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Fore and Aft: Abstraction in Tolkien's "Ishness" Designs

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Fore and Aft: Abstraction, Vanishing Point and Symmetry in Tolkien's "Ishness" Designs

1. Preliminaries

In evaluating Tolkien's visual designs, it is easy for the viewer to fall into the same pattern as literary critics have in assessing his fiction. In discussions of Tolkien's Middle-earth this or that seems "Northern" (Tom Shippey's essay on "northern spirit" in McIlwaine is a handy index of what *northern* means for Tolkien) or "Celtic" (most notably in the Allen & Unwin reader's report on *Silmarillion*, in *Beleriand* 432) or "Medieval," never "Classical" or "Modern." Yet, what is essentially "modern" in modern art? The hallmark of modernism in the visual arts in the early twentieth century was the "abstract," which for the purposes of this essay will be taken to mean simply "not figural," that is, "not pointing to a concrete reality in nature." If we use a definition of "abstract" that broad, there are many aspects of Tolkien's art that can come under the domain of the "A" word, since the "predicate" of Tolkien's most famous artifacts, both visual and literary, is not our primary world, but Middle-earth. However, early in Tolkien's development as an artist—and in the formation of his adult imagination—the artist sketched a series of images that were undeniably abstract by any definition, works to which he gave the curious term *Ishnesses*.

Discussion of abstract forms in western art histories do not usually focus on the medieval period. The orthodox line is that the presuppositions of western art from which the modernist abstract artists broke free are essentially representational or mimetic—that is, the artifact refers back to the primary world. While those presuppositions held for classical and renaissance art, they did not hold for the thousand years of European art in between. So, while "abstract" in Giotto may not mean the same thing as "abstract" in Kandinsky, to the medieval artist the fundamental referent of the artifact is not the primary world but the transcendent world beyond the senses. Yet Tolkien was a man of the 20th century, and at the time he was developing as an artist had a demonstrable interest in current trends in the visual arts, as recent research has suggested (Organ, Testi). We should not be surprised, then, to find an impulse toward the abstract in Tolkien's art. Yet when striking abstracts appear in his *Ishnesses* collection about the time of his matriculation to Oxford (1911-1912), those abstract works *do* surprise the experienced viewer of Tolkien's art, standing distinct from the architectural

verisimilitude of the Whitby sketches that preceded them (Summer 1910) and the naturalistic landscapes that followed them (Summer 1913).

Before we examine the abstract qualities of the *Ishnesses* drawings—in particular two paired sets of pictures, *Before, Afterwards, Undertenishness,* and *Grownupishness*—it would be useful to acknowledge that "abstract" in any theoretical discussion of art always designates a point on a spectrum. In Platonic aesthetics, all painting is abstract, in that the artifact is "abstracted," pulled away, from the object it imitates in the primary world. Further, that object itself is abstracted from its *eidos*, its ideal form in the transcendent realm. Medieval artists, who probably did not know Plato, practiced a similar twofold abstraction. In Giotto's *Nativity* from the Lower Church in Assisi (c. 1310s) the figures of Mary, Joseph, and the Christ child reflect families in the everyday world. Yet the angels that hover over the stable (and the further dozen inside the stable) are not found in the sensible world, yet are nonetheless "real" to Giotto and his audience.

Fig. 1 Giotto, *Nativity*, Lower Church, Assisi (1310s). WikiArt.com, Public Doman Image.

In a similar vein, as mentioned, the subject of Tolkien's best-known visual works lie in the Middle-earth he spent his life writing about and painting. No matter how "realistic" or figural Tolkien's paintings of Middle-earth may be in a formal sense, they are still abstractions from his imagination—or as Blake would say, his vision. The mechanism of abstraction is for Tolkien fundamentally linguistic in origin, as he argues in *On Fairy Stories*. It is "The Invention of the Adjective" that allows us to abstract the quality of "greenness" from green things and apply it to other things not green in nature by making "green" an adjective. Tolkien makes virtually the same point, though non-grammarians can easily miss it, in his famous *Beowulf* lecture of 1936, distinguishing *draco* (concrete noun, "dragon") from *draconitas* (abstract noun, "dragonishness," if you will; *Monsters* 17).

