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The Fantasy of the Real: J.R.R. Tolkien, Modernism, and Postmodernism

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J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, grips readers of all ages in the power of its story and characters. Tolkien leads his audience through a world and a time that is entirely different from that of contemporary society, but he also remains true to the human condition as the morals and conflicts within the story resonate with authentic human emotion. Tolkien allows readers to temporarily escape the present although not to forget reality. Tolkien follows his own "rules" of "fairy-story" in order to present a fantastical tale that represents Truth better than many stories that may not be considered fantasy at all by connecting the contemporary reader with the sense of a historical epic. However, readers may question the brilliance of a man who would spend years making up his own peoples and races, complete with their own histories and languages, simply for a "fairytale". Why would a man who can write a best-selling epic in three volumes waste years on creating this complex context of make-believe?

Tolkien wrote in an age that was infused with modernism but also approaching the drifting nature of postmodernism. This meant that people were becoming increasingly individualistic at the same time as they were becoming more disconnected from any sense of faith in an authentic real or an absolute. People were replacing an absolute and authentic Real, or Truth, with false distractions for the purpose of this paper delineated as lowercase real, or

truth. Enlightenment promises like individuality and scientific advancement failed to produce promised answers but only led to more questions and emptiness. Everything from religion and science to politics and philosophy were affected by the broken system of modernism that took away absolutes and never replaced them, leading to a postmodern era defined by distraction rather than Reality Belief in language also suffered as language theorists like Ferdinand de Saussure and Jean Boudrillard proved that a solid connection between substance and thought was arbitrary. Tolkien, however, remained "safe" from the modern ideal of looking outside history to discover the individual. Tolkien remained rooted in the traditions of Old England and the Christian faith, even providing his own "history" in which he could create a world that still thrived from the presence of absolutes and relevant historical context. Through creating his own world, history, and language, Tolkien tells a story based on his philological interests. However, his work also functions as a pre-modernist text whose author still believes in a transcendent signified, or absolute, and presents this to his audience by structuring a world in which the signifier still represents the signified in the closer relationship of a more primitive age. Tolkien ironically uses a fantasy world to get back to a more stable and authentic real through reconnecting to English history and creating a "fantasy" world in which language is more closely connected with the authentic.

Part I: Between Two Ages: The modern and postmodern context

Tolkien invented his world and wrote his trilogy in the 1930s and 40s following his involvement in World War I and throughout the mounting conflict of World War II. Tolkien finished the story in 1947 and completed his revisions by 1949 (Carpenter 203, 204). Allen & Unwin published the first volume of the trilogy in the summer of 1954 and the other two soon

followed, sixteen years after Tolkien had started the work (219). Tolkien's world was finally available to the public, a public that was reaching the edge of a modern age and quickly shifting into the even more arbitrary ideal of the postmodern. The ideologies, or the lack thereof, which surrounded Tolkien and his contemporaries were defined by individualism and right to choice with a noticeable lack of faith in any defined Real, or absolute. The expectation that people ought to choose their own beliefs started with the Enlightenment, which was "marked by the development of discourses of rationality and reason, a rejection of previous ways of organizing thought and the development of an autonomous subject" (Murray and Tew 11). By encouraging people to use their own reason, the Enlightenment defined a move towards greater individualism. The modern age was marked in its beginnings by the Enlightenment and industrialization had led to "endless self-reflexivity and cognitive instability" as people spliced life into separate domains that they could not define apart from history in the way the Enlightenment had promised (Wood 335). Whereas the Enlightenment had promised that reason would lead to Truth, in actuality, a modern age dictated that more reason only led to more uncertainty, and the individual became stuck in a system without absolutes.

Philosophically, modernism led to individualistic thinking and therefore relativity. Philosophers began to agree with Nietzsche, who reveled in the thought that "Truth" is only "the will to be master of the multiplicity of sensations" (Rorty xvi). Philosophy saw a shift from groups seeking truth through what works to individuals deciding their own truth based on reasoning through their own sensations. Truth was no longer certain even in the sense that it could be decided by a community; instead it was relative based on individual belief. This prevalent uncertainty led to a complete lack of anything stable, including morality. According to Richard Rorty, relativists had to "give up on the idea that there are unconditional, transcultural,

