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The Mythos of pUr-fection

Language, Theology, and Benjamin in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

for my mother
to whom I owe everything

i'd write you a message in Quenya
but neither of us could read it

Lá istan quet' Eldarin, ammë. Nai!

*Ai! laurië lantar lassi súrinen,
yéni únótimë ve rámar aldaron!
Yéni ve linté yuldar avánier
mi oromardi lisse-miruvóreva
Andúnë pella, Vardo tellumar
nu luini yassen tintilar i eleni
ómaryo airetári-lirinen*

Sí man i yulma nin enquantuva?

*An sí Tintallë Varda Oiolossëo
ve fanyar máryat Elentári ortanë,
ar ihyë tier undulávë lumbulë;
ar sindanóriello caita mornië
i falmalinnar imbë met, ar hísë
untúpa Calaciryó míri oialë.
Sí vanwa, ná, Rómello vanwa, Valimar!*

*Namárië! Nai biruvalye Valimar.
Nai ehyë hiruva. Namárië!*

The poem above is not one that should look familiar to the average reader, or be readable in any substantive way, even to experienced language learners. Although the poem appears in an English-language text, it itself is not English: it is no natural language at all. This poem, called “Namárië,” is written in Quenya, a highly structured and developed fictional Elvish language J.R.R. Tolkien created and wrote into his fantasy land of Middle-earth for the books *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, its existence as a constructed language precedes even the creation of the story itself, and its power, both spoken and written, is essential for the narrative and characters. Quenya’s presence in the story, both here and in other key scenes, is marked by acts of translation and non-translation, and special connection is made between Quenya, supernatural ability, and a kind of “natural theology” (Madsen 39). In this essay, I seek to engage with the text and translation of Tolkien’s invented Elvish language of Quenya (and, to a lesser extent, Quenya’s linguistic descendant Sindarin), in order to understand the language as the fundamental aspect of culture in the

narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* and the other Middle-earth stories. Tolkien's fiction of translation offers a deliberate morality to the story and provides a linguistic example for the Benjaminian concept of "pure language," which grants Tolkien special access to his narrative.

"Namárië" appears at a pivotal moment in the text—Frodo and his comrades, the Fellowship of the Ring, are setting off towards Mordor from the Elven village of Lórien, bidding goodbye to comfort and safety as they head towards danger. The Elven ruler Lady Galadriel meets the travelers at the riverbank, as they prepare to depart, and sings them this lament as they ride the river's current away from the land. The narrator takes care to mention that this is the last time Frodo will ever see the land of Lórien (*The Fellowship of the Rings* 369). The title of this Quenya song, as artistically and roughly translated by Frodo later in life, is "farewell."

The Elf Lady Galadriel, as she is called, is a particularly notable character, for reasons not explicitly discussed in *The Lord of the Rings* books themselves. In *The Silmarillion*, we learn that Galadriel is not just an Elf (which alone means she is undying), but also one of the Noldor, an ancient Elven people known for their thirst for knowledge and storytelling ability. Elves are holy creatures compared to other Middle-earth species, seen in the capitalization of their name "Elf/Elves," rather than the lowercase convention of "orc/orcs," "hobbit/hobbits," or "human/humans." As a Noldor, Galadriel was born across the sea in the land of Valinor, the land and the people from whence language originated. Her presence here signifies a historic shift in the book, as this is the last moment where Frodo and the rest of the Fellowship are together blessed with safety until the war and the destruction of the Ring. Her words are phonetically musical, rhythmic and "fair," but eerily they leave Frodo and his friends feeling no peace as they head off on their perilous

journey, as though the words themselves know how unlikely the Fellowship is to achieve victory.

Quenya, the High-Elvish in which “*Namárië*” is spoken, is not a modern language of the Elves of Lórien, a Middle-earth realm. Rather, Quenya is the language of old poetry, ceremonies, and texts much like an Elvish Latin, or more accurately an Elvish Hebrew. As the language of the Noldor, who are Elves of knowledge, Quenya must also be deeply tied to Truth.¹ Quenya, the direct offshoot of Primitive Quendian (the very first language), is the native language of Valinor (*Silmarillion* 61), the mystical heavenly elven-land across the sea, and from whence all Elves came. Galadriel herself is one of the last Elves on Middle-earth who has ever seen Valinor, and her connection to Valinor even further wraps her in a shroud of mystery. The elven inhabitants of Lórien (and the Elf who is a part of the Fellowship, Legolas) natively speak Sindarin (the more modern Gray-Elvish tongue and a linguistic descendant of Quenya) and can also converse in the Common Speech, the language hobbits speak (that appears in the text as English). Humans and Elves alike have Sindarin names, like Legolas (“green leaf”) and Aragorn (“revered king”), illustrating an earthly link to this particular Elvish language.

The decision to use Quenya, as opposed to Sindarin, Common Speech, or English, as the language to send off the Fellowship, is deliberate, and allows readers a glimpse into the cultural meaning of Quenya, and relationship of characters to this tongue. This moment in time when “*Namárië*” is spoken is the longest example of Quenya that the books contain, though the language itself was, in author J.R.R. Tolkien’s notes, completed to a high level of functionality. There are few other moments in the text where the language and its properties

¹ Truth, with a capital T, is a theme the reader encounters frequently in the narrative, as Truth cannot exist without knowledge. Saruman the wizard learns this lesson the hard way, that delusions cannot take the place of knowledge, and will not lead him to Truth.

are highlighted, primarily through the eyes of Frodo and Sam, main characters, hobbits, and non-native Quenya speakers. Quenya is the language of not just *an* ancient people, but rather *the* ancient people—it is called “*the* Ancient Tongue,” by Elves who appear to Frodo and Sam early in the narrative (*Fellowship* 79, emphasis mine)—and has a special mystical connection to the characters, whether or not they speak it.

The linguistic hierarchy of Quenya over Sindarin over the Common Speech (and English, by extension in the translation) is inherent in the grounding of the story, and the relationship that characters maintain with these mystical, “special” Elvish tongues differs widely. Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn possess a stronger connection to Quenya than any other member of the Fellowship, but all members of the Fellowship relate to Elvish, from Legolas who likely natively spoke Sindarin (as his Sindarin name and heritage would imply), to Sam (who, in a moment of great need, invokes the power of Elvish using Sindarin²). In their group moment of hearing Galadriel speak Quenya, however, they all react similarly to the power behind the words: the significance with which “*Namárië*” is expressed is not lost on any of them, regardless of formal Quenya education.

Of all Elvish languages, Quenya possesses the deepest link to the past, but the Elves themselves are all tied to the past, in a world that is changing and entering a new age. In Appendix B at the back of *The Return of the King*, we are told that the story of *The Lord of the Rings* take place at the very end of the Third Age in Middle-earth (1059). The Elves themselves, formerly great in the First and Second Ages, are now a shadow of what they once were, willing and able to live only “in memory of the past” (1059). With the Great War of the Ring, and the attempt to destroy the Ring that comes with the Fellowship, the High-

² This moment takes place in *The Two Towers*, (712), when Sam is summoning his strength to attack Shelob the Spider with Sting, Bilbo’s sword. We’ll return to this, and the implications of class and religious maturity in Sam and Frodo’s relationships to Elvish, later in this essay.