The grammatical nature of Tolkien's theory would seem to demote the visual arts. Indeed, Tolkien says so explicitly after his discussion of the "Green Sun" of Fantasy: "In human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature. In painting, for instance, the visible presentation of the fantastic image is technically too easy; the hand tends to outrun the mind, even to overthrow it" (60). This comment also applies the CGI images of Middle-earth in film and video games, if we multiply by ten. Tolkien the philologist and fantasist in 1939 knew what he was talking about: Tolkien the undergraduate dabbler in visionary art in 1911-12 had attempted a "visible presentation of the fantastic image" in his *Ishnesses* drawings.

Having touched on the Invention of the Adjective and the grammatical process of abstraction, it is hoped we are equipped to tackle that peculiar word "Ishness." It is a word Tolkien coined to indicate the category into which Tolkien placed the drawings we are about to discusss. He used the word as a title of a sketchbook around 1913, but, perhaps recognizing a similar pattern in earlier works, placed the antecedent pictures in an envelope that he labeled "Early Ishnesses." There is something natural and childlike and even endearing in the word "ishness"—the OED's entry on the suffix *–ish*, (sense 2) recognizes that journalistic use had colored the particle with a "slighting or depreciatory nature." But the philologist in Tolkien would have enjoyed the whimsy of making a substantive, a stand-alone word, out of two suffixes, the adjective suffix *–ish* and the noun suffix *–ness*.

A historical examination of the suffix *–ish* brings us very close to the territory of Tolkien's *pre*-historic theorizing about the origin of the adjective. In hypothesizing "The Invention of the Adjective," Tolkien is imagining a moment in the development of the human mind, and his example of "green" reveals how ineffable the moment is. Tolkien postulates a primordial time when language was

extensional, deictic, "pointing" to real things in the sensible world. (At this nexus we should see the relevance to the discussion of abstraction in art.) At that hypothetical primordial moment "green" was merely a quality of specific things that are green: grass, limes, Ava Gardner's eyes. In the Noun-era "green" could not be spoken—it could not be a word yet if "words" named things in the sensible world to which we can point—in other words, nouns. (The word "noun," in fact, stems from the Greek *nomen*, "name." That etymological fact would be a great deal more telling were it not for the fact that our word "verb" comes from the Latin word for "word." *C'est la philologie.*) So the word "green," which we recognize as an adjective, could not have existed as such until we draw it out of things that are green—and in so doing we invent the adjective—"green." Whoever wrote the OED entry on *–ish* seems to anticipate Tolkien's argument in the treatment of sense 3: "added to adjs. with the sense 'of the nature of, approaching the quality of, somewhat', apparently first with words of colour (which may have been treated as sbs., and so have originally come under 2)."

Reviving the currently-disused grammatical term here abbreviated "sbs."—*substantives* —could make the fantasy of a pre-adjectival "noun-world" easier to imagine. Nouns and words that function like nouns were called "substantives" because they pointed to something concrete, substantial—a thing with substance. The speculation that color words "may have been treated as sbs." posits the same primordial moment imagined by Tolkien—the pre-adjective moment. "Ish," then, is the adjective-making power. It does not, in English or in any of its Indo-European cognates (including the Greek *–iskos*) become a free morpheme, a form that stands on its own. Yet the whimsy of Tolkien's use of "Ishness" depends on treating it as if it were a free morpheme by binding it to another suffix, *-ness*. There is no evidence that either *–ish* or *–ness* were ever independent words.

The dependent nature of suffixes might seem so self-evident that it need not be mentioned. Nevertheless, Tolkien's work in the earliest forms of his native tongue would have made him aware of other suffixes that were *not* always suffixes, that *were* once free morphemes. Were it not for the early predilection of *–ish* for color words, as the OED lexicographer noted, we could just as easily be using another common adjective suffix, *-ly* for color words. Yet *–ly* was originally *–lic*, which was in fact a separate word: "like." In place of the noun suffix *–ness* we could use the noun suffix *–hood*, which is readily found in Old English texts as a stand-alone abstract noun, meaning "state or condition." As childlike and silly as the word sounds, then, "Ishness" stands beside words and word-forms like *woses, dwarrow, arkenstone* in Tolkien's fiction that *could have* survived, even if they didn't, a category Tom Shippey names "asterisk words" (20, 22).