moral obligations, obligations rooted in an unchanging, ahistorical human nature" (xvi). Rorty reiterates the modernist idea that one had to step outside of humanity to regard it in terms of history and social formations and then reject these things in order to form one's own individualistic belief. There could not be an absolute Truth that defined humanity but only loosely defined truth that rose from historical context and social constructs that benefitted the greater good. Truth as people see it had become "relative" rather than "objective" because it was only defined in terms of how it related to other conceptions. Derrida called the search for an absolute the search for a "full presence beyond the reach of play," meaning "an absolute beyond the reach of relationality" (xviii). If there was an absolute truth, then it would have to somehow transcend all social relationship or interaction with history. Therefore, modern philosophy severely limited the possibility of an absolute. Finding Truth became collectively or even individually impossible unless an individual could somehow separate himself completely from any historical context or relationship with other human beings. Thus, modernist belief marked a "rupture with the past" as the subject, or individual, began to distance himself from all outward restraint and make only individual feelings the basis for knowing truth of any kind (Murray and Tew 3). The modernist was supposed to be able to distance himself from a particular past or tradition that was now regarded as naïve and take an individualized neutral stance. The great irony of this, according to Gustavo Benavides, is that "the task of self-extrication proves to be perpetual" (Wood 335). Individuals were forced to constantly distance themselves from history and context and therefore could never reach any true absolute.

Technology starting with and following the Industrial Revolution largely contributed to the modernist individualistic mindset. Philip Tew and Alex Murray call the railway the most "representative image of Modernism" (4). The trains and the railways spreading across both

Europe and the United States in the latter half of the 19th century marked the "locus of innovation, speed, changing social relations." The railway system even formed its own standard time, altering the historical perceptions of not only space but also time (4). This new fluidity emphasized the alienation involved in modernity as individuals could become even more disconnected from the standards of history and from dependence upon other individuals as machines and systems began to replace people. This made the only sense of community one of "collective dislocation" and made space and time "multiple and ambivalent" (5). These advancements in travel and communication marked the typical schism of "newness" that also led to a more "mechanized" humanity (5). As individuals became less dependent upon communities, they were more able to distance themselves from history and tradition to focus on reason leading to their own relative truths and therefore no Truth, or absolute, at all.

These new rises in technology also led to innovations in consumerism and economics, one of the most influential being the new ability to produce 'mass media.' Mass media was an "increasing homogeneity of cultural production provided by technology" that led to an "increasingly homogenized and importantly apathetic society" (Murray and Tew 5). Mass media contributed to the loss of an absolute by providing products of distraction for people, erasing their need to find a Real. Idealist theories of aesthetic experience shifted to materialism (6). As mass media increasingly marketed mass production and consumerism, people began to define themselves by their privately owned goods and therefore became even more isolated and autonomous (Wood 337). "Traditional" cultures defined the human self as "social and dependent," a working part of larger society in which one became a "person" by fulfilling a social role (338). However, as mass production subsumed the collective and offered individualism, people instead defined their essential being as a constant search for self-

satisfaction. Mass media perpetuated this search by selling the ideologies and products that fulfilled the individualistic definition of "happiness." With so many distractions and opportunities to be happy, the materialism of a modern age not only left people without an absolute but also left them lacking the motivation to find one. The machine of production fostered an autonomous connection between humans and products as men and women defined themselves by what they did. They would therefore be tied closely with production; "the organization of a society governed by law, and a personal life governed by both self-interest and the will to be free of constraints" (Murray and Tew 12). Reason had led people to want their own free will; yet, they were still trapped in the machine of industry and capitalism. So people were forced to seek this "free" will through economic prosperity and consumerism, resisting historical tradition. This resistance was supposed to lead to affluence, freedom, and happiness; but, in reality, it was further destroying the ability to find happiness in a stable center and known Truth.

Modern politics further destroyed the opportunity to believe in an absolute. Although democracy appeared to offer the desired individuality and freedom of modernist belief, the human spirit was also constantly crushed by the oppressive tyrannies springing up in an age of war (Wood 346). Most prominently in Nazi-Germany, fear of government power and coercion had never been so "pandemic" as millions were murdered for arbitrary reasons, many by their own governments. Even in America, politics were corrupt and fear prevalent as people practiced surveillance on their neighbors "lest they themselves be devoured by the gigantic bureaucracy of oppression and manipulation" (346). This brutality of mass death and the bureaucracy of western governments led not to more gratified freedoms of individuals but rather a deep fear of traditional ideologies and power structures. Not only was a stable Truth not to be found, but now

individuals could see an established absolute as literally dangerous not only to the freedom of thought and reason but to their very lives and happiness.

Religion as a traditional structure could also no longer offer a stable reality as it was dismantled by fear and reason. In the modern age, religion became simply one of those "historical conditions," or traditions, from which individuals had to separate in order to gain their own complete understanding of self through reason. The modern world was left with a "cosmic vacancy" of "divine absence and abandonment" (Wood 345). Modernist belief accepted a Nietzsche-like "death of God" stance in a world where they had in fact abandoned God as another tradition constructed by societies for the benefit of the whole rather than the individual. In the reign of reason, even religious people would be forced to step outside of Christianity, or other religions, to prove the validity of their beliefs from a neutral point above the Church with its historical and cultural implications (342). Religion had become pluralistic and individualistic; no longer could God's act of self-disclosure be utterly final. Each person would determine his own religion and morals rather than base them on tradition or a historical text like the Bible (348). Now, reason alone could "establish a correspondence between human action and the order of the world." According to French social theorist Alain Touraine, "Religious thought had indeed tried to [establish this correspondence], but was paralyzed by the finalism characteristic of monotheistic religions based upon a revelation. Reason inspire[d] science and its applications; it also require[d] the adaptation of social life to individual or collective needs" (Murray and Tew 12). Science and reason allowed people to choose their own fluid "absolutes" and suggested that a real stated absolute in religion was distasteful. The arbitrariness of modernism made the very idea of a monotheistic God outdated and naïve along with so many of the other rejected histories and traditions.

