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A Secret Vice (2016) by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins

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A Secret Vice: Tolkien on Invented Languages, by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins. London: HarperCollins, 2016. lxvi, 157 pp. £16.99 (hardcover) ISBN 9780008131395. [no US edition.]

During the past decade or so there has been something of a fashion for issuing standalone editions of J.R.R. Tolkien's shorter works, usually accompanied by Tolkien's notes, drafts, and/or associated writings, as well as a critical introduction and commentary. Many of these—from *Smith of Wootton Major* in 2005 to last year's *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun*—have dealt with Tolkien's fiction, but his academic works have not been wholly neglected. In 2008, Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson produced an excellent edition of "On Fairy-stories," an essay which they characterized as "the theoretical basis for his fiction," and "the manifesto in which he declared his particular concept of what fantasy is and how it ought to work" (p. 9). Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins's new edition of *A Secret Vice* gives a similar critical treatment to an essay they claim (p. ix) is equally foundational as a reflexive comment by Tolkien on a different, but no less significant sphere of creative activity: his practice of inventing languages for aesthetic or artistic purpose.

After the usual front matter and a short foreword, *A Secret Vice* contains five major constituents: a lengthy introduction (itself divided into five sections), the text of "A Secret Vice" proper, a previously unpublished "Essay on Phonetic Symbolism," an edition of various associated manuscript materials, and a "Coda" on "The Reception and Legacy of Tolkien's Invented Languages." This is followed by three appendices: one gives a chronology of Tolkien's writings and their external contexts (running, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, from 1925 to 1933), the second is a table of abbreviations, while the bibliography is, somewhat unusually, presented as a third appendix. There is no index.

The introduction contains a wealth of important background commentary and critical reflections on a wide variety of topics related to the main essay. It opens with a section on *Myth-making and Language Invention* in which the editors defend the importance of Tolkien's linguistic creations. They quote Tolkien's own view that "the mind, and the tongue, and the tale are coeval" (cf. p. xiii), but it is clear that for many of his readers, the "hobby" of language invention still needs to be justified in terms of its contributions to his narrative works. This section accordingly culminates with a discussion of how Tolkien's stories were often shaped by, and sometimes even emerged from his linguistic creations.

The remaining sections of the introduction deal with various contexts directly related to the main essay itself. The next and shortest, *Theorizing Language Invention*, presents a summary of the arguments and lines of thought in "A Secret Vice." This is followed by a lengthy description of *The Languages of Middle-earth*, which provides an overview of Tolkien's creative involvement with the

Elvish languages over many decades, and exemplifies a number of points made in the main essay. The editors do an excellent job of making clear the dynamic nature of these languages, which Tolkien constantly “niggled” away at, and of contextualizing their invention (which included a great deal of historical depth) within the scholarly context of Tolkien’s professional field, comparative philology. At nearly fourteen pages, this section may perhaps go beyond what is strictly necessary for the illumination of “A Secret Vice” itself, but this mini essay serves so well as a short primer to the scholarly study of Tolkien’s invented languages that this is easily excused. One suggestion by the editors, however, is somewhat less convincing: they suggest that the “positive reception of his Elvish languages . . . and the self-reflection that writing this paper afforded may have also encouraged Tolkien to continue practising and perfecting his ‘secret vice’” (p. xxviii), an idea which is supported by referring to a number of key works on Elvish linguistics Tolkien produced in the 1930’s. While it would be interesting if this were the case, “A Secret Vice” requires no such extra justification as to its significance, and since most of the linguistic writings mentioned seem to date to the period of about 1936-8—some five years or more after the delivery of “A Secret Vice”—any really close connection with that essay seems less likely.

The next section, *‘A Secret Vice’ and its Immediate Context*, begins by identifying the time and place of the essay’s one known delivery: the 29th of November, 1931, for the Johnson Society at Pembroke College. The editors have found no further evidence to either confirm or rule out a possible second delivery at a much later date (a possibility discussed by Christopher Tolkien in his preface to the first publication of “A Secret Vice”). They go on to clearly and concisely review Tolkien’s creative and academic life during the period which “A Secret Vice” was written and (first?) delivered, discussing the his academic and social affiliations during this period, as well as the various scholarly and literary works he produced. Their closing suggestion that “‘A Secret Vice’ is . . . probably the first occasion at which Tolkien spoke publicly . . . about his entirely private mythology and secondary world” (p. xl) is probably not quite correct, since Tolkien had read a form of “The Fall of Gondolin” to the Exeter College Essay Club in 1920 (see Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Chronology*, 2006, p. 110f.), but the editors nonetheless convincingly outline the significance of this essay within the context of Tolkien’s life.