But what does "ish" mean? Well, "ish" in its origin is an expression of the nature of adjectival abstraction, as quoted above from the third OED sense "of the nature of." By adding the noun suffix *–ness* Tolkien brought these abstractions back to the substantive realm. We pull a quality away from a thing, then we make a *thing* of that quality. We discover what the scholastic philosophers called the *quidditas*, the "whatness" of a thing, as Tolkien did in the *Beowulf* essay with the word *draconitas*. By making it a thing, it can be rendered as a visual image, which leads us to the pictures we will now examine.

2. *Before* **and** *Afterwards*
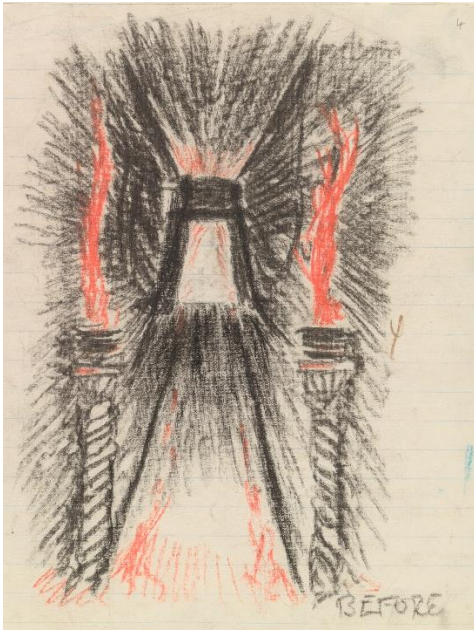

<div style="text-align:center">

Fig. 2. *Before* [c. 1912]
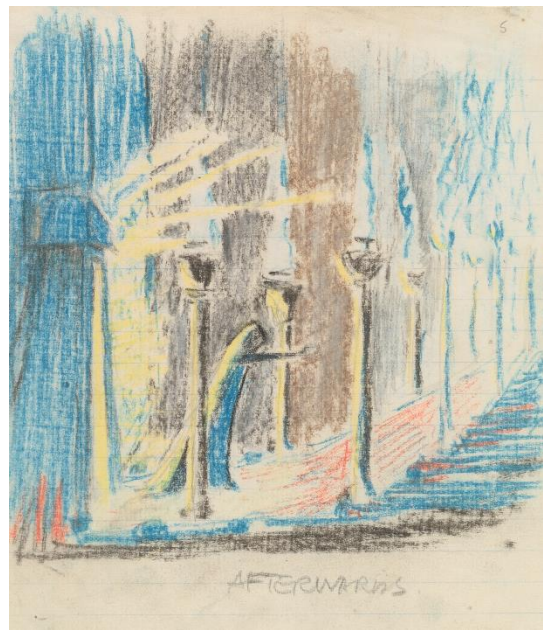Bodleian MS. Tolkien Drawings 88 fol. 4
© The Tolkien Trust 1995

Fig. 3. *Afterwards* [c. 1912]
Bodleian MS. Tolkien Drawings 88 fol. 5r
© The Tolkien Trust 1995

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The first two images we will consider beg treatment as a complementary pair, colored pencil sketches on lined paper named *Before* (Hammond and Scull fig. 30, McIlwaine fig. 21) and *Afterwards* (Hammond and Scull fig. 31). A skeptic or purist could argue that these sketches are scarcely abstract in a presentational sense at all, but rather cartoonish in both the current sense of *cartoon* ("like a comic strip") and the renaissance sense ("like a preliminary study for a more finished

painting"). Both sketches offer figural images of hallways and upright torches, but in a stylized manner that seems more intent on capturing the essence of a vision than giving the illusion of a real place. The black pencil lines that establish the floor, ceiling, and walls in *Before* make only the most rudimentary allusion to the placement of light and shade, but rather act like vector lines indicating direction—as the words "before" and "afterwards" also connote. In like manner the red lines of *Before* establish merely the shape of the flame, without attempting to create the effect of light. A few red reflections on the floor in the foreground, and near the trapezoidal doorway to the rear are the only concessions to lighting effects in the sketch.