The culmination of modernist fears and relativism came from the first and second World Wars in the first half of the 20th century. With the First World War, or the Great War, something new and terrible entered modern life in the form of battles not fought with "swords and catapults" or even with rifles but rather with "tanks and howitzers and airplanes." The modernist legacy of advancing technology and the powerful Machine had virtually led to mass murder. Instruments of war were no longer designed to kill individual soldiers but instead to wipe out whole armies and communities, to "lay waste to nearly every living thing" (Wood 344). Entire peoples were exterminated and political parties and oppositions blown away. Warfare was one thing about modernism at least that did not remain solely about the individual. However, Nietzsche's romantic idea of "cleansing warfare" brought all the fears started by technology, politics, commercialism and everything else to a frightening head. The escalated fear of death resulted in an even greater fascination with science and the limits of the body as a perceptual system (Murray and Tew 7). Devastating loss became a central part of the individual experience and led to a self-consciousness of the uncanny. Humans would now have to orient themselves toward self-disintegration in the face of weapons that could in fact lead them not only to death but literal nonexistence. If death was inevitable even with the medical advancements produced by the wars and technology, the purpose of life must be to live as long as possible and enjoy oneself (Wood 338). Due to the terror and the fear brought about by the wars, people would be even more convinced that the only place to look for truth was inwards and that a journey toward self-fulfillment until nonexistence should be the primary function of life.

Modernism was primarily a response to the Enlightenment promise that reason and thinking would lead to Truth. However, instead of leading to one absolute Truth, the Enlightenment raised more questions and showed the impossibility of forming a collective

absolute to which communities could adhere outside of history and tradition. Modernist belief

dictated that traditional societies had been built upon "manufactured" status quos that paraded as

ultimate Truth but really only caused people to be slaves to the system. Modernists tried to break

free of that system by rejecting traditional "Truth" to form new ideas as individuals. As

modernist thought moved into the unclear boundaries of postmodernism, individuals began to

realize that even personal truth is ambiguous and ultimately unknowable. Thinking began to

shift to the paradigm that perhaps there really is no Truth, and people are just able to find enough

distractions or enough truths to keep them satisfied until their inevitable deaths.

Tolkien wrote during this age in which individualism of the subject was starting to fail

and people were realizing that they had become stuck in the post-Enlightenment system of

unfulfilled promises and constant fear. Reason had led to uncertainty rather than ultimate Truth.

Science had led to chemical warfare and nuclear threat by the end of World War II rather than a

prolonged and fulfilling life. Religion had not only been deluded by science but had also not

come through on its own promises of humanism. The reason and individualism of the

Enlightenment had led to the opposite of illumination and clarification as fears became more

pronounced and confusion was more prevalent rather than less. The ambiguity of what could be

known and even what ought to be known was in intense conflict with the individual desire for an

authentic absolute that seemed to have disappeared in the midst of all this fearful "knowledge."

Part II: Even Language: Language theory according to Ferdinand de Saussure and Jean Boudrillard

Language is a social element that, like science and mathematics, seemingly represents the

Enlightenment ideal of reason in its logical, rational, and universal order. According to social

theorist Zygmunt Bauman, "'Through its naming/classifying function, language posits itself between a solidly founded, orderly world fit for human habitation, and a contingent world of randomness, in which human survival weapons – memory, the capacity for learning – would be useless, if not downright suicidal. Language strives to sustain the order and to deny or suppress randomness and contingency'" (Murray and Tew 14). Language fits the ultimate form of reason because its universal use of naming and classifying allows it to be straight-forward and ordered. However, modernists' ambition was to "access the impressionistic" to emphasize the disordered and chaotic. Modernists wanted to discover ambivalence and inner conflict that were not in keeping with the traditional stability of language while at the same time turning language into a scientific system. Structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure taught in the latter half of the 19th century and early 20th century in the *Course in General Linguistics* that language is in fact fluid and works from the same relationships between conventional signs and value in a similar way to the ambivalent Marxist arguments expressed in economics. Saussure turned the study of language into a science as a modernist celebrating language's arbitrary nature but also its scientific clarity. Later, post-structuralists like Jean Boudrillard would argue that the production and mediation of a new modernistic technology separated language from its original basic intent. Tolkien wrote his trilogy in the midst of this shift from the relative stability of language as a closed system in modernist study to the mediated and fluid language theory under more postmodernist arguments like Boudrillard's.