Elves that remained in Middle-earth like Galadriel were well aware of the implications of Frodo and the Fellowship's departure from Lórien: the Third Age was just about to reach its conclusion, and the Elves' time to rule on Middle-earth was declining rapidly. This moment of farewell is a goodbye on multiple levels, as Galadriel chooses to use the language of the past as a prophetic adieu to both the Fellowship (an example of the interspecies friendships that the Third Age held) and to the entire land of Middle-earth. Galadriel had just said farewell to each member of the Fellowship individually just pages before this lament, but she chooses again to call out to them after their boats had pushed off from the land of safety, with this (non-) prayer for their success. By using Quenya, this mystical language of power, she is tapping into this celebrated history of the land, and once she finishes her historic, symbolic, and prophetic farewell song, an extraordinary thing happens. Just a day after this strange recitation, which calls on tragic events long past³, Frodo and the Fellowship separate for good to accomplish their tasks. It is as though Galadriel's words of farewell are responsible in part for the Fellowship's separation, indicating both a farewell *for* the group as a whole (leaving Galadriel and Lórien), and *to* the group (leaving each other, and the safety the group offers).

In her troubling, lonely song, with phrases that, translated, say things like, “the years have passed like swift draughts,” “out of a grey country darkness lies on the foaming waves between us,” “forever,” “lost,” and “exile,” she uses powerful evocative imagery in order to effect an emotional reaction. These potent concepts are hidden in a tongue so foreign that even those who speak it do not understand, but the words, when spoken, are still able to effect a powerful reaction: all members of the Fellowship are moved to an overwhelming “grief” at the conclusion of Galadriel's lament— each member's eyes “were filled with

³ A full translation of “*Namárië*” is available in the Appendix to this essay.

tears,” and Gimli and Legolas share a dialogue about the burden impressed upon the group that has now finally become real (369). Without knowing the words enough to recite them back, the Fellowship all express the sentiment that they have been forever changed since hearing Galadriel’s song, and their profound sorrow, their “grief” (369) (a word even more palpable, because it connotes a significant loss, or even a death), is something they receive from her Quenya words, with or without basic knowledge of the language.

Scholarship centering on Tolkien, Quenya, and language in the narrative has generally focused on its religious or social maneuvering, or its linguistic construction⁴. It will be my goal instead to coordinate a reading of Quenya that functions both linguistically and narratively. I will work with Tolkien’s construction of the linguistic behavior of Quenya (not simply the Elvish tongues as a language family), watching how it plays out religiously and systematically in the text during moments of translation, through moments like Galadriel’s speech above, determining what it does, and what this means. What are we to believe about the narrative, if Tolkien’s fantasy of translation plays by the rules of traditional, natural language translation?

Quenya itself looks noticeably different from the surrounding English text—the words have different, visible stresses, and strange diacritics that immediately foreignize Quenya to English readers of *The Fellowship*. Moments like this of Quenya-speaking and hearing are significant both as instances of translation and of non-translation. Hobbits and humans (both humans in the story and humans who read the books) are not permitted

⁴ Examples of these sources include: Catherine Madsen, “Light From an Invisible Lamp”: Natural Religion in *The Lord of the Rings*” in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2004), pp. 35-47; Mary Zimmer, “Creating and Re-creating Worlds with Words: The Religion and Magic of Language in *The Lord of the Rings*,” in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*. (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2004), pp. 49-60; and Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003)). Linguistic sources include (Ross Smith, “Fitting Sense to Sound: Linguistic Aesthetics and Phonosemantics in the Work of J.R.R. Tolkien.” *Tolkien Studies* 3 (2006): pp. 1-20; and Yoko Hemmi, “Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and His Concept of *Native Language*: Sindarin and British-Welsh.” *Tolkien Studies* 7.1 (2010): pp. 147-74).

immediate linguistic access to the words themselves. This separates the language as Other during speech: Frodo has studied Quenya thanks in large part to his uncle Bilbo, and is able to speak it when first approaching the Elvish-speaking Elves who travel into The Shire (although he mistakes their Sindarin for Quenya) (*Fellowship* 79). He possesses the key to the foreign tongue, able to comprehend what no reader of *The Fellowship* can. But in this one moment of farewell, Frodo somehow “did not understand the words” (*The Fellowship of the Rings* 368) as Galadriel sings them. Although he holds the academic knowledge to translate what he hears, Frodo’s moment of translation too does not occur during or immediately after Galadriel’s speech. Rather, we are told that “as is the way of Elvish words,” Frodo kept the poem “graven” (368) in his heart. He translates them “long afterward” (368) while writing his memoirs, showing that the words have incredible staying power. In this moment, as with many others, the verb describing how Quenya is spoken is crucial: Galadriel alone “sang in the ancient tongue” (*Fellowship* 368) the lines of poetry we see. When Frodo hears Elvish heard once before in Rivendell, it is also sung by an individual: “a voice rose in song” (231). When Frodo and Sam themselves speak in Elvish, later in the narrative, they are said to “cry” (*Two Towers* 704, 712) the lines of poetry, not to speak them, chant them, or recite them. Rising, singing, and crying are all not words to describe casual speech but rather affected, impassioned, and/or religious invocations, and these words are certainly not casual. Part of the magic of Quenya lies in its musicality, and so the “blended word and melody” (232) of the poem plays into its meaning.

The translated lines of Common Speech that come after “*Namárië*”—which are not made Other for the readers, as they are wholly written in English—are formatted differently from the Quenya lines, appearing as plain text in paragraph format, while “*Namárië*” is separate from the story, centered on the page, and in italics. The basic meaning, readers are

led to see, has been maintained: Frodo believes the lines were “as well [translated] as he could,” but the style and the essential Otherness is still Quenya’s alone, separate from the rest of the English/Common Speech text. As we know, Frodo can connect with the pure meaning of language behind the farewell, so he understands the intent of the song he hears, and eventually he is able to translate, but in the moment itself, Frodo is held captive under Quenya’s spell, which precludes him from translating in the moment, making him equal at that time to those members of the Fellowship who do not know Quenya. Quenya, this scene shows, contains such intense meaning that it prohibits immediate translation until deep meditation can occur—something Elves do naturally (and therefore have no trouble translating), but that others do not. These non-native Quenya listeners must *actively attempt* translation. This is accomplished by maintaining a distance from all characters at most times unless they are prepared to hear it, except those characters, like Galadriel, who are either Elvish or have some deep connection to Elves. And indeed, the characters do not need the Common Speech translation, for it is not translated for them: rather, *the translation is for us, the readers*, who do not actually hear Galadriel speak as we venture off into assured danger, and cannot therefore fully know/Know the truth it contains.

In his essay, “Tolkien as Philologist,” David Jeffrey argues that Quenya and Sindarin are more than just mystical, but outright magical languages. The words themselves, spoken or unspoken, fundamentally have the ability to connect, to create, and to stop evil when it appears. Jeffrey states that Elvish tongues “still ha[ve] the power to recover: to still Shelob, the watchers, the Nazgûl. That is, it is language that most powerfully preserves the traces, the pattern in the leaf of the world’s first forest. The great opposition in *The Lord of the Rings*... is expressed as a struggle between the mellifluous language of Elves and the grating gobble of Orcs” (67). In the case of “Namárië,” Galadriel is calling after the Fellowship with a farewell

from the distant past. The ancient element of the sung language, its foreignness, and its contradictory strange connection to those who hear it, work together to furnish Quenya with a special focused linguistic power. But what does this magical power mean, and how are readers to make sense of a magical language like Quenya, when it is kept at such a distance from the readers through displaced translations? What kind of language is Quenya?