The doorway, which Wayne G. Hammond and Cristina Scull identify as "megalithic" (35), is a major contribution to the tonal effect of brooding age, and indicates that Tolkien was as conscious of the visual cues of antiquity in pictorial design as he would be of the linguistic cues in his creation of Middle-earth prehistory in his fiction. The massive blocks of stone (hence the term "megalith") that created a sense of grandeur in Agamemnon's Mycenae—as well as independently in Machu Picchu (Peru) and the Egyptian Pyramids—depends on the trapezoidal shape, with inward sloping sides (narrowing at the top), to hold the crushing weight of the stones. The converging orthogonal lines of a long hallway (as in the overall design of the sketch) suggest the "vanishing point" of perspective drawing that is the key design element of *Before*. The simplest form of the angled sight lines is of course a triangle, and with lighter materials a purely triangular door is possible, as found in the north wall at Mycenae and the gate at Elaios in Aetolia (Marquand 77). But with the "Cyclopean" architecture at Mycenae (Greeks of the classical period had lost the capability of building with such big stones, so they imagined that the giant Cyclopes must have built Mycenae), a lintel was imposed, resulting in the characteristic trapezoid shape of ancient temples. Vitruvius, in *De Architectura*, describes the proportions, depending on the height of the doorway (IV.6), apparently an attempt to make doorways shorter than 25 feet appear higher—an important effect in sacred spaces.

A few quick, deft lines in his drawing confirm that Tolkien understood the principle: the ceiling of the hallway manifestly extends above the lintel, and the strong horizontal stroke that marks the lintel lies nearly a third of the distance from ceiling to floor. As a result, the fact that the vanishing point of the floor and ceiling lines of the hallway extends beyond the doorway—which, since we are facing it, is "before"[1] us—the hallway itself is a trapezoid that echoes the shape of the doorway.

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[1] The temporal and spatial equivocation of the English word "before" may be culturally determined. I recall a poetry reading in Pittsburgh, several decades ago, by Li-young Lee, in which

The orthogonal lines pull us toward an unknown, lost in the trapezoidal white space of the opening, which, as Hammond and Scull observe, is the focal point of the sketch ("perspective leads the eye," 35).

What, if anything, the door signifies, is less important in an abstract than in figural styles of art. Dwelling too much on significance of a shape could lead the critic to that other "A" word, the one that really was a problematic word to Tolkien: "allegory." Yet what is patent in the image of the door is the emotional and associational weight that it carries: anticipation (whether eager or apprehensive) of whatever is on the other side—which, because we are "before," we don't know. To some extent the linguistic process of abstraction in the invention of the adjective has already implied a visual analogue in the words "before" and "after," to which Tolkien's philological imagination—even though he made these sketches before his momentous shift at Oxford toward Germanic philology—stood alert. Both *before* and *afterwards* bear affixes; *afterwards* actually has two. In Old English, as in modern, *æfter* and *fore* can orient us either in time or in space. In time, our *forebears* lie behind us, and our children come *after* us; on a ship (if we are at the helm), *fore* is ahead of us, *aft* behind. The anxiety over the future has a ready-made iconographic analogue to these spatial orientations, and whether it is a hall or a road stretching to the horizon, the third dimension in pictorial art consists in a matrix of lines converging at acute angles, like Tolkien's *Before*. The temporal, which is a mental construct, becomes spatial. The abstract adjective becomes the concrete noun; the *–ish* becomes the *–ness*.