In order to understand Tolkien's text through Saussure and Boudrillard, one must first be able to recognize the terms they fixed in language theory. According to Saussure, the central "being" of language is the "sign," which is split into two parts, the "signified" and the "signifier." Language is a system of these signs that expresses ideas according to what the

surrounding culture has agreed upon (Saussure 851).   Saussure uses the word "sign" to

designate the whole where "signified" is the concept and "signifier" is the sound-image (853).

The "sign" itself designates this relationship between the signified and the signifier. Saussure

argues that "without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent

distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There

are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language" (856). Signs

and language are necessary for thought to exist under Saussure's assumptions. Saussure

continually reminds his readers to think of talking to themselves; when we form thoughts in our

heads, we are articulating "words" and therefore connecting images and designators in our

subconscious as we use the signifieds and the signifiers together.

Another important concept of Saussure's to remember before addressing his role as a

modernist is that of linguistic "value." Saussure draws this concept from Karl Marx's distinction

between "use value" and "exchange value" in economic theory. "Signification" is tied to the

characteristics of the object, and the "value" is entirely a function of the system of exchange, in

this case language (Leitch 847). This means that the value gives significance to a signification,

or a word. This value is determined not by the word itself but rather by the exchange of given

concepts within a community. Value is fixed by everything that exists outside of the word,

therefore connoting a negative relationship between significations in language rather than

positive. Saussure calls language a "system of interdependent terms in which the value of each

term results solely from the simultaneous presence of others." Words can be exchanged for ideas

or compared with other words. The value is not fixed because it can always be "exchanged" for

another given concept or word outside of the original intent (Saussure 858). As a result, rather

than pre-existing thoughts and ideas, we have a closed system that creates "values" based on

individual exchanges (859). This allows the actual system of language to be more important than the concept of an inherent, or absolute, language. Ideas and sound cannot possibly exist without the closed system in which the value of the signified can only be determined by the signifiers rather than absolutes.

In spite of the celebrated individualism rooted in modernist thought, many of Saussure's assumptions rest on the role of community in the function of language and its system. Apart from dependence on general society for the formation of signifiers, as a process language functions as a closed scientific system that successfully rejects all outside forces according to modernist ideology: "Linguistics could only become a science by eliminating all 'external' factors in favor of an exclusive focus on what [Saussure] called *langue*—'language alone' or 'language as such,'...Saussure modernized linguistics and everything else for miles around, not by proposing a comprehensive unified theory of knowledge but rather by stripping away most of what had been regarded as integral parts of language, leaving the abstract notion of systematicity itself" (Harpham 20, 21). Saussure focused on eliminating surrounding factors to study the system of language as a purely scientific element, therefore modernizing linguistics.

Despite the science of the language system, the connection between signified and signifier remains largely subjective. The arbitrary nature of the sign is at the heart of language as modern theory (Culler 117). The two elements of the sign, the signified and the signifier, evolved only under the influence of all forces that can affect sounds or definitions, meaning that the entire history and process of language depends upon the fluid or arbitrary nature of the sign (117). Saussure emphasizes that language is not just a naming process in which words are naturally and absolutely designated to pictures and ideas. The values of the sign that emanate from the system are entirely relative to the plane of ideas and articulations of the system, making

the sign arbitrary (118). Arbitrariness is essential to the study of language as a science, according to Saussure. The sign must be subjective: "The link between signifier and signified was not natural, given, inevitable, or necessary, but "arbitrary," as was the fact that a given sound signified anything at all" (Harpham 22). In order for Saussure to study the system of language, he had to claim that the system was not dependent upon natural associations, which could suggest a Greater Being, or upon historical tradition, or even essentially relying upon individuals within society.   Saussure also delineated that the values of words, or signifiers, are also entirely arbitrary: "If this were not true, the notion of value would be compromised, for it would include an externally imposed element" (857). That "external element," especially if it was a determined absolute, would corrupt the language process. The notion of value determines the arbitrariness of language because it shows "that to consider a term as simply the union of a certain sound with a certain concept is grossly misleading" as this would isolate the word from its system. For terms to have value the arbitrary signifiers must be given value by society; they cannot hold intrinsic meaning.

Saussure interpreted language as a system of science that could produce concrete definitions, though he recognized the arbitrariness within the system itself. Post-structuralists later recognized some of Saussure's inconsistencies with modernist thought. As Geoffrey Harpham says, "It is fascinating to watch Saussure as, against his powerful will and deeply held convictions, he finds himself forced to dissimulate this laboriously achieved concreteness" (21). Harpham goes on to argue that "words" can never really be separated from their histories, traditional uses, and orthographic forms. Saussure's argument began to break down in the face of post-structuralists who saw the downfall of removing all traditional systems in order to discover a relative reality.

