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Tolkien's Dictionary Poetics: The Influence of the *OED*'s Defining Style on Tolkien's Fiction

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Abstract: This paper examines the connections between Tolkien's writing of fiction and his work as a lexicographer on the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Some of Tolkien's most characteristic stylistic flourishes show the influence of the distinctive, charming defining style of the first edition of the O.E.D.

Keywords: definition, dictionary, lexicography, narrative, plot, structure, style

Tolkien was, as this Centenary Conference acknowledges through its breadth of papers and panel discussions, a man of many parts – so many and so varied that it is sometimes difficult to reconcile them in a theory of the evolution of his fiction. His roles as son, husband, father, friend, teacher, and scholar have been repeatedly scrutinized, though he himself doubted the value of biographical criticism and resented intrusions into his private life. Perhaps he would not object strongly to my study of his early work as a lexicographer, however, since there is an objective relation between the products, whether scholarly or artistic, of a single mind.

It is known by most informed readers that Tolkien worked as a lexicographer on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but little has been written about his experience there. Aside from Humphrey Carpenter's (necessarily) cursory account, Peter Gilliver has done interesting (and I hope *seminal*) research on the entries Tolkien drafted for the *OED*, identifying what he worked on and explaining how he worked.¹ I will address how the process of historical lexicography and of writing entries for the *Oxford English Dictionary* may have affected his writing of fiction.

It would seem obvious that an experience which Tolkien described as the most instructive two years of his life should have had some perceptible impact on his writing. Tolkien said that in 1919 to 1920, drafting in W on the *OED* under the editorship of Henry Bradley, he "learned more . . . than in any other equal period" of his life (Carpenter, 1977, p. 101). If a writer must, according to the old dictum, "write what he knows", and the compilation and content of the *Oxford English Dictionary* accounts for a significant part of

what Tolkien knew, then it follows that, in some form or other, Tolkien wrote about the *OED*.

It would also seem obvious that the *OED*, as the foremost scholarly project and most useful tool for research on the history of English, would continue to figure heavily among his interests – as indeed it did. As a scholar of language and literature Tolkien would have consulted it frequently, perhaps daily. He also maintained connections with the *OED* project for many years after leaving his position there as a lexicographer; throughout the 1960s and 1970s he was consulted by Robert Burchfield on material for the *OED* Supplements.² Moreover, beyond these points of contact, Tolkien admitted that his great scholarly love was historical lexicography, and at least once speculated on what his life might have been like had the work been more remunerative and he had been able to continue in the occupation of "harmless drudge".³ His playful reference in *Farmer Giles of Ham* to the *OED*'s definition of blunderbuss (which includes the comment that this weapon is "Now superseded in civilized countries by other fire-arms") bespeaks a fond interest, some thirty years after his tenure at the *OED*, at least in the straightfaced humour of the dictionary's defining style.

Such easy access to the humour buried in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is gained only through intimate contact: much close consultation of its entries, or even (an experience I share with Professor Tolkien, much to my delight) drafting entries within its editorial conventions. While editing my M.Litt. thesis on Tolkien's fiction, I began also to work as an historical lexicographer on the fourth edition of the *Shorter*

¹ Peter Gilliver's paper, "At the Wordface: J.R.R. Tolkien's work on the *Oxford English Dictionary*" was presented at the Centenary Conference in Oxford, 1992 and is published in this volume.

² Many letters exchanged between Tolkien and the editors of the *OED* on particular lexicographical points are preserved in the dictionary archives at Oxford University Press in Oxford.

³ Conversation with Priscilla Tolkien, Oxford, April 1990. The designation of a lexicographer as a "harmless drudge" originates in Samuel Johnson's wry definition in his English dictionary.