Walter Benjamin's essay on "The Task of the Translator" may help to shed light on the subject of Tolkien as a translator, and Quenya's supernatural role in the text. Translation, Benjamin states, is not a simple word-for-word glossing of a text, immediately available or understood through the use of a dictionary. Translation should never take into account its audience: it is not something that can, or does, present literally the same idea, as expressed in two different languages. Rather, translations of any worth should connect to the relationship between languages, going back to the "primal elements of language" (81), focusing far less on language-specifics of syntax, structure, and grammar. In reality, nothing can be wholly translated at all; translators cannot reach a point of total intersection between two unique languages because such a point does not exist in words. In translation, essentially one is altering the original text.

Only once the translator realizes that a word-for-word 'translation' cannot occur, does the real act of translating begin. Instead of performing a surface level "fidelity" (79) translation of the text, in which the translator tries to write the text into the culture and behavior of the second language, a translator must dig backwards into "pure language" (74)—this proto-language of concepts, not of terminology—to find the meaning beneath the words, or what the words "intend" (74), as intention behind words is universal. Once the thought is solidified in "pure language," the translator can then proceed to figure it into the second language, using words and phrases that fit best with the concept, not the original

text. As Benjamin says, “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully” (79). Translations are, therefore, different modes of expressing the original text in terms of the Original Text, or the “pure language.”

This idea of “pure language,” or the proto-language of meanings to which all other languages merely refer in different ways, is also called the Ur-language. What Benjamin is indicating with the use of “pure,” or Ur, language, is the “expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages” (80), or the universal ideas conveyed *through* all words, rather than the words themselves. While people have different ways of expressing themselves (through languages), people all *intend* the same things with their words, meaning that all languages are just diverse configurations of the verbal expression of the Ur. Therefore, the only way in which to bridge a connection between two languages is to use the Ur that links together their meaning, allowing the original language of the text to be shaped by the abilities of the translating language to connect to the Ur, “expand[ing]” (81) both in significance until the true meaning, the referents of all symbols, behind both languages is attained. Translation shows the deepest point of connection between two languages, and this ‘deepest point’ is the universal, the original Word—the Ur.

Moments of Quenya speech in the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrate most clearly how the language is structured to fit into this understanding of translation. As we have seen, Quenya works as deep magic, connected to the land, the past, and somehow the being of all who hear it, and those who speak it (Galadriel, Gandalf, Frodo and Aragorn) are held above other characters as more intuitive, more connected to truth and morality, than the others who relate less formally to it (like Sam). Quenya is not like a “natural” language, as English is: English has a clear separation between people who do or do not

comprehend the language, and learning how to understand it takes time and education. Quenya is accessible to all and understandable as Truth by all people (and species), unifying everyone under its power. Those who learn to speak it can do so through academic means, but understanding the intention of the words is presented as universal in some instances, like “*Namárië*”; it is situation-specific, not knowledge-specific, understanding. Quenya functions not as a language that connects to the Ur, but as the Ur-language itself, to which all other languages compare and through which all must translate, within Tolkien’s universe. Quenya is deeply enmeshed in the fabric of Middle-earth, and its ability to remain distant while connecting to the people who hear it (like with Galadriel’s Lament) shows us both the linguistic and the nonlinguistic aspect of its authority.

While Galadriel’s Lament highlights the supernatural power Quenya and Quenya speakers hold, other moments reveal other aspects of the relationship characters maintain with Quenya. At the Doors of Durin, Gandalf finds his academic knowledge of Elvish put to the test. While the Fellowship stands outside the Doors, waiting to be let in, Gandalf translates the Elvish on the doors into Common Speech, which has him stumped. To open the Doors of Durin, one must speak the Sindarin word “friend” [*mellon*], but the written words above the doors are the only way in which to *access* the power: one cannot open the doors without reading the Elvish words, thus connecting reading to speaking (readers of the text, too, are only affected by Quenya and Sindarin through the written words themselves, which would appear are sufficient). One need not translate Friend to any other tongue to speak it—one must simply read, receive knowledge, and speak what is written to open the doors. Gandalf, who is fluent in both Quenya and Sindarin, is powerless at the face of the Doors of Durin until he merely acknowledges what is written there—only then do the words have power. The characters, such as Galadriel, Frodo, and Sam, can use words/language to

change the world around them, in a “verbal re-creation of material reality” (Zimmer 52), through the use of Elvish. Characters access power (more specifically, *good* power) by combining speech and understanding; in short, by *accepting* the supremacy of Quenya.

Tolkien, a linguist by trade, designed his Elvish languages to contain the linguistic elements of this power, and used the story itself as a “translated” vehicle to express the nonlinguistic elements. The “translator” Tolkien is a character in the story, too; he calls attention to himself as translator so that he can access the power that all translators possess. By fashioning himself as translator, Tolkien wants his readers to view him as “derivative, ultimate, ideational” (Benjamin 76-7). It is his duty as a “translator” to connect the translating (source) language as best as he can through the Ur into English, the target tongue. He claims the authority of deep connection with the Ur, by being a translator, and this transcendence is successful through both translation and the fiction of translation. While Quenya is not the Ur-language for English speakers, Tolkien wove the concept of Quenya as the Ur-language into the world he created, and the narrative within the world: the narrator speaks from a translated Common Tongue that assumes that Quenya *is* the perfect language. Within his fictional universe, Tolkien altered the Benjaminian idea that the Ur-language must be nonlinguistic: he invented a linguistic expression of a transcendental language-beneath-language, like an incarnation of the divine, which in Christian terms does not sully the divine, but makes the divine even more accessible.

Although garnering the most popular acclaim for his Middle-earth stories and characters, Tolkien’s roles as a linguaphile and invented language creator were essential to his own identity, the world he created, and to the kinds of stories he sought to tell. Tolkien created fourteen different languages for his Middle-earth world, designing the country, the people/creatures, the characters, and the story out of these invented languages. His passion

for linguistics (philology) imbued his entire life, and his dedication to creating a family of viable languages with historical connections and linguistic adjustments throughout history, is plain. A professor of philology in the English faculty at Oxford (at a time when literature and languages were at odds in the school), Tolkien was well versed in the phonetics and phonology of a number of tongues, including his specialty, Anglo-Saxon. In addition to his academic pursuits, his mastery of at least seven real-life languages (including his personal favorites, Welsh (his ancestral tongue) and Finnish) gave him unique authenticity and grounding for his inventions, as he used a variety of linguistic characteristics from different languages in his constructed languages (or conlangs) (Carpenter 59). A conlanger⁵ since childhood, Tolkien took great pains to develop his languages to a high level of functionality. His Elvish tongues of Quenya and Sindarin were highly developed, decidedly structured, fascinatingly beautiful, and planned with the intention of mimicking natural language—a feat in which Tolkien, on the whole, succeeded.

Tolkien’s relationship with his conlangs is particularly striking, especially in the light of the medium in which he chose to present these conlangs to the public. In a letter he wrote to the Houghton-Mifflin Company in 1955, he explains that his languages were, to him, the essential part of his Middle-Earth stories:

It is all of a piece, and *fundamentally linguistic* in inspiration... The invention of language is the foundation. The ‘stories’ were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows. I should have preferred to write in ‘Elvish’.