Baudrillard was one such post-structuralist who used Saussure's terminology but broke language as a scientific system down in a postmodernist age to reveal the actual outside factors that play on language, in many ways to the detriment of the system. Boudrillard primarily explored the outside forces of consumerism and the culture industry that affect the sign and allowed society to further separate the signified from the signifier rather than maintain the close relationship that Saussure intended between the natural signified and the constructed signifier. Boudrillard acknowledged an outside system that has drastic effect upon Saussure's scientific and closed system of language.

Baudrillard recognizes the terms of the signified and signifier but adds the culture industry's images as signifiers and not only the sound-images or written words that closely represent the signified. Baudrillard argues that the signified, the original idea, is commodified by the increasingly consumerist society of the latter half of the 20th century, and this allows for a dangerous separation between the natural signified and the more unnatural signifiers. Even though Saussure established that the relationship between signifieds and signifiers was always arbitrary and never fixed, Baudrillard extends the theory to say that signifiers are no longer signifying originally natural signifieds but instead are just portraying other signifiers. According to Baudrillard, images reflect other images leading to an increasingly unstable and relative real. Baudrillard calls this new process of signs that signify other signs the "procession of simulacra." A simulacrum is a signifier, or image, that is describing another signifier; "Baudrillard takes this idea of the signifier-signified relationship further in discussing one of his best-known ideas, the concept of the *simulacrum*. He starts with the idea that the signifier-signified relationship is a relationship of a symbol to a notion of 'reality' – signifiers are representations…that point to something beyond or outside of themselves, something which supposedly has a reality of its

own, regardless of how it is represented" (Klages 170). As the production of the culture industry permeates consumer society, reality itself is no longer represented. Instead, copies of reality, or representations of representations, are what appeal to consumers as the 'real' and desired; "Simulacra, as signifiers with no signifieds, produce what we know as 'reality,' according to Baudrillard" (Klages 171). In Saussure's system, signifiers ultimately represent Real signifieds, although the connection of the sign was arbitrary. In Baudrillard's theory, however, consumerism replaces the natural Real that is represented by the system of language according to Saussure with another kind of 'real' as images become the base for other images. Baudrillard uses another distinct term to distinguish this kind of 'reality' from the natural reality of signifieds in his discussion of signs into simulacra. Baudrillard uses the term "hyperreality to delineate the loss of distinction between natural signifieds and simulacra that led to people accepting false reality. Hyperreality is the cycle of the culture industry reproducing their reproductions in order to sell images of the 'real' that are commodified from other images; "In the realm of the hyperreal, the distinction between simulation and the 'real' continually implodes; the 'real' and the imaginary continually collapse into each other. The result is that reality and simulation are experienced as without difference…In fact, simulations can often be experienced as more real than the real itself" (Storey 163). Hyperreality creates a dizzying effect for those living under the consumerism of the culture industry because the real is continually shifting and changing based upon the imaginary real of the other images. People are unable to find solid absolutes because what is supposedly true is always changing; "When the image is more 'real' than any other 'reality,' where there is only surface but no depth, only signifiers with no signifieds, only imitations with no originals, Baudrillard says, we are in the realm of *hyperreality*" (Klages 171, 172). Since the signifier has become its own signified, the real is

both the image started with and the image produced leaving consumers to live in a constant state of suspended and shifting reality.

This slow death of the actual in favor of created 'reality' led to a deep sense of nostalgia; "We are left yearning for the things we have killed, and 'nostalgia assumes its full meaning' as we create ever more signs to simulate those lost things" (Leitch 1554). This feeling of nostalgia left the public open to the culture industry creating even more signs and false reality to make up for the sense of loss. The public subconsciously felt their lack of a stable Real but allowed the culture industry was to produce representations to temporarily satisfy that desire; "The world is remade in the image of our desires. The signs (the images of what we want) exist before we create the thing to which the sign refers" (Leitch 1554). Since the public no longer had an actual Real to grasp, they allowed the culture industry to make it up and continued to grasp at that manufactured real in order to satisfy the sense of loss that creates the feelings of nostalgia. The scientific desire of Saussure and other modernists played a large role in driving the public to this need; "The West, with its compulsions to explore and to know the whole globe, is driven to *name* and to explain each thing it encounters. The name, our knowledge, replaces the thing. For the difference and otherness of the thing, we substitute the signs that translate, account for, and tame it within our own signifying system. This is why Baudrillard insists that signs murder" (Leitch 1555). Saussure followed the typical drive of modernism to separate and explain a system, but by reducing language to its own system he lost the essential of the Real in favor of linguistics and signifiers. Saussure himself admitted to the negative relationship of language that gives the sign value only by valuing other things represented by other signs. Baudrillard blames this sign/value relationship for a loss of authenticity; "[Representation] starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent…Conversely, simulation starts from the *utopia* of this

principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value,* from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1560). By creating a system in which representation is always necessary, Saussure reduced language and social constructs to too much of constructed 'reality' as the sign replaced the authentic absolutes that it is supposed to signify and represent.