RESERVE

Oxford English Dictionary – and from 1988 to 1990 I learned more than in any equal period in my life. A large part of my work was to compress or conflate the information offered in the *OED* for incorporation into my smaller-format dictionary. To do so, I had to study the *OED*'s defining style very closely. With such study it quickly becomes clear that the *OED* has a character, a personality almost – a feature typically unknown and certainly unwelcome in a dictionary. This character owes, in large part, to the sheer scale of the project and the room available for definition: writing, like speech, betrays the author's character and context more clearly with every word. For those unfamiliar with the *OED*, I suggest Anthony Burgess's approach: take it to bed with you, like a "weighty mistress". Failing that, I direct you to the comprehensively, subtly, and elegantly defined entry for the word *language* noun²: it has five major senses, each with an average of two transferred or narrowed (subject specific) senses, and a section for attributive and combined uses. Also, the entry group for *out* is an exercise in grammatical distinctions too subtle even for most writers and illustrates this dictionary's attempt at minute precision: it accounts for *out* as a noun, verb, adjective, preposition, interjection, and combining form. Even an idle perusal of the *OED* reveals unexpected though completely characteristic biases: the first edition of this monument to English finds space for close and beautiful definitions for arcane scholarly terms (prosody, literary stylistics, grammar, theology, and philosophy are particularly rewarding fields of search, yielding *aphoresis*, *senecloche*, *subjunctive*, *parousia*, and *teleology*), while passing in complete silence over a basic and absolutely common word (*fuck* is the notable example) and dismissing the humble *manat* as "some kind of fish". In these entries, one imagines the tongues of the editors ("the Four Wise Clerks of Oxenford" of whom Tolkien writes in *Farmer Giles of Ham*) firmly in their cheeks, as in the *blunderbuss* entry.

And so, after a year or more steeped in the attitudes, conventions, and language of the *OED*, one evening I found myself again reading *The Lord of the Rings* (as one is wont to do for solace in this hard world). Wallowing in the high morality of Sam's sparing Gollum at the base of Mount Doom, I was suddenly struck by a shock of recognition:

"Oh, curse you, you stinking thing!" he said. "Go away! Be off! I don't trust you, not as far as I could kick you; but be off . . ."

(Tolkien, 1983, p. 980)

"Go away!?" "Be off!?" This, from the Sam Gamgee of stout farming stock, so fierce, so rural, so determinedly salt-of-the-earth? The Sam Gamgee who told Bill Ferny he had an ugly face and then threw an apple at it? Who fought trolls and killed Shelob for love of Mr. Frodo? Who was described by the narrator moments before as inarticulate with "wrath and the memory of evil". Framed by the heated, colloquial "you stinking thing" and "not as far as I could kick you", "Go away! Be off!" stands out as formal – and rather unlikely. Suddenly, all the *OED* entries for expletives that had ever crossed my desk leapt to mind:

bugger verb, sense 2c. *coarse slang*.

With *off*: go away, depart.

sod verb³, sense 2. *slang*.

With *off*: to go away, depart.

truss verb, sense 4. *obsolete*.

To take oneself off, be off, go away, depart.

wag verb, sense 7. To go, depart, be off.

Now *colloquial*.

It was clear that Sam, in the coded language of Tolkien's dictionary, was not only cursing, but *swearing* at Gollum, as well he might.

Thence, I ranged further for evidence that Tolkien's fiction drew on his experience specifically as a lexicographer as distinct from or at least in addition to his medieval scholarship. The old chestnuts, already commented on by other scholars, were there: in *Farmer Giles of Ham*, the reference to the *OED* entry for *blunderbuss* and the pun on *grammar* and *glamour*, and in *The Hobbit*, the "low philological jest" of naming the dragon Smaug (Shippey, 1982, pp. 40-41; Tolkien, 1981, p. 31). Yet there is a broader influence than these pointed jokes suggest: an attitude toward the use of language and to narrative construction that pervades Tolkien's work, from time to time breaching on the surface of tales like a whale showing part of its submerged bulk.