The second sketch, *Afterwards*, shows slightly more concern for lighting effects, with the shading on the lamp posts, consistent with the light source behind the vague beckoning figure. The trapezoidal door is again prominent, though the more distant leg of the trapezoid is obscured by yellow beams of light. The point of view has shifted; as Hammond and Scull suggest, this may be the same door, through which we have now passed (35, though H&S leave it as a question: "Have we gone through the door?"). To a degree, the change of orientation is the logical consequence of the move from *Before* to *Afterwards*. However, it is not the 180-degree shift we might expect, but 270 degrees: we are on the other side of the door, but not looking at it straight on as in *Before*. Formally the offset makes a great deal of difference, because a striking element of the first sketch (which *Before* shares with other *Ishnesses* drawings examined below) is a radical linear symmetry, though only on the vertical axis. The actual lines of *Before* are measurably off-center, but it is a rough sketch: the implicit center line of the drawing vertically

the poet said that in Chinese the past is imagined as *in front* of us, the future behind. But in Indo-European thought the idea of the future as in front of us is universal enough to take for granted.

bisects two roughly identical halves. Horizontally it is decidedly asymmetrical, but asymmetry is the nature of the acute triangle and the trapezoid: the base is by definition wider than the apex. Centering the doorway vertically is necessary to place the viewer in line with it; *not* centering it horizontally is psychologically necessary to emphasize the length of the hallway. Remember, the function of the trapezoid for Vitruvius was to trick the eye into seeing the sides of the doorway as orthogonal lines receding to a great height.

Symmetry is abandoned altogether in *Afterwards,* however. The right side of the hallway, the right leg of the sight-line triangle receding to infinity, is absent from the sketch (as noted, so is the right leg of the trapezoidal door). The hypothetical vanishing point that is often the center of the composition in perspective drawing is now somewhere off the paper to the right, and Tolkien compensates for the absence with two techniques: color density and foreshortening. By the first I simply mean that further objects are penciled more lightly than closer objects, the standard landscape technique that Tolkien will later master in his watercolors. The second refers to the elementary method of drawing each successive lamppost shorter than the one before. The distant prospect in this hallway fades to invisibility—but it is not the invisibility of darkness; quite the opposite. The upper right is the lightest part of the composition, despite the fact that the putative light source is on the left.

Studied together, these two companion-pieces help us define what an *Ishness* is. It is a capturing on paper of a vision, a mental concept, an archetype. It is a reification or figuration of an abstract thought. Catherine McIlwaine, Curator of the Tolkien Collection at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, cites a 1917 letter to Tolkien from his cousin Mary Incledon linking the concept of *Ishnesses* to art critic John Ruskin, but the details of the association cannot be gleaned from the letter (McIlwaine 164). Considering Ruskin's life's work of justifying the work of modern painters to a Joshua Reynolds Royal Academy school of criticism which accused them of abandoning nature and mimesis, a guess at the context of Tolkien's aesthetic discussions with his cousins might be risked. Canvasses such as J.M.W. Turner's storm paintings were attacked for lacking figural reference to the primary world. Ruskin argued that they *were* figural, but a sort of formal abstraction became necessary for Turner to capture the reality one actually sees in a storm. As Ruskin expressed it in Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*:

> Depriving the subject of material and bodily shape, and regarding such of its qualities only as it chooses for particular purpose, [the imagination] forges these qualities together in such groups and

forms as it desires, and gives to their abstract being consistency and reality, by striking them as it were with the die of an image belonging to other matter, which stroke having once received, they pass current at once in the peculiar conjunction and for the peculiar value desired (4.291; see Hewison 77).

Ishnesses then may represent a Ruskin-like (or Turner-like) exploration of the role of imagination in the production of the visual image, particularly in capturing a vision rather than a concrete object; the *ishness* of a thing rather than its form. More detail than this guess would require a separate essay.

Only a few years after Ruskin wrote these words, an admirer of his, who like Tolkien was an Oxford academic turned fantasy writer, published a reflection on the drawing of abstract concepts, including "muchness." In Chapter VII of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), at "A Mad Tea-Party," Alice listens to the Dormouse tell a story about three little girls who, like Tolkien's cousin Mary and her sisters in 1912, were learning to draw.

