantasy Incarnate,' I offered an interpretation of the following passage from 'On Fairy-stories':

> The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalisation and abstraction, sees not only *green-grass*, discriminating it from other things (and finding it fair to look upon), but sees that it is *green* as well as being *grass*. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faërie is more potent… The mind that thought of *light*, *heavy*, *grey*, *yellow*, *still*, *swift*, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into a swift water… When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power… we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm… in such 'fantasy', as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. (OFS 41-2; emphases in original)

Highlighting the choice of the adjective 'incarnate' as a modifier of the noun 'mind' in the first sentence of the above quotation, I argued that behind the passage as a whole stood an incarnationalist conception of language, according to which the world, as it is given to us, is differentiated by us and through language into concrete substantives and abstract qualities (adjectives). Fantasy, or sub-creation, arises when qualities are abstracted from their given bodies and incarnated in different linguistic objects, thereby generating a new linguistic form that has no referent in the primary world.[7]

In keeping with the comparative method employed in the first section of this paper, I now attempt to identify the place of this passage in Tolkien's intellectual biography. The result of comparison with writings earlier and later highlights the lecture on 'Fairy Stories' as a turning point in Tolkien's thought, or so I suggest. Prior to the lecture we find no suggestion of an incarnational conception of language. In the passage quoted above we may discern, not

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[7] In 'Fantasy Incarnate' I suggested that human fantasy is rather similar to than identical with true incarnational art (Cook 2016, pp. 6 and 11) and concluded that we need to qualify Tolkien's claim in 'On Fairy-stories' that Man, engaging in fantasy, becomes a sub-creator (p. 13). This now seems a misconception on my part, born from an undue focus upon the mental component of fantasy. It is true that a new linguistic form is not a material thing (as is the world and as is a Silmaril), yet it is a word or a sentence or a story that is told and, as such, a sensible container of thought.

merely an incarnational notion of adjectival projection, but also an underlying conception of words in general as embodying meanings. By the 1950s, what was implicit has become explicit, with the sounds of speech presented as the raiment of thought. The lecture and subsequent essay on fairy stories thus mark the moment of emergence of a new incarnationalist conception of language.

The germ of Tolkien's theory of fantasy is found in the closing remarks of his 1931 lecture, 'A Secret Vice,' but here with no hint of an incarnational dimension to language. Concluding his discussion of his "hobby" of inventing languages, Tolkien observed that once a language is invented one no longer has "to grope after the dazzling brilliance of invention of the free adjective," but may immediately "say *green sun* or *dead life*" and so "set the imagination leaping":

> Language has both strengthened imagination and been freed by it. Who shall say whether the free adjective has created images bizarre and beautiful, or the adjective been freed by strange and beautiful pictures in the mind? (ASV 34)

The emphasis in this 1931 talk is on the liberation of the adjective, not its projection into a new substantive. More fundamentally, the forming of fantastic images in the mind is posited as something distinct from – if intimately related to – the remixing of adjectives. This distinction between language and mental imagery chimes with the statement earlier in the lecture:

> [A] 'word' is a group of sounds temporarily more or less fixed + an *associated* notion more or less defined and fixed in itself and in its relation to the sound-symbol. Made not created. There is in historic language, traditional or artificial, no pure creation in the void. (ASV 13; emphasis added)

'On Fairy-stories' subtly if significantly revises this picture of the relationship between words, thought, and imagination. The "free adjective" is now isolated from the art of language invention and connected rather with the art of the story-teller, and the adjectival play of the story-teller is now hailed as an act of (neither creation nor making but) sub-creation. Crucially, this adjectival remixing is now presented as the sole road to sub-creation. Gone is the earlier suggestion that mental imagery may free the adjective. Behind this shift to an exclusive focus upon language stands a revised presentation of the relationship between sound and meaning. In the 1931 talk there is said to be an *association* between the sound of a word out there in the world and a notion inside the head; it is this separation of sound and mental image that allows the concluding rhetorical question as to whether mind or language takes the lead in imaginative invention. Rather than evidence of a rejection of the mental component of speech, I suggest that the exclusive focus on language in 'On Fairy-stories' points to a new perspective on spoken language in which the sounds of words *embody* meanings.