(Letters 219)

To Tolkien, then, the text itself is a mode of presentation of ideas about language, presented in “linguistic aesthetic” (Letters 220). With no other academics of his time focusing on constructing languages, Tolkien needed to find a proper way to successfully offer his

⁵ A conlanger is someone who constructs languages.

experiment to the public—to make them care. To do so, Tolkien gave a practical application to his languages, situating them in a world, to illustrate more than just the academic side of his conlang—there are religious, political, cultural, and emotional aspects of language that Tolkien invented, too, and Tolkien chose to show those aspects through narrative and character development. His contribution to the world of literature was undoubtedly more than just the stories of Frodo, Bilbo, Gandalf, and the Ring: to him, they were the chance to experiment with language, to use his academic knowledge of linguistics to tease a thought about language into being, and to present it to others for entertainment as well as edification.

In Tolkien’s era of academia, the study of language was called not “linguistics,” but “philology.” The two terms are alike, but not entirely the same, treating language in subtly different manners. A linguist’s job is to study the way languages work, but the job of a philologist (a “lover of language”) is primarily to relate, to connect one distant language to a more familiar tongue. This is completed through linking the ideas expressed in the distant language to the abstract concept of Language (Becker 381), so as to more clearly show similarities and differences in cultures and their tongues. A philologist, then, is very much a translator, in the sense of Benjamin. In his academic life, Tolkien was a master translator, writing for the Oxford English Dictionary, and providing translations for the Middle-English texts *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Pearl* that are still successfully used today.

As an author, however, Tolkien functions as a translator of texts that *do not exist* in the original, tying him to authority of linguistics that all translators have, even though he is not *truly* translating the stories we read. Although he states that he “would rather have written in Elvish”, the fact remains that *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Silmarillion* are all English-language books, written in English, using English to relate to other languages and ideas. Quenya, Sindarin, and the Common Speech are languages natively spoken by

characters in the novel, but they do not exist outside of Tolkien's mind—indeed, Common Speech exists primarily as an idea, as we know hobbits do not speak English, though there are no foreignizing moments of translation between Common Speech and English that we see in the text. And yet, readers are asked by Tolkien to pretend with him, to indulge Tolkien in his fantasy of being connected to a nonreal system of languages, which readers receive from him in acts translation (or the lack thereof). Even more, readers are asked to believe that Tolkien is “just a translator” of the languages, but also of the stories themselves—the English we read in the story is just Tolkien's “translation” of Frodo's and Bilbo's memoirs, which were written in the Common Speech. Like the hobbits, we can only relate to Quenya through translation, and we may only relate to the narrative through this thin guise of translation, as well. Tolkien would have us buy into the idea that none of what we can see in *The Lord of the Rings* was written in English originally—although, as we know, English is Tolkien's native language, and of course is the original language in which Tolkien wrote his Middle-earth books. Along the scale of sacredness, English is placed even further from Quenya than the base-level Common Speech, though just barely so. Multiple fictional levels of translations combine in the narrative to reach the readers: Quenya and Sindarin to the Common Speech (so that the hobbits may understand), and from the Common Speech to English, for those outside of the narrative. But if we are to consider that Quenya is the Ur that connects all languages to each other, then all translations are technically performed through Quenya: Tolkien must understand the Ur-language to be able to translate this story.

Conlangs are by no means a new phenomenon, with evidence of conlangs stretching far back before Tolkien, into the twelfth century⁶. Historically conlangs have functioned as

⁶ Arika Okrent details the chronology of conlangs in her book *In the Land of Invented Languages*, explaining that conlangs progressed through at least four distinct historical phases since the 1600s: scientific, peace-building auxiliary, logical, and artistic.

ways of rectifying a deficiency felt in natural languages (phonetically, socially, culturally, or politically), but throughout the 1900s, linguists began experimenting with artistic expression through language: modifying certain aspects of natural language to develop a fictional literary/film world, rather than seeking to effect changes in natural world societies with their constructions (Okrent 282). Tolkien was among the first conlangers to present his invented tongue(s) within narrative bounds (a successful venture, all things considered), and, as the father of high fantasy, is credited with popularizing conlangs in fantasy stories⁷.

Calling his conlanging philosophy “linguistic aestheticism,” Tolkien constructed Quenya and Sindarin so as to test the concept that languages could be pleasing in all forms. Unlike Saussure, who suggests the concept of arbitrary relation of name to referent in language, Tolkien sought to make Elvish words relate exactly to their meaning—pleasant ideas become beautiful words. If ideas were expressed through words and there were a direct connection between meaning and form, then the language could relate universally to all people, and all would understand the intention of words without ever learning to speak the language. Using his own sense of “beauty,” Tolkien developed Sindarin and Quenya format, organization, and style from Welsh and Finnish. Welsh, the language of his ancestors, particularly appealed to him as the language of his people, as he states in his essay on constructing languages, “A Secret Vice.” Tolkien believed firmly in the natural predilection of all people to their ancestral tongue, and as a child of Welsh-English parents, he was helplessly in love with the Welsh language, believing its sounds and meanings were successfully interwoven. As such, Sindarin gets its phonetics from Welsh. Finnish, unrelated to his ancestry, was his basis for Quenya “phonetic pattern and structure,” as he felt

⁷ Tolkien’s Elvish languages were some of the first artlangs (conlangs created as an art form) to come into prominence. As Okrent notes, Tolkien’s books in which the Elvish languages were featured were in print a full 50 years before comparable artlangs like Klingon became popular; indeed, Tolkien is considered by some to be the founder of artlangs as a conlang category.

immediately and deeply connected to the foreign language while reading a Finnish grammar book, declaring he was “intoxicated” (*Letters* 214), that is, enraptured by the way the language worked, both unknown and familiar at the same time.

The languages themselves, however, are not just subtypes of the languages on which they are based. Tolkien designed them to be closely related languages from the same language family, connecting to each other in a different way than Welsh and Finnish do to each other in real life. In particular, Quenya, Tolkien’s most highly developed language, bears characteristics that are similar not just to Finnish, but to many languages and language families from around the world.

Quenya, above all else, is a language designed by Tolkien to *sound pleasing*. The books use the term “elvish” to mean “extra special,” “wholly peaceful,” or “divine,” like in the use of the term “elvish beauty” (*Two Towers* 716). Whether or not Tolkien intended it to be so, Quenya functions much in the same way that a real language does, with similar constraints on the phonetics and phonology to nonfictional languages, but with special attention paid to linguistic behaviors (such as sound symbolism) that are naturally appealing (in Tolkien’s own mind, whether or not that translated well to others). Ross Smith attempts to quantify this “pleasing” focus through a combined linguistic and literary analysis of Quenya in his article, “Fitting Sense to Sound: Linguistic Aesthetics and Phonosemantics in the Work of J.R.R. Tolkien.” Smith claims that the language possesses traits that make it “flowing,” “light and melodious,” comparing it in pleasing properties to “the most beautiful of Romance languages,” considered by Smith to be Spanish and Italian (7). Smith uses the poem “Oilima Markirya,” a poem in Tolkien’s “A Secret Vice” to demonstrate his claims. Unfortunately, few scholars have Tolkien’s calculated ability to combine literary and linguistic terminology effectively into a harmonious whole. Linguistically, Smith’s argument is unconvincing, as he

provides the basis for his report using pseudo-linguistic terminology with little meaning, such as explaining the pleasure of listening to Quenya through its lack of “brusque English-style consonant clusters”, “hard, guttural phonemes”, and through the use of “soft” and “non-sounded” phonemes (7).