"They were learning to draw . . . and they drew all manner of things—everything that begins with an M . . . such as mouse-traps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness—you know you say things are 'much of a muchness'—did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness!" (Carroll 58)

This scenario invented by the Dormouse, the humor of which depends on the "nonsensical" nature of the prospect of drawing an abstraction, must nevertheless have been close to what Tolkien, and perhaps his Incledon cousins, were attempting to draw. *Alice* author Lewis Carroll admired Turner's art and Ruskin's criticism, so the Dormouse's half-awake musings may have a strong dose of Ruskinism themselves. Social circles at Oxford were small in the 1860's. Carroll photographed the great critic in 1870, and Carroll's Alice, Miss Liddell, was later courted by Ruskin (until Alice's parents intervened). While Tolkien's artistic endeavors in 1912 may not have been *exactly* what the Dormouse imagined, they may have been "much of an ishness."

3. *Undertenishness* and *Grownupishness*

Fig. 4. *Undertenishness* [1912]
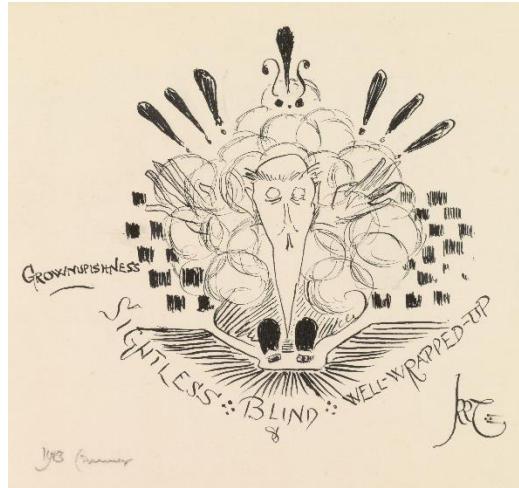MS. Tolkien Drawings 88, fol. 13r
© The Tolkien Trust 1995

Fig. 5. *Grownupishness*, Summer 1913
MS. Tolkien Drawings 88, fol. 7r
© The Tolkien Trust 1995

A second set of companion-images, the watercolor *Undertenishness* (MS. Tolkien Drawings 88, fol. 13r; Hammond and Scull fig. 34; McIlwaine fig. 64) and the black-ink drawing *Grownupishness* (Bodleian MS. Tolkien Drawings 88, fol. 7; Hammond and Scull fig. 35; McIlwaine Cat. No. 39), share the vertical symmetry of *Before*. The first, in fact, looks for all the world like a popular elementary-school inkblot exercise in which wet paint or ink is applied to the middle of a folded piece of paper, and the resulting symmetrical "found art" usually looks (as *Undertenishness* intentionally does) like a butterfly. Because the painting was *not* produced that way, however, there is a refreshing organic quality to the symmetry, like the symmetry we find in nature: almost, but not quite an exact mirror image. Though correspondences between left and right are unmistakably deliberate, there are subtle variations, such as (1) the difference in coloring in the "wings," browner on the left and grayer on the right; (2) the curl of the lower wing on the left ends in a point; the one on the right is blunter; (3) the outward curving antenna-like lines at the top center of the painting are of varying thickness. And so on. Symmetry with variation.

One form of abstraction found in this piece and not in the previous two is a nearly decorative species of geometric abstraction. The two trees (just saying "two trees" in an essay on Tolkien almost strikes sparks from silmarils) have a nearly perfect roundness to their ruddy foliage that is scarcely seen in nature, and the

suggestion of branches underneath that foliage with three simple strokes of a darker color strikes a compromise between the figurative and the abstract. It suggests the limbs beneath the leaves in the way that real tree limbs in nature peek out—and yet they are just stylized brush strokes.