In the drafts of the St Andrews lecture we can actually see Tolkien's new incarnationalist thinking being brought into the light. In their edition of 'On Fairy-stories,' Flieger and Anderson give two early versions of the long passage quoted above in which the idea of fantasy as sub-creation is first introduced.[8] Both versions appear to have been written for oral delivery, but the second bears the mark of revisions made with an eye on publication. While the basic ideas are the same in both, the adjective 'incarnate' is absent from the earlier version (in MS. A: "The mind, and the tongue, and the tale are coeval"). It would be foolish to hail the introduction of this adjective in MS. B as somehow heralding the point at which a new incarnational perspective emerged. The addition or deletion of a single word by an author is

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[8] See OFS 181 (MS. A) and 221-3 (MS. B). Flieger and Anderson (OFS 200) note that the version of the passage in MS. A contains what would seem to be Tolkien's first use of the term "sub-creator."

usually a mark of stylistic not conceptual revision. The introduction of the adjective is surely significant nonetheless, for it suggests that the idea of incarnation had now firmly entered Tolkien's mind in his thinking about language and fantasy.

By the 1950s, in which decade, as we have seen, he was developing incarnational themes at key points throughout his legendarium, Tolkien articulated an overtly incarnational account of language. In the *Dangweth Pengoloð* we read:

> …that which we [i.e. the Elves] call the *coirëa quenya*, the living speech, is the language wherethrough we think and imagine; for it is to our thought as the body to our spirit, growing and changing together in all the days of our being. (PM 399)

The *Dangweth Pengoloð* is presented as an example of the instruction of the English mariner Ælfwine given by the Elf of Gondolin, Pengoloð the Wise. Its starting-point is Ælfwine's puzzlement at the fact that Elvish languages change. Elves live as long as the world itself and seem to possess enduring memories. Ælfwine naturally supposes that no significant divergence could therefore exist between the language of the past and that of the present. Put another way, we are likely to assume that the kind of experience of most contemporary English-speakers when confronted with a page of *Beowulf* (or even a play of Shakespeare) would be quite alien to an Elf. Pengoloð's answer to Ælfwine tells us much about Tolkien's conception of human language. The languages of both Elves and humans change, Pengoloð explains, and they do so because of "the nature of speech, which is fully living only when it is born." For speech is an incarnation of thought about the world, and the world changes, and so also do the minds of both Men and Elves. In time the once living "union of the thought and the sound" becomes but a dry custom in which "the two are no longer perceived apart." Language is now no longer "living" and is ripe for change: "the sound awaiting some new thought, and the thought eager for some new-patterned raiment of sound" (PM 397). The explanation, while cast primarily in relation to Elvish language, is general: living languages change in the wake of changes in thought and changes in the world itself.

The *Dangweth Pengoloð* opens a window on Tolkien's thinking both about his own invention of languages and his professional work as a philologist. The chief difference between the development of Elvish and human languages, according to Pengoloð, is that the former change as a result of deliberate artistry. For "the Eldar the making of speech is the oldest of the arts and the most beloved" (PM 398). Thus linguistic invention is identified as another incarnational art – an art, however, in which Tolkien was no less adept than his Elves. But also significant are the implications of Pengoloð's account of the development of language for the work of the philologist who studies the languages of the distant past. Confronted with the words of a now dead language, the philologist must reconstruct the conditions of the world in which it once lived and the thoughts that once animated the sounds made by the letters before him.[9] Of course, the two practices come together in the invention of what are imagined to be ancient languages, which, if they are to have the feel of once living languages, must be conceived in conjunction with the thoughts of those who spoke them and the world in which they were spoken. Put another way, someone who seeks to invent the living languages of Elves imagined as walking our earth in ancient days will need to reconstruct both the mythological traditions of the Elves and the history of the world in those elder days.

Taking the lessons of Pengoloð of Gondolin in hand we arrive (to borrow a term from Tom Shippey) at the understated "philological core" of 'On Fairy-stories.' Language is at the root of Tolkien's conception of sub-creation as an incarnational art. Language itself is incarnational, clothing thought in uttered sound. It is the nature of this incarnational practice that it differentiates between things and their qualities, and so makes possible fantasy, which

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[9] On Tolkien as a philologist see, of course, the first couple of chapters of Shippey 1982.

arises when nouns and adjectives are joined in novel ways. So hot fire is placed in the belly of the cold worm, and the "dragon" is born – a living word expressing a new thought but without a referent in the primary world. Now, such linguistic sub-creation is a deliberate invention, which is to say an art. So while the growth of human language is in general a natural phenomenon that occurs independently of the conscious wills of language-speakers, in the act of fantasy human story-tellers partake in the art of the Elves, for whom speech is in general developed by way of deliberate invention. Tolkien's idea of fantasy, from this perspective, is a mature reconceptualization of one facet of his practice of inventing entire languages.[10]