Humans long for solid authenticity and many eras center around the search for that Real. The confusion of modernist belief left people longing to find their own individualistic meaning in life, but Baudrillard and postmodernism precluded the possibility of any absolute Truth as the culture industry replaced stability with distraction. Since we had no more satisfactory strategies to gain a real, we turned to the growing dominance of images and signs that the culture industry produced, thinking that they could at least give us momentary distractions or satisfaction in the nostalgia of what we sought. The 20th century has seen a progression that ends in this utter loss for something authentic and significantly better than our emptiness: "Baudrillard's general analysis supports Lyotard's central point about postmodernism, the collapse of certainty, the dissolution of the metanarrative of 'truth'. God, nature, science, the working class, all have lost their authority as centers of authenticity and truth evidence on which to rest one's case. The result is not a retreat from the 'real', but the collapse of the real into hyperrealism" (Storey 165). People were now being placated by a procession of simulacra that presented so many false realities that a stable Real that was so necessary could not be found.

Tolkien wrote between these extremes of language theory as history dictated a growing loss of faith in absolutes and the basic signified Real. Tolkien wrote during the modernist ideal

of "scientific" language systems that should be separated from the roots and meaning of history, but he also wrote in a time that the postmodern function of the culture industry was taking hold. The propaganda of the wars and the increasing consumerism following them was leading to a more Baudrillardian concept of the signified and signifier being so separated that the public was finding Truth impossible and instead substituting signs for reality. Tolkien rejected this confusion of mediated language and instead returned to the roots of English history to create his own language in which signified and signifier could have the basic relationship Saussure intended. Tolkien's text deviates from Saussure's modernism in the way that he ties his own languages into historical dialects, therefore also reminding the reader of his need to reconnect with his roots rather than live a separate function outside of historical tradition. Tolkien used the realm of story to satisfy his own philological interests, but his text also functions in a manner that reconnects audiences who are stuck between the modernist condition of non-history and the postmodern condition of mediation with their tradition of language in its historical value and the sense of getting back to a more solid signified.

Part III: The Roles of Tolkien

Like all authors, J.R.R. Tolkien wove his own ideologies and interests into his text and was also influenced by the ideologies surrounding him while he wrote, whether they infused themselves into the text or acted as something against which the author could react. Two threads of Tolkien's life evidence themselves throughout his text and give his text power to react against the separation of the signified and signifier. As a philologist, Tolkien rejected the modernist idea of language as pure science and reconnected it with the importance of its past. As a Christian, Tolkien uses his text as a sort of "heightened reality" in which he is seeking to teach his readers

but also connect them with the sense of the Real that he believed was embodied in the gospels and the Church, though it is not always explicit Tolkien's text. Tolkien's views on language and philology rejected the modernist ideal of seeing a system outside of its history while his Christianity not only connected him deeply with historical contexts but also gave him a belief in an absolute that allowed him to approach story with a view towards Truth and Reality.

A. Tolkien and language

Saussure recognized the human element in the production of language, but he tried to stand outside of the social constructs in order to explain language as a system. As proven by Saussure, language is in fact a scientific system, but language is also an important social activity. Language is part of human behavior and is primarily governed by humanistic tradition and culture. Society, and therefore language, is an intricate network of organized units, from the family, to nations, and even to those reached by mediated press and television (Potter 175). This means that parts of the social network inevitably affect other parts. Language is a means of communication that is constantly shifting and influenced by those who speak it. The health and fluidity of language depends upon the common people, the people who have historically changed language and are reading Tolkien's text. Spoken language daily refreshes the strength of language. According to essayist and critic Logan Pearsall Smith, "…human speech is…a democratic product, the creation, not of scholars and grammarians, but of unschooled and unlettered people…its roots are deep-buried in common soil" (qtd. Potter 178). As the "common people" affect language, it follows that they are also greatly affected by language. The fact that mass media reaches the "masses" means that the common people are influenced by mediation and therefore the degradation of language into that which represents the represented rather than

the Real. This leaves the masses hungering for something more authentic that they no longer

receive from simple social communication. These "common people" are then open to Tolkien's

re-authentication of language as art also speaks to the masses in a way that is not commodified if

it is acting as true art. Art, like language, is both inspired by society and influences society; "The

artist's created work – literature, music, painting, or sculpture – is inspired by contemporary

society and , if it is to be meaningful, it is handed back to that society again, and, through that

society, to the world at large" (Potter 179). This is especially relevant to Tolkien's text as he

constructed languages that have not been created or used by society but have been influenced by

the history of English-speaking peoples. Tolkien used the history that still belonged to

"contemporary society" in order to hand it back to them in the form of created languages that

subconsciously hearkened back to the languages of the ancient past.