The real geometric abstraction is in the ground beneath the two trees, which is rendered in a series of lozenges or diamonds of contrasting colors that, on the decorative end suggest the variation in a pattern, but considering the image figurally, create a sense of depth. The bottom-most diamonds in the pattern become the foreground, and Tokien renders them in black ink. The next row is brown and suggests a space just before the roots of the trees. The third row is grey, marking the line on which the trees stand. The grey row is remarkable in three ways. First, it is interrupted by the trees themselves: on either side of both trees a diamond is irregularly shaped to accommodate the roots, indicating the dual nature of the pattern as abstract (a mere decorative pattern) and figural (a representation of the ground on which the trees grow). Second, the lozenges in the grey row are larger than the others, even though the conventions of perspective would call for diminishing size as they eye goes up the paper. The result, unexpectedly, is a heightening of the 3-D effect, suggesting a rounding of the ground at the roots of the tree, an effect increased by the repetition of the brown color in a fourth row. Third, the middle cell of the grey row is the largest of all, and comes to a point that stretches beyond the natural end point of the diamond, intruding on the row "behind" it.

The diamond pattern looks more like scales than the floor of a forest (which is what opens up behind the foreground), and Tolkien's practice in creating lozenges with brushwork is good preparation for one of his best dragon paintings more than a decade later (*Hringboga Heorte Gefysed*, 1927), the scales of which use the same technique. Tolkien's choice of the diamond pattern reminds us of the process of abstraction itself in the theatrical origin of motley, the diamond pattern of the harlequin in *commedia del' arte.* As a costuming choice, the diamond-grid pattern of harlequin's costume began as an attempt at a figural spectacle, more or less realistically attempting to identify the "clown" character (a word originally simply meaning "country bumpkin") by putting patches on his jerkin. But the visual needs of the stage begin to override verisimilitude: in real life, when we patch our clothing, we try to match the color and weave as closely as possible to avoid detection of the repair. But in the theater our need is the opposite: we *want* the repair to be noticed, so the audience can understand the poverty and simplicity of the character. So we put a square patch on a garment in directly contrasting color. Once the convention is accepted, we can merely paint on the contrasting color:

continue the process of abstraction, and we have a pattern of contrasting diamonds—motley. A similar process fits Tolkien's design needs at this point: patterns of light and shade, grass, weeds, and humus on a forest floor, could be drawn in individual detail if one were bent on realism. If not, they can be abstracted to brush strokes—or if one prefers the geometric, lozenges.

To return to the point. The elongated point on the middle diamond may be puzzling in the context of the ground itself, but in the overall design of the painting—the "stepping back" that Hammond and Scull describe (37) as revealing the butterfly design of the whole work—it seems sensible and indeed inevitable in the way that sound design brings the puzzled viewer to say "of course!" There may be a point to the point. In the language of perspective design mentioned earlier, the tip of the central diamond points to the vanishing point. The middle diamond (midpoint in both dimensions: vertically the middle of the whole design, and horizontally the midpoint of the diamond-grid ground design) marks the line of symmetry on which the unity of the design depends. It leads the eye to the next section of the piece, going up on the paper (and "in" along the implied third dimension of a perspective design). That section, viewed as if we were peering between the two trees, appears as a conventional presentation of a forest path, stretching to the horizon point like the hallway in "Before." We can see the equivalent more figurally in watercolor of the same period, *Eeriness* (MS. Tolkien Drawings 87, fol. 10; Hammond & Scull Fig. 40; McIlwaine Cat. No. 40). Tolkien aids the forest effect by allowing the color of this section to modulate from the greys and browns that dominate the whole piece to a greenish, or as green as anything in the painting gets. As ambiguous as the dreamy image is, a glance at it says "forest."

For the modernist, one of the purposes of abstraction is to free art from the demon of meaning. Much as we might like simply to enjoy the figures, however, the young artist has placed an interpretive constraint on this painting by titling it: "Undertenishness." An additional constraint is given by the fact that the picture is found in the company of a similarly-named drawing named "Grownupishness," which we shall examine next, and so postpone part of the discussion. But for now a few tentative observations might be offered. The structural resemblance of "Undertenishness" to "Before," already mentioned, suggests the most archetypal interpretation of the "open road" image: anticipation, inviting the viewer toward what is to come. Leaning toward what is ahead is certainly appropriate to youth, though "Under Ten" is more specific than "youth."

Every detail in the central portion of *Undertenishness* draws the eye forward: the elongated point of the central diamond, the curved lines that flank that

point (and form a mirror image of the "antennae" at the top of the design), the parted green (graded with brown, and then yellow) suggesting a forest path. In the days when one reckons one's age in single digits, the whole world lies before one. The future is a big question mark.