Conclusion

This essay has worked to achieve three aims. Firstly, to establish that new incarnational ideas emerge within Tolkien's legendarium in the wake of the 1939 lecture on 'Fairy Stories.' Secondly, to identify an incarnational idea at the heart of the 1939 lecture (and subsequent essay) that might be a source of these new elements of the legendarium. Thirdly, to explain the relationship between these two sets of incarnational ideas. The first goal was met by showing how, in the wake of the 1939 lecture, new conceptions arose about Sauron's Ring, the nature of the Silmarils, and the process by which Ilúvatar created the world. The second goal was met by identifying an idea of deliberate linguistic incarnation at the heart of Tolkien's conception of (human) sub-creation. It remains, therefore, to explain the relationship between linguistic sub-creation, on the one hand, and the new incarnational elements within the legendarium on the other.[11]

We have already set out most of the groundwork required for such an explanation in our discussion of Tolkien's 1951 letter to Milton Waldman. To recap the classification of incarnational art given at the end of that section: Ilúvatar's two-step creation of the world provides (something like) ideal forms of human sub-creation (thought and sound generate a vision of a world), elvish sub-creation (the embodying of spiritual fire within material form), and elvish enchantment (the generation of a world into which the spectator may enter). Finally, the incarnational operations of Sauron and Morgoth are imitations of such creative activities that, in light of their aim of dominating others, necessitate the passing of a part of their own spirit into material body. All that is required now is the reorganization of this ultimately theological framework so as to frame a narrative that commences with Tolkien's 1939 theory of linguistic sub-creation.

The simplest narrative would seem to be that, in the wake of his St Andrews lecture, Tolkien took his recently articulated account of linguistic invention as a model for the magical workings of matter and spirit within Arda. That is to say, he wrote his theory into his practice by projecting his conception of linguistic incarnation in words into an idea of magical incarnation in things. More generally, Tolkien posited a hierarchy of creative activities, ranging

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[10] The *Dangweth Pengoloð* thus points to a new perspective on the idea articulated over two decades earlier in 'A Secret Vice': "for perfect construction of an art-language it is found necessary to construct at least in outline a mythological concomitant…. because the making of language and mythology are related functions (coeval and congenital…)" (ASV 23-4). Once the conception of sounds as embodying thought has arisen, and once human sub-creation has been theorized as a linguistic act, the making of mythology becomes not only *related to* but, also, a *subset of* the making of language.

[11] In this essay I have not attempted the further step of relating the incarnational ideas set out in the St Andrews lecture to the earlier 'Silmarillion' writings. This might well be attempted; after all, it is not such a very great step from the idea that Fëanor *put* the light of the Two Trees into a material container to the idea that he incarnated this spiritual light. In other words, while this essay has taken as its subject the relationship between Tolkien's theory of fantasy and his subsequent practice, it would probably be possible to connect the emergence of this theory with Tolkien's earlier practice of fantasy.

from human linguistic practice through Elvish sub-creation to divine creation. Elvish enchantment now came to indicate not only the unrealizable aspirations of human fantasy but also the inherent limitations of all earthly incarnational practice: only Ilúvatar creates primary reality. But within Arda, incarnate beings now do with things what humans in the primary world do only with sounds: Fëanor does with spiritual light and crystalline substance, and Sauron with his own spirit and molten gold, what the human story-teller may do with thought and words. Middle-earth became a world in which the magical potential of human words is revealed in the visible being of magical things.

"All this stuff," wrote Tolkien in his letter to Waldman and referring to his legendarium as a whole, is "fundamentally concerned with the problem of the relation of Art (and Sub-creation) and Primary Reality" (Letters 145, and note). The argument developed in this essay suggests that the ground of Tolkien's solution was linguistic. Already in 1931 Tolkien had formulated the idea that the invention of entire languages was an art, and that this art fostered imaginative play with adjectives. In 'On Fairy-stories' this imaginative play was associated with story-telling and subtly connected to the idea of incarnation. It was subsequently projected into a magical art of things at various key points within the legendarium. Inevitably, this projection engendered a teleological conception of "Art." We say things for a purpose, and our intentions arise from our desires no less than our thoughts. This is why, in Middle-earth, beauty is associated with truth-speaking and good will, while its opposite is not so much ugliness as deceit and the embodiment of a will to dominate.

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