Even so, Smith’s claims about Quenya appear apt, provided there is rigorous linguistic analysis of the Quenya language, in as much fullness as they appear in the narrative. In “Tolkien’s Tongues: The Phonetics and Phonology of Tolkien’s Quenya Language,” I present a linguistic analysis of “*Namárië*” to provide this foundation that Smith lacks. My findings indicate that based on the poem, Quenya has a strong tendency towards sonorant phonemes and even spacing of vowels and consonants, with short syllables, few closed syllables and no tautosyllabic⁸ consonant clusters. Linguistically speaking, sonorant phonemes are sounds, like /l/, /r/, or /n/, which permit airflow to pass relatively freely when uttered (Ryan 15-6). The sonority hierarchy, which rates phonemes based on their sonority, asserts that consonants with high sonority function more like vowels than do obstruents, like /b/ or /k/. As vowels already have higher levels of sonority than consonants, a language that possesses a high number of vowels and highly sonorant consonants would be a language with emphasis on phonetic ease of speaking and flow.

The overall effect of the language, then, is as Smith claims, a smoothly rhythmic, fast-paced language designed to be pleasing when heard. Tolkien has constructed a language designed to be appealing, adhering to universals in linguistic behaviors while using phones and patterns that are easy to articulate (at least, for an English speaker) and high in sonority, and he uses the narrational treatment of the Elves and their language to support this linguistic

⁸ Tautosyllabic—meaning ‘of the same syllable’. If a word has no tautosyllabic consonant clusters, then any consonant clusters (consisting of 2 consonants in a row) take place at a syllable boundary, dividing the consonants (the first, as the coda of the last syllable, and the second, as the onset of the next syllable).

behavior. Words are spoken quickly, tumbling from one syllable to another, with few consonants that require a full stop in articulation of phonemes. While Tolkien's own linguistic preference must serve as the basis for his understanding of beauty, he still taps into his knowledge of the way all natural languages behave—only changing those aspects of language that could logically be changed—to create his desired effect. In reading the epic Tolkien has created, readers must accept on some level that Tolkien was successful in his creation of a beautiful language. All literature requires a base-level acceptance of the success of the author to tell a story, and with the language he created as foundation, Tolkien is only successful if we view Quenya to be the beautiful language he says it is. Tolkien's understanding of linguistic aestheticism was the method, for which Tolkien selected his phonemes, syllable structure, and syntax, and literarily we must follow Tolkien if we wish to buy into the world of the narrative. This is because his languages maintain a reputation in the novel, one that Tolkien constructed out of phonology and linguistic appeals to beauty.

Tolkien's whole world of his books is, indeed, a direct offshoot of his desire to experiment with linguistic aestheticism. Linguistic aestheticism provided the impetus for Tolkien to create the Elvish languages, and the conlangs provided the foundation for the world of Middle-earth and the characters that populate the narrative. The behavior of the language that Tolkien called Quenya—its relationship between sound and sense—helped establish the narrative's pervasive belief that because Quenya is the Ur-language (not just an interpretation of the Ur-language, as other languages are), Quenya does not need to be understood linguistically to be understood spiritually. All can hear Quenya and through the strange words, know on a fundamental level what is being spoken because though the words are foreign, the words are holy expressions of a nonlinguistic (sublinguistic) idea. But though all characters universally can comprehend the significance of Quenya words, each individual

character relates to and is able to speak Quenya in varying degrees of fluency. As the narrative progresses, we can track the moral development of the characters through their relationship to Quenya. This can be seen most poignantly through figures in the Fellowship, particularly Frodo and Sam.

From the first chapter of the narrative, we are told that Frodo and Sam, as hobbits, natively speak Common Tongue. Yet as the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the hobbits' Ur-language may be some form of Elvish, shown in their ability to understand and use the magic of the language themselves. Yoko Hemmi's argument on Tolkien's "native language" is one that figures profoundly into this understanding of translation and hobbit-Ur-language. Hemmi's case for a refiguring of the term "native language" rests on the Tolkien quote "language is home" (157). The term "native language" is a technical linguistic term, but Hemmi uses the term "native language" to describe the relationship of the hobbits to Elvish: "Sindarin is depicted as the *native language* that 'stirs deep harp-strings' in the hobbits' linguistic nature. It is the *native language* to which, in Tolkien's endeavour to express his concept mythologically, the hobbits could *go home*" (168, no emphasis added). Hemmi is cautious about "native language," as she connects her own usage only to Tolkien's own personal (nonlinguistic) belief: "Tolkien rephrases an individual's *native language* as 'one's inherent linguistic predilections' (note the plural form), implying that 'a' *native language* consists of more than one component" (153).

Native language, in linguistics, is similar to the idea of "mother tongue," or the language that a person speaks from earliest childhood; it is unusual for the phrase to mean 'the inherent language of the mind or the heart.' Hobbits, even special hobbits like Frodo and Sam, are not born speaking Sindarin or Quenya; they are born with the *ability to understand* the meaning behind Elvish at key moments in life, and when given the chance to

gain maturity through experience, they become able to speak words in this foreign language. Their deepest hearts do, as Hemmi believes, emote and relate in the Ur-language of Quenya or Sindarin (the choice between the two again being related to “natural linguistic predilection”), but Hemmi extends this example of the hobbits to indicate that Tolkien fundamentally altered the meaning of “native language.”

We should take care to avoid the danger of using Tolkien’s own words as sole law in his written text: Tolkien felt tied to Welsh as a kind of linguistic “home” (Hemmi 151) or “roots” (152), but it *was not* his native language, in linguistic terms. His use of “native language” attempts to refer to the language underlying all, the one to which one returns home, and the one in which the “peculiar and common” are combined (155), or the language to which people feel most connected. Even though this conflation of the term “native language” with the idea of a “heart language” is problematic, Tolkien’s attempt to subvert the language of linguistics to suit his own story and linguistic theory demonstrates a need to express this concept of language-beneath-language, or language of the heart. How can we effectively marry Tolkien’s notion of heart-language to the linguistic behavior of the Elvish languages, particularly Quenya?

The Ur, as a concept, is more than simply a kind of magic inherent in the land or in the language. Although there are no active, organized religious practices to which Frodo, the rest of the hobbits, or any other figures adhere (no church to attend, no tithes to pay), there remains a distinct kind of Elven-given natural mysticism imbued in the characters, that informs them, laying down the laws of morality. The books themselves are grounded on a central struggle of good versus evil, and morality figures into this, as not a duty to a set of Scriptures or dogma, but as an innate understanding of the value of life, which helps characters “discern” (gain wisdom through experiences) what is worth doing (Madsen, 40).