Most obviously, Tolkien foregrounds the lexicographer's concern with the semantic possibilities of words and phrases. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo's initial conversation with Gandalf shows Bilbo using the same phrase as both a greeting and a farewell; Gandalf calls attention to the difference, not only of broad denotation (or basic meaning) but also of connotation (or subtle suggestion), between Bilbo's uses:

"Good morning!" said Bilbo, and he meant it. The sun was shining, and the grass was very green . . .

"What do you mean?" [Gandalf] said. "Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?"

"All of them at once," said Bilbo . . .

After Gandalf alarms the hobbit with talk of adventure, Bilbo changes his tone:

"Good morning!" he said at last. "We don't want any adventures here, thank you! You might try over The Hill or across The Water." By this he meant that the conversation was at an end.

"What a lot of things you use *Good morning* for!" said Gandalf. "Now you mean that you want to get rid of me, and that it won't be good till I move off." (Tolkien, 1979, pp. 15-16)

For good measure, Gandalf then turns the noun phrase of salutation into a verb phrase which emphasizes the second, peremptory sense: "To think that I should live to be good-morninged by Belladonna Took's son, as if I was selling buttons at the door!" (Tolkien, 1979, p. 17)

Also clearly to be seen in *The Hobbit* is a self-conscious concern with styles of language, the effect created by particular syntactic structures, grammatical constructions, and a restricted lexicon. This parallels the *OED*'s practice of identifying typical usages according to geographical occurrence, register, or style. In *The Hobbit* Tolkien

RESERVE

repeatedly contrasts the verbal styles of the dwarves with Bilbo's, and even distinguishes among the dwarves by verbal style and register of language. Compare the high-flown speech of Thorin:

"Gandalf, dwarves and Mr. Baggins! We are met together in the house of our friend and fellow conspirator, this most excellent and audacious hobbit . . . We are met to discuss our plans, our ways, means, policy and devices. We shall soon before the break of day start on our long journey . . . It is a solemn moment . . ."

This was Thorin's style. He was an important dwarf.

(Tolkien, 1979, pp. 26-27)

with the pragmatic, businesslike expression of Gloom:

"Yes, yes, but that was long ago . . . I was talking about you. And I assure you there is a mark on this door - the usual one in the trade, or used to be. *Burglar wants a good job, plenty of Excitement and reasonable Reward*, that's how it is usually read. You can say *Expert Treasure-Hunter* instead of *Burglar* if you like. Some of them do. It's all the same to us."

(Tolkien, 1979, p. 28)

To characterize the trolls, Tolkien chooses a lexicon and accent which set them very quickly in a tradition of literary and dramatic villains. Words like *blighter*, *blinking*, and *blimey* place the trolls in their social hierarchy by register, and orthographic renditions of pronunciations ("Ere, 'oo are you?", "yer", "et", "tomorrer", "'ell", and "a-thinkin") place them by accent. These are popularly perceived features of a working-class London dialect - stage cockney. To achieve his narrative ends, Tolkien, is not above exploiting a language stereotype.

In "Riddles in the Dark", Gollum is characterized through grotesque physical description, but even more so through his language. His sibilant "Preciousss" echoes in every reader's memory. Perhaps the most telling of his verbal peculiarities, however, is his use of the first person plural (*we, us*) to refer to himself but the third person neuter singular (*it*) to refer to Bilbo: it suggests Gollum's self-absorption and thorough identification with his Ring, as well as his objectifying of the hobbit as a potential meal.

The narrator's glossing of the speech of Dain's dwarves as they approach the Mountain calls attention not merely to the difference between their verbal style and the reader's own ordinary speech, but foregrounds their cultural character as it is expressed through that speech:

"We are sent from Dain son of Nain," they said when questioned. "We are hastening to our kinsmen in the Mountain, since we learn that the kingdom of old is renewed. But who are you that sit in the plain as foes before defended walls?" This, of course, in the polite and rather old-fashioned language of such occasions, meant simply: "You have no business here. We are going on, so make way or we shall fight you!"