In *Grownupishness*, evidently, it is an exclamation point. Six of them, in fact, arranged about the central figure, three on a side. (Seven, if the shape directly above the Grownup's balding or tonsured head is an exclamation point.) There is one literal question mark, immediately to the left of the Grownup's head, but its mirror image on the right diminishes its significance as punctuation. In fact, if we regard the shape on the left as a question mark, it is a rather elongated one, stretched out. If you stretch out a question mark further, what does it become? Is growing up the process of ironing all of our cherished question marks into exclamation points? To the undertenish, it often seems that way.

The vertical symmetry seen in *Undertenishness* is here as well, but no longer inviting, and no longer expressed as the inverted V of the open road. Indeed, if the radiating lines of the ground in this picture have a vanishing point, it would be at the Grownup's posterior. As with the previous picture, the symmetry exists more in theory than execution: in the circular swirls of fog surrounding the Grownup, and the bricklike geometric pattern behind him, Tolkien does not scruple to match the left with the right, not even in the number of circles or "bricks." The dark rectangles of the "brickwork" might look like a checkerboard pattern (which would be a variation on the motley described in *Undertenishness*, if rotated ninety degrees) but for the fact that the dimensions and even the shapes of the individual polygons are irregular and sketchy (obscured, after all, by the curls of mist). Squares and rectangles of course *become* diamonds and lozenges if viewed in perspective, as we see in Tolkien's depiction of a tile floor in *Wickedness,* a picture of the same period (Hammond & Scull Fig. 32).

The man's face lies elongated by the beard, which inverts the pattern of the open road. It is mirrored by the mouth, which is simply a caret; the nose, a matching caret larger and with curved legs; and the tonsure, with wisps of remaining hair radiating out of the center line of the composition. His splayed fingers imitate the exclamation points, as do the soles of his shoes at the bottom of the sketch.

His eyes are blanks. No wonder the legend reads "SIGHTLESS*BLIND* WELL-WRAPPED-UP." The redundancy of "sightless" and "blind" may raise a smile, but even in 1911-12 Tolkien knew enough about language to understand several things about redundancy. First, it was not considered a logical or grammatical error in early English. Poets who composed middle English romances seemed to enjoy redundancy for emphasis: in *King Horn* the hero goes into hiding

"under a roche of stone" (line 79); he kills Saracens to death (631); the villain is "fals" and "untrewe"; King Thurston laments that his sons were slain and deprived of life (913-14). Second, the established linguistic principle is that true synonymy is rare: as Tolkien would later tell his Aunt Jane, *argent* is not really "the same" as *silver* (*Letters* 310). Third—or perhaps this is a specific instance of the second— the punchline of "Sightless and Blind" may be more profound than mere redundancy. A grownup may wax so old that he loses his eyesight, but long before that time, he has stopped seeing things that the undertenish can see quite clearly. Tolkien saw the beauty of a tree outside his window, a beauty to which his neighbor, who wanted to cut it down, was blind (*Letters* 321). As William Blake told the Rev. Dr. Trusler in 1799, "The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way" (702).

We don't need to read specific lessons about youth and maturity into *Undertenishness* and *Grownupishness*. We just need to trust our instincts and our first impressions. *Undertenishness* is inviting, if a bit mysterious. *Grownupishness* is ridiculous, and invites us not at all.

Abstraction is not just a stylistic choice in Tolkien's *Ishnesses*. It is an exploration, very early in his development as an artist, a writer, and a thinker, of the nature of the imagination, and how the creative mind, whether in words or in painting, captures the general that the particular expresses. In the middle ages, using a specific iteration of a type to represent the type was called "allegory." But even though that word, if not the concept, was problematic for the later Tolkien, in 1911-12 the problem may not even have occurred to him. For a young Oxonian already steeped in the "Secret Vice" of inventing words, neologism comes more readily than the well-worn word. Let's not call it "abstraction." Let's just call it *Ishness.*

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