The final and longest section of the introduction discusses *‘A Secret Vice’ and the Larger Context*. This considers three intellectual trends or movements which informed the background of “A Secret Vice”: the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century fashions for inventing languages, the linguistic study of sound symbolism, and development of Modernism as a literary movement. The importance of the first topic is apparent enough, given the overall theme of “A

Secret Vice” (not to mention its explicit reference to Esperanto in its first lines), and the editors ably summarize and contextualize the relevant history. The second topic—the investigation of sound symbolism—has a more direct bearing on the “Essay on Phonetic Symbolism,” and the editors are again successful in sifting through a great deal of often technical material, and presenting it in a concise and easily digested manner. Since at least the publication of Tom Shippey’s *Author of the Century*, Tolkien’s place as a twentieth-century writer and his often-idiosyncratic engagements with the intellectual and literary concerns of his day increasingly become topics of discussion, an approach which is extended and deepened in surprising ways in the final pages of the editors’ lengthy introduction to *A Secret Vice*. Long-time readers of Tolkien may be somewhat startled to find the discussion turning to Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, but that these figures do have some real connection with Tolkien and this essay is made clear by the minutes of the Johnson Society meeting at which Tolkien delivered “A Secret Vice,” and the manuscript notes included later in this book refer repeatedly, if sometimes obscurely, to these two Modernists. In the final portion of the introduction, the editors insightfully show how Stein, Joyce, and Tolkien shared a number of key concerns about the aesthetics of language, though their responses to these concerns were very different.

Following this substantial introduction we find the text of “A Secret Vice” itself. New readers may perhaps wish to begin here so as to better appreciate the contexts discussed in the introduction, a decision encouraged by switching at this point from Roman to Arabic numerals and labelling the essay as ‘Part I’. The text will of course be in large part familiar to those who have read the previous version of “A Secret Vice” in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (1983), but the text here does differ in a few respects. Most obviously, two versions of the opening of the essay are printed side-by-side in narrow columns within a table. I found this presentation to be somewhat unintuitive, especially since the whole table is set off from the rest of the essay by a black border, and one has to wait until the eighth endnote for an explanation of the arrangement. Perhaps the righthand version—and alternative written in pencil, could have simply given as a footnote or an endnote, as Christopher Tolkien has done numerous times for variants in *The History of Middle-earth*. This confusion is, however, short-lived, and the remainder of the essay presents a more-or-less diplomatic edition of “A Secret Vice,” including portions which were struck through and re-written. Some may, perhaps, be put off by the unpolished look this gives the essay, but more of Tolkien’s readers may appreciate the clearer glimpses of Tolkien’s writing process this approach allows. Tolkien’s underlined words, however, were surely intended to represent italics in a printed context, and I am not sure why these were left unchanged. A set of endnotes follows the main text, providing more specific contextual information, identifications of references and

allusions, and cross references with other writings by Tolkien.

By far the most significant difference from previously published versions of the essay comes on pages 20-22, which present several paragraphs on the “Fonwegian” language. Christopher Tolkien had omitted this section from *The Monsters and the Critics* because it was written separately in pencil on inserted loose sheets, and it was not clear that they were intended to form a part of the essay as delivered. Since the Johnson Society minutes make direct reference to a language from “the island of Fonway” (p. xxxiii), it seems Tolkien did read out this material as well, and the editors present it in the main body of the text. Somewhat controversially, the editors characterize “Fonwegian” as a language of Tolkien’s own invention (p. 50f.), which may appear to be at odds with Tolkien’s comment in the essay that he found the relevant materials in “some secret documents,” and that discussion of the language “will save this paper from being too autobiographical” (p. 20). There are some potential arguments in favour of the editors’ judgement, but it might have been preferable to acknowledge the question directly and provide some of the reasoning for supposing Tolkien’s “authorship” of Fonwegian in the notes.

In “Part II,” this edition presents for the first time another essay by Tolkien. This is much rougher, and has no title; the editors have chosen to call it “Essay on Phonetic Symbolism,” practically an incipit (its first two words are “phonetic symbolism”). The editorial practice is much the same as previously. The essay itself is somewhat difficult to follow in its flow of thought, but generally concerns the relationship of the sound of a word and its meaning. Tolkien considers several different ways in which sound and sense may interact—he is, unsurprisingly, especially concerned with the historical aspects of the topic, during the course of language change—before approaching what may be his main theme: the relationship of a given individual’s “phonetic predilection” (p. 70) to the established “system” of the language(s) which they speak (including eventual changes to the “system”—i.e. language change—due to accumulated pressures by individuals). This is an important theme for Tolkien, and one which he returned to repeatedly in both his creative and academic works.¹ Rough and oblique as this essay is at points, it is very illuminating about this idiosyncratic but significant strand of Tolkien’s thought, it represents a very major new source in considering Tolkien’s thoughts on the aesthetic aspects of language and language change.