Elves, the creators of the language, are the keepers of this connection, as they are the embodiment of the past: an ancient and undying race, living amongst mortals. Catherine Madsen uses a term Tolkien coined himself in his *Letters* about the underlying non-religious religiousness of the story: “natural theology” (Madsen 38). “Tolkien borrows Christian magic, not Christian doctrine, and Christianity without doctrine is a shadow of itself,” Madsen states (37), because the belief in the Truth behind things (an understanding of the way things are) is so fundamental that it needs not even be mentioned, among the people who are good, who learn to discern what to do, rather than acting on selfish, earthly greed: worship, says Madsen, is only called such when it is to the wrong sources, implying “illegitimate” idol worship (e.g. Gollum worshipping Shelob, or humans worshipping Sauron) (38). Divinity shows itself through varying levels of connection to Quenya and to the divinity of unseen Elves. This is because the education of natural theology is a process of maturity, and as the verbal expression of the transcendental language of all souls (the w/Word of God), Quenya must take time to learn. “In *The Lord of the Rings* God is not shown forth, nor does he even speak, but acts in history with the greatest subtlety. He... remains the last Other behind all otherness that may be loved” (47). It would be natural that God/divinity would speak to all through a language not of words but of the Truth behind words, as languages are not universal, but the meaning behind words is. Tolkien created Quenya to be the presence of the w/Word of God in the narrative, spoken and written.

Through this idea of natural theology (a religiousness without religion), a term more appropriate than Tolkien’s perversion of “natural language” can fully take form. ‘Ur-language’ better defines what the hobbits experience in their relationship to Elvish, because it accomplishes three key things: it encompasses the Tolkienian idea of linguistic ancestral memory, it fully uses the concept of linguistic aestheticism to illustrate the harmony of the

Quenya phonology Tolkien constructed, and connects into the overwhelming undercurrent of natural theology present in the narrative. The Ur-language potential is within us at all times, but it is not our native, birth-tongue: we must *learn* to use it (to call upon the Elves in their own tongue), like Frodo and Sam do, and, as we discover, Gollum so obviously does not.

Sindarin, although revered and still connected to natural mysticism of the world/the deep nature of all members of the Fellowship, in the same way as Quenya, appears also as somewhat more earthly than its High-Elvish predecessor. The Elves of Lórien, who are Grey-Elves, are less connected to this natural mysticism than their High-Elven brethren, as none of the Grey-Elves had ever seen the land of Valinor. The land is still revered, but it is not understood, because none of the Sindar has experienced life there. Grey, the color between black and white, is a color of uncertainty, of compromise. Galadriel herself sings of grey things in “Namárië”:

*ar ihyë tier undulávë lumbulë; ar **sindanóriello** caita mornië i falmalinnar imbë met*

(Fellowship 368, emphasis mine)

This, translated by Frodo, means “all paths are drowned deep in shadow; and out of *a grey country* darkness lies on the foaming waves between us” (368, emphasis mine). Upon close inspection of the lines above, it is clear that what we know to be the Quenya word “grey” can be found in the Quenya phrase: *sindanóriello* (or even just *sinda*) is from the same root as Sindar, the Quenya name for the Grey-Elves, who speak Sindarin (they are, in a sense, “in greyness”). A country that has grown grey from shadows has a mixture of white and black: the good (white), and the evil (black, shadows) come together into a murky grey, which makes good and evil unclear. A language that is grey, therefore, exists between holiness and earthliness. Elves that are grey are less holy, and therefore not as pure or as

whole, as the High-Elves (seen in the traditional sense of knowledge-bearers, as white⁹). The Grey-Elves speak a fallen Elvish, an Elvish formed not in Valinor but in Middle-earth. This Elvish is less magical, less Ur, than Quenya. Note, however, that while Sindarin is substantially *less* holy than Quenya, it still nevertheless retains elements of this Elvish holiness which Common Speech does not possess.

With this hierarchy established, all Elves in the narrative, Grey-Elves and High-Elves, possess a varying level of spirituality and understanding of nature and time beyond that of hobbits or men. Between the hobbits themselves, however, there is a personal hierarchy—a class hierarchy, even—which determines access to the holy Quenya language (and to this natural theology). The inter-class friendship of Frodo and Sam provides us with immediate source for direct comparison of the relationship of different hobbits to Quenya.

As he was taught Quenya by Bilbo, Frodo has immediate access to Quenya throughout the story (except during Galadriel's Lament, as explained on Pg. 6-7), and is also singled out among all hobbits from the beginning as special, given the status and onus as Ring-bearer. He does, however, still shows an interesting sign of immaturity, early on in his journey, though he knows Quenya: when the Elves visit The Shire, Frodo hears their Elvish and is eager to show his knowledge of Quenya, to impress them and converse in their tongue. The song of the Elves is not truly given to the readers at this moment: it is explained that the Elvish they sing is the "fair-elven tongue" (77), but the Elves' dialogue is written almost exclusively in English, excepting some names, which are transformed to Sindarin for us. Frodo is said to have known "a little" (77) of Quenya at that moment, and announces (apparently in Quenya), "A star shines on the hour of our meeting." No doubt Frodo

⁹ The connection between Elves and whiteness/light is exceedingly strong, and to explain more fully is out of the scope of this essay. For a pertinent example that explains this connection, consider that the Elvish deity of Varda/Elbereth (star-queen), described more fully in *The Silmarillion*, lives on Mount Everwhite, called *Oiolosse* in "Namárië" (Quenya, l. 9), and *Fannilos* in "A Elbereth Gilthoniel" (Sindarin).

memorized this in his book learning of Quenya; he recites this line as one would recite a Bible passage. We see, too, Frodo's line of Quenya text is not the same as Galadriel's speech on the page, as it is written in quotations and italics, not simply in italics. With quotation marks, this line appears less magical, less powerful, than a true invocation of Quenya poetry would be, and Frodo only "speaks" the lines of Elvish, not singing or crying. This is the only moment of Quenya Frodo recites before his journey begins, and the Elves hear the speech and mock, calling him a 'scholar' (which as any linguist knows, does not indicate that he is fluent, just that he is book-learned): "Be careful, friends!" cried Gildor laughing. "Speak no secrets! Here is a scholar in the Ancient Tongue" (*Fellowship*, 79). Note once again that the Elves, who *are* fluent in a kind of Elvish, are said to be "crying," not merely "speaking," as Frodo does. Frodo's moment of Quenya is not a radical or desperate moment of revelation, because he does not know the words' true Meaning behind them, so his recitation is laughable.

Frodo does, however, truly speak Quenya, the way Galadriel does, in an hour of great need, once he has experienced more sorrow: in Shelob's lair, he feels true fear, and calls forth light. We are told he cries aloud, *Aiya Eärendil Elenion Ancalima*, but his cries are not set in quotes, like regular speech. Instead, they are separated out in italics, like Galadriel's Lament at Lórien: he has reached the level of true invocation, rather than simple recitation. This moment is when Frodo truly calls upon the Elvish power as his savior, and this is the verbal reality of his suffering, his understanding of needing divine help: the words here mean, "Hail Eärendil, brightest of stars" (*Letters* 385). Frodo has realized at this moment of true invocation the natural theology evident in all the books, and he now understands the meaning of Quenya in a way that his previous self, only reciting Quenya, never could. From

the dynamic change in Frodo's personality shown in this moment, it is no wonder that he is one of the only non-Elves invited to travel to Valinor (heaven?) at the end of the books.

Sam, not chosen but self-elected, is years younger than Frodo, and also years less wise. He bears the Ring for a time, too, but he does so only because in that moment, Frodo cannot (*Two Towers* 715-6). Sam's job of following Frodo into Mordor is indeed perilous, and there is no denying that Sam is noble in his own way, but there is a particular class distinction between Sam and Frodo, that leaves Sam beneath his friend. Sam is a packhorse, a willing slave: he welcomes the title of servant, never forgetting to call his master Frodo "Mr. Frodo." While undeniably a decent hobbit, and a faithful travel companion, Sam lags behind Frodo in key areas, only some of which are his own fault: education, moral judgment (regards to treatment of Gollum), and emotional maturity.