(Tolkien, 1979, p. 261)

Bilbo's speech contrasts with that of most of the other characters throughout the novel. Two exchanges highlight his

style especially well. With Smaug, Bilbo engages in a verbal duel, gradually penetrating and adopting (as best he can) the dragon's style of language. This passage demonstrates not only the difference between Bilbo's usual speech and the inflated style employed by Smaug, but also the difficulty with which Bilbo struggles toward the state of mind that produces this style (Tolkien, 1979, pp. 212-213). In the exchange of farewells between Bilbo and Balin, the verbal styles of hobbits and dwarves are contrasted yet again, but this time the contrast serves the further purpose of revealing how Bilbo, having experienced and learned much, remains essentially a hobbit in character:

"Good-bye and good luck, wherever you fare!" said Balin at last. "If ever you visit us again, when our halls are made fair once more, then the feast shall indeed be splendid!"

"If ever you are passing my way," said Bilbo, "don't wait to knock! Tea is at four; but any of you are welcome at any time!"

(Tolkien, 1979, p. 274)

In *The Lord of the Rings*, this concern with appropriate or characteristic verbal style manifests chiefly in Tolkien's stringent avoidance of the dual voice. He rarely allows the narrator to lend his articulacy to a character in order to express that character's complex thoughts. Notwithstanding that I have already used a part to show how Tolkien encoded Sam's swearing, the passage in which Sam's sophisticated understanding of Gollum contrasts so sharply with his inability to express his thoughts stands out as Tolkien's most faithful expression of any of his characters through language:

Sam's hand wavered. His mind was hot with wrath and the memory of evil. It would be just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature, just and many times deserved; and also it seemed the only safe thing to do. But deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched. He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's shrivelled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again. But Sam had no words to express what he felt.

"Oh, curse you, you stinking thing!" he said. "Go away! Be off! . . ."

(Tolkien, 1983, pp. 979-80)

Tolkien is at pains to show the differences between the languages of the peoples of Middle-earth through repeated references to their differing personal and place names. This is first seen in the names given to the swords of Westmessen found in the troll cave: what is *Orcrist* for elves is *Goblin-cleaver* for men and *Blter* for goblins; what is *Glamdring* for elves is *Foe-hammer* for men and *Beater* for goblins (Tolkien, 1979, p. 59). This attention to providing the right names of things in a particular lexicon carries over into *The Lord of the Rings* and becomes, as so many of Tolkien's stylistic devices, more sophisticated. The names of people and places are multiplied by the number of societies they are known to. Even the names of generic things are glossed in

RESERVE

many Middle-earth languages:

Thereupon the herb-master entered. "Your lordship asked for kingsfoil, as the rustics name it," he said; "or athelas in the noble tongue, or to those who know somewhat of the Valinorean . . ."

"I do so," said Aragorn, "and I care not whether you say now asla aranton or kingsfoil, so long as you have some."

(Tolkien, 1983, p. 899)

This gently comical vignette exposes the co-dependent sides of the lexicographer's approach to language: the herb-master is indulging in pedantry of the most tiresome kind, while Aragorn is insisting on grounding words in relation to external reality.

Finally, there are parallels between the *OED*'s characteristic definition structures and their underlying logic and Tolkien's narrative structures (in terms of plot structure and descriptive logic). This area of influence is perhaps the least easily pinpointed and defined, but the most pervasive.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* seeks to define in two ways: delineating distinctions between particular uses (identified as senses) while establishing connections between uses according to their semantic and grammatical development in a historical framework. Again, I direct readers to the entry for language n.²

Tolkien's plot-structures at their most complex show this tension between the clarifying separation out of an event from its narrative context in order to delineate its characteristics as an event, and the establishing of connections between events to illustrate the historical or causal developments which form the narrative pattern of the text. In *The Road to Middle-earth*, T.A. Shippey identifies the basic structural mode of *The Lord of the Rings* as *entrelacement*. This designation is, perhaps, not perfect – as Shippey states, this structural device is pre-novelistic (1982, p. 120); also, medieval and early modern models of *entrelacement* (such as Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*) are disjointed, unfulfilled, or incomplete, so that the final relation of all the narrative components is difficult to perceive; their plots are sometimes more labyrinthine than interlacing. I suggest that a useful model for Tolkien's interlaced narrative structure is the historical dictionary entry: lines of development separate and are followed, and then perhaps converge again, as in senses 1 and 2 of language n.²