Tolkien actively rejected the modernist view that anything, language especially, should

be separated from its history; "Tolkien was convinced…that languages and cultures are

inextricably rooted in time and place, that geography is hugely determinative of the way people

think and act, … that a people's first products are its myths and stories, and that these narratives

are the essential carriers of both religion and morality" (Wood 341). Not only is language

directly tied with history, but the stories that it tells are essential to form the cultures that have

formed the language. Tolkien might have argued that the first products of language are its myths

and that these stories then serve to shape a growing society. This is also why Tolkien hated the

idea of English becoming a universal language; "Such a commodifying of his native tongue

would destroy the vitality of the many local languages that English would come to displace"

(Wood 341). Tolkien believed in the importance of English history not only to his own tongue

but also to every culture. Language is a unifying element but also unique to its speakers; to take

that away is to deny a culture of its individuality. Forgetting the base of a language causes a culture to lose its mythical, moral, and social histories and runs the risk of giving up individual freedoms.

1. Philology's Role in the Text

Tolkien's career as a philologist was not just a job but defined his very psyche and life. Tolkien loved words, the sounds of words, the definitions, and especially foreign words, even from his childhood when he would see foreign names and places written on the sides of boxcars. Tolkien's love for words naturally connected him to story; "It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine" ("On Fairy-Stories" 75). Tolkien's love of story and history combined with his love for words and language inevitably led him to the role of a philologist. A philologist is someone who works with history and literature to explore entomologies and the intricacies of language. Tolkien demonstrated adamant affection for his England's ancient history; he was emphatic on preferring pre-1066 A.D. England to contemporary Great Britain. By creating languages that recall Old and Middle English, Tolkien not only created a story, but he created an entire mythology for his beloved nation to maintain English history and national identity. Tolkien was "preserving the epic language used to record the ancient deeds of a nation to preserve the cultural integrity of a nation itself" (Dawson 110). Hence, the philological saturation of Tolkien's trilogy: "Philological concern [is] at the core of…*The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien insisted on the primacy of philology in the genesis of his work: 'The invention of languages is the foundation. The stories were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse'" (Dawson 109). Language was so vital to Tolkien's

stories and philology to his essence that he created whole worlds in which to house them and an entire epic to present their social importance to the world.

The history aspect of Tolkien's philological studies was expressed largely in the characterization of his people groups throughout the epic as he incorporated ethnic elements of Old England into the characters. For example, the Riders of Rohan are largely representative of Anglo-Saxon society and the bravery of Celtic warriors. The female "princess" of Rohan, Eowyn, is another prime example: "Eowyn's name may be Anglo-Saxon, but the inspiration of her character—her fearlessness in the face of death, her determination to avenge her slain kinsmen and her refusal to be dominated by a foreign power—are very Celtic" (Dawson 106). In the text, Tolkien mixes some of the most important ethnic groups who created the language and legacy of Old England, maintaining history's diversity while also recalling the bravado and epic characters of the past. The Hobbits are the primary and most basic "English" group within Tolkien's world. Tolkien calls the hobbits "rustic English people" who are "small in size because it reflects the generally small reach of their imagination – not the small reach of their courage or latent power." Tolkien said in a letter that had he thought of it in the beginning, he would have given the Hobbits more English-sounding names in order to answer the very English-like Shire in which he placed them (qtd. Pearce 153). Tolkien did, however, still give the Hobbits English characteristics in the way they relate to the wider context of the created world. The Hobbits recognize "Englishness" as familiar to them; "Names which were totally familiar or usual to the Hobbits (whose point of view is important throughout the tale) had to be presented as names totally usual for English-speaking readers" (Stanton 152). The purpose of the Hobbits' Englishness was in part to connect Tolkien's English readers with their own past and allow them a familiar hero to which they could directly relate. In a letter to W.H. Auden,

Tolkien said, "If you want to write a tale of this sort you must consult your roots, and a man of the North-west of the Old World will set his heart and the action of his tale in an imaginary world of that air, and that situation" (qtd. Pearce 154). Tolkien set his world in Old England in order to hearken back to the beloved historical roots of English myth and legend as well as genuine historical context.