This class distinction becomes most apparent in the comparison between Frodo and Sam's relationships to Gollum: Frodo learns to love Gollum, in a way Sam never does. This key failure in Sam's character is a moral failure, for which Sam is later punished. Early in the story, we are introduced to a naïve Frodo, who feels no empathy for the figure of Gollum, suggesting that Bilbo should have killed Gollum when they first met (*Fellowship* 58; refers to *The Hobbit*, Chpt. 5). Gandalf, moral guide that he is, cautions Frodo not to be so unfeeling: "It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and mercy: not to strike without need" (58). At the time, Gandalf's words fall on deaf ears. But as Frodo matures through trials (physical and spiritual), he begins to establish a trusting connection between himself and the vulnerable Gollum, with whom he sees a strange, sad similarity. Carrying the Ring gives Frodo insight into suffering, and teaches him empathy for fellow victims of evil. As such, Frodo offers safety and trust to Gollum, something that turns Gollum's heart towards good. But Sam, as mere servant to the Ring-bearer (not bearing the Ring himself until late in *The Two Towers*)

has no compassion for Gollum, his master's other servant. Sam hates Gollum out of jealousy and ignorance, and mistakes Gollum's connection with Frodo for a trick. Through Sam's callousness and mistrust at key moments (where Gollum is deciding whether to be noble or self-serving), he ruins Gollum's burgeoning signs of redemption (*Two Towers* 699). Sam's childishness places him beneath Frodo, who is the chosen hobbit—and, indeed, Sam is lower in status/societal class than Frodo—which is why his inability to read or speak the pure, heavenly language of Quenya logically follows. Sam is not chosen, he instead follows the one who is chosen; he is an offshoot, a less pure version of the hobbit whose burden it is to save all of Middle-earth.

Sam's connection to Elvish, then, means something different than Frodo's Quenya link. We are not told that Sam speaks any language but The Common Speech, which is why it is so notable that we see him speaking a form of Elvish, during his battle with Shelob over Frodo's lifeless body, after the travels have worn him down to near the point of death, in an empathetic act of pure selflessness towards his master Frodo:

‘Galadriel!’ he said faintly, and then he heard voices far off but clear: the crying of the Elves as they walked under the stars in the beloved shadows of the Shire, and the music of the Elves as it came through his sleep in the Hall of Fire in the house of Elrond.

Gilthoniel A Elbereth!

And then his tongue was loosed and his voice cried in a language which he did not know:

A Elbereth Glthoniel
o menel palan-diriel,
le nallon sí di'nguruthos!
A tiro nin, Fanuilos!

And with that he staggered to his feet and was Samwise the hobbit, Hamfast's son, again.

(The Two Towers 712-13)

Sam, in a moment of panic, as he believes all may be lost, calls upon Galadriel, and then receives supernatural support as he invokes the name of Elbereth, a queen in the Elvish land of Valinor. We are told that “his tongue was loosed,” meaning he somehow lost the inhibition that was precluding him from speaking Elvish all along—his tongue was always capable of it, but he was somehow too tongue-tied to allow himself holy speech. The language used here is Sindarin: like “*Namárië*” for *Quenya*, it is the largest text of Sindarin in the narrative. The translation for this section is not provided in *The Two Towers*¹⁰, but remains as a moment of a kind of speaking in tongues that Sam does not understand, but yet still receives benefit from speaking. This moment of Sindarin is untranslated, as Sindarin is still related in a way to the *Ur*—it is one level removed from the *Ur*, a more earthly power that seems to be what is necessary in the moment. Sindarin works here for Sam, who finally learns how to relate to (humble himself before) divinity, in the face of something he cannot handle. Sam is not speaking Elvish; the language is speaking *through* Sam. Sam does not understand the words he is speaking, but he knows them because of their relationship to the pure language beneath the Elvish words he is speaking. And we too, as readers, do not need a translation for this text, because we can see the words’ meanings’ effect on Sam, and have been shaped, changed by the journey ourselves. Sam has grown here from his earlier moments of moral weakness: never to the level of Frodo, but just enough that he can use the words and take heart in their intent. In Sam’s darkest moment, when he fears all is lost but chooses goodness and hope anyways, we can see that Sam is no longer the naïve hobbit who left The Shire. The journey has had a powerful linguistic (and therefore emotional/spiritual)

¹⁰ It is, however, later explained in *Letters*, in a note to a reader who had asked. The rough translation is: “O! Elbereth Starkindler from heaven gazing-afar, to thee I cry now in the shadow of the fear of death. O look towards me, Everwhite!” (*Letters*, 278) Once again, we can see this element of whiteness being attached to elves, and we can infer that calling upon whiteness in an hour of darkness (as Sam was in, with *shadows* all around him, and with the black Shelob close at hand) is a fundamental analogy.

effect on Sam, and it has made him a better, stronger, more naturally religious figure than he was before he set off. In the next scene, we see Sam growing even further: he accepts his place as the new Ring-bearer, as he believes Frodo is dead (*Two Towers* 716) but knows the quest to Mt. Doom must continue. This key moment signals his maturity in willingness to suffer, thus earning him the power of connection to the Elves (which, in turn, leads him one day to take off for Valinor himself). Sam takes a longer time to become wise, which perhaps is why the “wise” part of his full name “Sam-wise” does not appear first.

This moment is yet another instance of emotional response from a speech act that is not academically understood, like Galadriel’s speech, but this time spoken by a hobbit with no experience in languages at all. After speaking these words, Sam finds within himself the strength to wound Shelob with light into retreat (713) and to take on the burden of the Ring for a time; he invokes a name of power in the Elvish language, so even though he is humble—he is not chosen—he still can possess a variant of this sacred language (an element that lies dormant inside him all along), when in dire need. It is not the Quenya language of Galadriel or Frodo, the purest of good, but Sam’s invocation of Sindarin works for him, in his moment of desperation: his plea to a higher power, even at his low platform, is, on some level, answered, as the light from his sword (Elf-given) surges forward, “searing the dark air with intolerable light” (713). It is Light, called into being through Sam’s use of an Elvish language, that (temporarily, not permanently, as Sindarin isn’t Quenya) takes down the evil of the spider, rather than a literal stab-wound.

Frodo and Sam both cry out in Elvish when they believe their cause is hopeless—when they are staring death in the face. This, contradictorily, is linked to their *living*, and their eternal rest in the heavenly land of Valinor. These passages demonstrate a kind of universality inherent in the Ur of Elvish: all people, this passage suggests, are born with the

ability to understand it, and are capable of achieving some manner of speech in the Ur-language. But in order to use the power of the language of light, they must experience the baseness of their own mortality, and in doing so they are saved. This is similar in a sense to the Christian acceptance of Jesus Christ: by acknowledging one's own poverty in the face of things beyond understanding, and accepting of a higher power beyond oneself, one can gain access to eternal life. This verbal bowing at the feet of deities of light is how we know Sam and Frodo are saved, not their suffering under the power of the Ring, for not all Ring-bearers go to Valinor. Gollum does not acknowledge a higher power beyond the Ring, and does not understand mortality, so he does not speak the words of the Elves, and he dies as he reaches out for his material idol.