An excellent example of the way in which Tolkien's plot-structure and development parallels the *OED*'s characteristic sense-structure is the plot line that centres on Pippin's theft of the Palantír of Orthanc. His action emerges from a complex set of events, beginning with Boromir's attempt to take the Ring from Frodo, which sends the hobbit into hiding and Pippin and Merry out alone to search for him. The younger hobbits are captured by orcs and brought inadvertently to Fangorn Forest, where they rouse Treebeard to attack Saruman at Isengard. Saruman is defeated and Pippin is nearby to recover the palantír that is thrown from the tower. It arouses his intense curiosity so that he steals it, looks into it, and sets in motion another chain of events with

far-reaching effects in the War of the Ring. Gandalf takes Pippin into his own care, so that he is brought to Gondor where he eventually saves the life of Faramir; Merry is transferred to the care of Aragorn, who takes him to Rohan where he enters the service of Théoden, eventually following him to the Battle of the Pelennor Fields in which he helps Éowyn destroy the Lord of the Nazgûl. The palantír itself is given to Aragorn, whose use of it provokes Sauron to ignore his own land and attack Gondor, allowing Frodo to get to Mount Doom where the Ring is destroyed. The straight line of causality or plot development is clear; the offshoots of connection to other plotlines are also easily seen.

Yet the passage dealing with the event (the theft itself) stands out with almost surreal clarity against the events surrounding it. The moment, separate from the cumulative events leading into and out of it, is defined as an independent, coherent event by the clarity of its terse narrative, purely descriptive except for Pippin's sudden talking to himself:

At last he could stand it no longer. He got up and looked round. It was chilly, and he wrapped his cloak about him. The moon was shining cold and white, down into the dell, and the shadows of the bushes were black. All about lay sleeping shapes. The two guards were not in view: they were up on the hill, perhaps, or hidden in the bracken. Driven by some impulse that he did not understand, Pippin walked softly to where Gandalf lay. He looked down at him . . .

Hardly breathing, Pippin crept nearer, foot by foot. At last he knelt down. Then he put his hands out stealthily, and slowly lifted the lump up . . .

"You idiotic fool!" Pippin muttered to himself. "You're going to get yourself into frightful trouble . . ."

(Tolkien, 1983, p. 614-5)

Tolkien illustrates through his interwoven plots that causal development is the basis of history. In *The Lord of the Rings* the close interdependence of events, the relentless development of lines of causality, and the frequent use of retrospective narration (notably by Gandalf at Bag End and by all speakers at the Council of Elrond) blurs the beginnings and ends of the various stories told in the novel; the movement or process of history is the thing most clearly communicated. In the *OED* the logic of the entries, including the etymologies (which may trace a word from its earliest postulated origins in the mists of unrecorded time) and combinations or collocations (which represent the marriage of one word with another to produce a new lexical entity), demonstrates the ceaseless process of a word's development. The parallels are clear; Tolkien's own practice as a lexicographer and a writer of fiction provides the connection.

Henry James wrote that plot construction in the writing of a novel is like arbitrarily drawing a line around a body of events and showing that the things inside the line are connected to one another though not to anything outside. The General Introduction to the *OED* states that words and senses are "linked on every side" with other words and senses, and that "the circle of English has a well-defined centre but no

RESERVE

discernible circumference. Yet practical utility has some bounds, and a dictionary has definite limits: the lexicographer must, like the naturalist, 'draw the line' somewhere." Tolkien, as a novelist closely attuned to historical lexicography, drew his line around tales plucked

out of his "compendious history" of Middle-earth and drew the threads into tight connection between those tales, producing perhaps the most truly "historical" novel ever written.

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RESERVE