“Part III” of *A Secret Vice* reproduces twenty-three pages worth of manuscript notes associated either with “A Secret Vice” or the “Essay on Phonetic

1 To give just two examples, compare the discussion of Elvish *lámalyávë* “individual pleasure in the sounds and forms of words” in “Laws and Customs among the Eldar” (*Morgoth’s Ring*, p. 215), and the idea of a personal “native language” discussed in “English and Welsh” (*The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, p. 190).

Symbolism.” Some of these are extremely fragmentary: the first note given, for instance, merely reads “But only as a way” before breaking off. Much of the material in these pages is transparent drafting for one of the two main essays of the book, either sketching out the flow of ideas or working out the phrasing or expression of a particular passage. The first three pages of notes, for example, range across many of the ideas in the “Essay on Phonetic Symbolism,” and it is obvious that the paragraph in that essay beginning “No grammar of, say, Gothic . . .” (p. 71) has developed from the draft paragraph printed at the bottom of page 84. In many cases this draft material does not add much to what is more clearly discernible in the full essays, but there are a number of interesting nuggets scattered throughout. There is, for instance, a note which mentions “Anna Livia Plurabelle” and “Stream of consciousness” (p. 91), a reference to Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, and another which says “Gertrude Stein” (p. 100). Other notes indicate that Tolkien considered using both his own poem “Errantry” (referred to as “Merry Messenger,” p. 92) and the Eddic *Brot af Sigurðarkviða* (pp. 98, 105) to illustrate the role of phonaesthetics in poetry. On the whole, these fragmentary (and sometimes repetitive) materials will probably be most read (outside of reviewers) by researchers closely investigating some particular topic or other, rather than constituting a section that many will want to read straight through.

Following the three sections that form the core of the book is a *Coda* on how invented languages, both Tolkien’s and those of others, have fared in the decades since the delivery of “A Secret Vice.” The first portion deals with *The Reception of Tolkien’s Invented Languages*, tracing the history of the publications of Tolkien’s linguistic material, and the various attempts to interpret, study, and use his Elvish languages in print and online. In twelve pages this history is fairly comprehensively surveyed, the main primary sources discussed, and the various trends in the study of Elvish reviewed. Particular emphasis is given to the contrast between approaches focusing on academic description of Tolkien’s languages (exemplified by books like Jim Allan’s *An Introduction to Elvish*) and those aimed towards applied use (such as David Salo’s Elvish contributions to the Jackson film trilogies), both of which are described fairly even-handedly and respectfully.

The second part is subtitled *Imaginary Languages for Fiction: Tolkien’s Legacy*, and reviews a number of invented languages appearing in artistic works (especially film and television) since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. This section is interesting, though being only slightly over four pages, its coverage is necessarily brief and selective. The connection with Tolkien is also somewhat looser, though the content is certainly of general relevance to the book as a whole, and this section would be better enlarged than omitted. The editors do outline how most later art languages can be understood to contain the major “elements” Tolkien had described as desirable in an invented language (p. 132f.),

but they could have done more to draw historical as well as typological links with Tolkien's work, and to support their claim that these languages really form a part of his "legacy."

Taken as a whole, this edition of *A Secret Vice* should be regarded as a very significant publication, both for those interested in Tolkien and students of invented languages. It is a largely well-edited and learned presentation of important material by Tolkien. While the core essay has been available for several decades, the wider contexts provided by the introduction, notes, and manuscript materials make its significance even clearer, and the new essays and comments by Tolkien found in parts II and III help us better understand Tolkien in his original context. Furthermore, the simple act of focusing renewed attention by readers of Tolkien on "A Secret Vice" is possibly as important as anything else this book might accomplish. Language invention was a core creative activity for Tolkien, and directly related to his creation of literature. This essay, coy as it can be in places, represents a subtle and thoughtful perspective on language invention by one of the art's most accomplished practitioners, and makes a compelling case that "art" is indeed the right term. With any luck, this book will help more people better appreciate where Tolkien was coming from in his work the Elvish (and other) languages, and to recognize the potential interest and aesthetic value of creating new languages in any context.

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