In Middle-earth, Quenya (and Elvish) is *light*, or goodness, something we all have within and must nurture into outward expression. Language is moralized, therefore, and Quenya is viewed as the language of *the good soul*: the language of the morality inside characters is Quenya in its purest form, and to access Quenya is to understand virtue, reality, and Truth. But the language need not *just* be spoken to exact its power on others. As we see for the Fellowship at the scene just outside the Doors of Durin, the source of the magic of the language does not lie only in the speech act, or in the act of verbalizing the words: the power of the Elves resides in the acknowledgment of the language—in Quenya—itsself, and in the words, written, spoken, and thought. If you cannot understand Elvish, you cannot read the lines of text on the Doors, and if you do not speak the Elvish written on the Doors, the Doors will not open. The Doors of Durin scene works for Gandalf like the story of Frodo in miniature: we watch Frodo gain access to Quenya, from the moment of “*Namárië*” being recited to him (comprehending the power) to the moment he speaks in Quenya (using

the power). You must first understand Quenya; then, and only then, you may speak Quenya, and the doors will open.

The natural language of the Elves, as Tolkien created it to be, was designed as a pleasing-to-read yet alien tongue, recalling something in all of us that is capable of reading into the meaning behind the foreign-yet-familiar words. As Zimmer articulates, the magic present in *The Lord of the Rings* is linguistic in nature, as words have the power to change and invent reality, just as a fantasy novel invents reality that is translated to the reader. The world of Middle-Earth, created in the mind of Tolkien, was formed out of language: it was fashioned out of the creation of Quenya/Sindarin, but the book itself is also made up of language. As Tolkien's letters say, the narrative is "fundamentally linguistic in inspiration" (219), but also is fundamentally linguistic in substance: the story is the words on the page. Without knowing the words ourselves, we can read the story and comprehend the words' meaning (we too relate to the natural theology of morality), so we are also reading a piece of the Ur, of Quenya, by reading *The Lord of the Rings*. Our English translation, handed to us by Tolkien, is an attempt to connect to the Ur, with the idea that the meaning underlying the narrative is the Ur, and Tolkien's "translation" is just his expression of the Ur, as best he can to all people who read his books, meeting them at their level of spiritual maturity in the Ur. If we were all wise, we could all read the books, as "originally" written in Quenya, but we are not, and therefore we read the books with just occasional peeks at the divine.

Returning to Benjamin, Tolkien's claim to the role of translator indicates that he has a different sort of power than an author. A translator, according to Benjamin, has more access to the "pure language" than the author of the original text, so by fictionalizing translation (meaning that the original author does not exist), Tolkien claims he has the *strongest possible* connection to his language. The "translator" character Tolkien plays

accomplishes the behemoth task of making the Nonspoken, Invisible into visible, articulated, and immediately and spiritually accessible to those who deserve it. Tolkien acts as God here, making Quenya into a Christ, the incarnation of the Ur-language of meaning, where sound and sense can combine. The dogma of religion need not be present in *The Lord of the Rings* and its related stories because religion and theology are already naturally present in the land, which has been created by language (Tolkien's language, and/or the words of the story itself). This argues, in an almost transcendental or Quaker way, that true theology is already present—religion, or “natural theology” is everywhere without being anywhere specifically in the narrative—to those who can access the moral code and nonlinguistic meaning behind it.

Tolkien's own fictional act of translation gives the narrative an even stronger authority, with the idea that relating to the Ur is an act that connects you to power. Translations must pass through the Ur, and therefore are closer to Truth (with a capital T) than books that are just purely written in one language and are never brought back by a translator to their fundamental essence. Tolkien fabricates an immediate deep connection with the Ur, with this essence, in order to assert that his narrative has a superior element of Truth—and, additionally, possesses *the* superior element of truth in it, in Quenya. Quenya may not be our Ur language, but it is the Ur-language for the characters (and their language system) in the narrative, and we may take note at how people relate to the power and goodness, championing the Truth of things under all.

This power Tolkien claims is imaginary, and we are well aware, as Tolkien is not actually translating, but it is all the more powerful because it is successful, as Tolkien has invented a world into which all readers must disappear, with such a strong back story and believable conlangs that the imagined reality appears not so silly at all. Benjamin asserts that,

“translatability must be an essential feature of certain works” (71). If this is true, then Tolkien’s job as the “author” of *The Lord of the Rings* was a breeze, as what could be more translatable than a book that has been partially written in an Ur-language? All that is required of such a translation is to trace the connection back down through English, finding the right balance between familiar and unfamiliar: Benjamin considers a text that is “identical with truth or dogma” to be “unconditionally translatable” (82), and this is what we see in Tolkien, with Quenya’s complete authority as the language of the natural theology of the land, the people, and morality.

Quenya is so fundamentally translatable, because it has already reached this level of pure truth, that it needs not be translated at all for the characters to feel its power, and to grasp what it intends. Quenya, like the natural theology of the land, is so natural that those who experience it know it to be true, from the moment they hear it, like the Fellowship listening to “*Namárië*.” As Madsen writes, “the ‘natural religion’ of Middle-earth is similar to what believers and unbelievers alike experience in daily life. Whether or not we invoke divine authority, all of us essentially have only our emotional ties and a little knowledge of history” (40). Emotionally, the Fellowship responds to Galadriel’s Lament, and allows it to transform their understanding of the world, even without the ability to harness the words themselves. The interaction of these character relationships, navigating speech and language with the Original Knowledge of the divine is a sort of narrative about the way languages can relate to each other through Truth in real life. Tolkien has simply (or perhaps not-so simply) embodied the way languages relate to each other in a physical proto-language of his own. And through Quenya, as we gain knowledge of the real Truth behind things in Middle-earth, we may realize more of our own Ur-language, which tells us more about the successes and failures of natural language to explain our own reality.

Appendix

“Namárië,” or “Galadriel’s Lament at Lórien”
 Original text and English translation
 (*Fellowship* 368)

Ai! laurië lantar lassi súrinen,
Ab! Like gold fall the leaves in the wind,

yéni únótimë ve rámar aldaron!
long years numberless as the wings of trees

Yéni ve linté yuldar avánier
The years have passed like swift draughts

mi oromardi lisse-miruvóreva
of the sweet mead in lofty halls beyond the West

Andúnë pella, Vardo tellumar
beneath the blue vaults of Varda

nu luini yassen tintilar i eleni
wherein the stars tremble in the song of her voice

ómaryo airetári-lirinen
holy and queenly

Sí man i yulma nin enquantuva?
Who now shall refill the cups for me?

An sí Tintallë Varda Oiolossëo
For now the Kindler, Varda, the Queen of the Stars

ve fanyar máryat Elentári ortanë,
from Mount Everwhite has uplifted her hands like clouds,

ar ilyë tier undulávë lumbulë;
and all paths are drowned deep in shadow

ar sindanóriello caita mornië
and out of a grey country darkness lies

i falmalinnar imbë met, ar hísië

on the foaming waves between us, and mist

untúpa Calaciryo míri oialë.
covers the jewels of Calaciryo forever.

Sí vanwa, ná, Rómello vanwa, Valimar!
Now lost, lost to those from the East is Valimar!

Namárië! Nai hiruvaye Valimar.
Farewell! Maybe thou shalt find Valimar.

Nai elyë hiruva. Namárië!
Maybe even thou shalt find it. Farewell!

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Eca, a mitta lambetya cendelessë orcova.