The setting of Tolkien's story also has much to do with language. Tolkien's study of philology and the growth of Old English allowed him not only to create the histories of his characters but also their languages. Tolkien's academic career bled into his personal life as even stories he made up for his children were endowed with made-up languages and philological concepts. To understand Tolkien's writings, we must also be able to explore his love for language: "…we must take full and proper account of the academic discipline which he spent his life studying and teaching – phonology, semasilogy, etymology and morphology of Germanic languages, and their relationship to the Indo-European family of languages" (Giddings and Holland 148). One of the most well-known of Tolkien's "made up" languages is elvish. Tolkien created a back-story and etymological context for the elves and also composed entire poems in the elvish language and style that show up throughout his text. The elvish language, Sindarin, is based on a "lost" Britannic language and is constructed to resemble Welsh phonologically by connecting British and Latin. This assemblage of languages offers an aura of linguistic reality to the text that draws readers to experience its constructed but also true Reality: "Linguistic authenticity was an essential component of Tolkien's attempt to recover England's ancient past…Aside from this intriguing philological aspect, Sindarin served an aesthetic purpose: just as Tolkien reveled in the pure beauty of the Welsh language…so his own readers could delight in the historical and linguistic richness that Sindarin brought to Tolkien's own mythological

universe" (Dawson 107). The elvish language offers an aesthetic of beauty that allows readers to remember the richness of their own English past. In a similar manner, "Black Speech" establishes the authenticity of a horrible and ugly language that belongs to an evil characterization. The tones in the language of Mordor are harsh and menacing; hearing the language is as dreadful as Sauron's dominion would be, integrating the very moral quality of language into the structure of the world (Stanton 149). The sounds of language, even to the reader who is not conscious to the philological aspects, demonstrate the importance that language plays not only in myth but in morality and the construction of society.

B. Tolkien and Christianity

Many critics have espied Christian themes throughout Tolkien's trilogy, themes from suffering to the conflict of good and evil to the possibility of eternal life. Beyond the more obviously Christian themes, Tolkien's work deals christianly with story by representing universal Reality. Not only did Tolkien believe in the "Transcendent Signified," or a God who embodies Truth beyond the mediation of a postmodern era, but Tolkien also demonstrated a faith in an Absolute, a faith that was quickly being lost in his contemporary culture. Even aside from the fact that Tolkien's Absolute is the Judeo-Christian God, Tolkien's text supports continued Truth in the world and, even better, asserts that Reality can still be known.

Many might argue, Tolkien among them, that story can be more real than the "real" in which we live, especially in terms of mediated language and truth brought about by the ever-growing strength and influence of the culture industry. American science-fiction and fantasy author Stephen R. Lawhead said that Tolkien's trilogy transports the reader to a "heightened reality" that is not always discernable in the "partial reality in which we live." According to Lawhead, "This heightened reality [leads] the reader closer to ultimate truth which Tolkien

believed was God Himself. Therefore, since Truth, properly understood, was Perfect, it was to

perfection that our quest for reality, or realism, should be directed. The imperfections of life, the

ambiguities and ambivalences of everyday existence, though real in a limited sense, only detract

from the greater reality, blurring the vision" (qtd. Pearce 147). In an age when "real" consists of

signifiers signifying other signifiers, we cannot possibly reach authenticity through a world of

images. People need authentic feeling in a story like Tolkien's in order to relearn the attachment

of the signifier to the signified and therefore rediscover natural Real rather than imaged "real."

Rather than another distraction, as some claim, Tolkien's text is an "escape into ourselves, the

quest to rediscover the essence of the self amidst life's distractions…escape in order to 'go

home'" (Pearce 147). Jesuit father James V. Schall says in his essay "On the Reality of

Fantasy," "The unsuspecting reader, who thinks he is only reading 'fantasy' in reading Tolkien

will suddenly find himself pondering the state of his own soul because he recognizes his own

soul in each fairy-tale" (qtd. Pearce 147). Tolkien's text draws its realism not from exact

representation but from the deep universal emotion that connects with humanity on a deeper

level. One of the ways in which Tolkien succeeds at the "realism" of fantasy is in keeping with

history, linguistically and in narrative form. In a letter dated 15 December 1956, Tolkien said,

"…I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect "history" to be

anything but a "long defeat" – though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and

movingly) some samples of glimpses of final victory" (qtd. Pearce 148). Tolkien does not

deviate from realistic narrative by making everything so happy or so tragic that it is not aligned

with, and fully representative of, true history. Instead, Tolkien offers a full range of truths and

emotions to make his work realistic; "…the work, because it is 'romantically religious,' is, like

formal religion, both heartening and frightening—heartening because it offers solace for the

world's ills of evil and death, frightening because in order to offer this solace it must stress the existence of these ills and the inevitability of them" (Reilly 194). Tolkien does not deny reality in order to join the postmodern ranks of those who distract audiences from true Reality to offer constructed truths. Rather, Tolkien's firm belief in an absolute and the importance of realistic representation and emotion allows him to present many basic truths in the form of an epic narrative.

C. Language, history, and Reality through Treebeard as a Character

Treebeard, of the Ent race, is a character who closely depicts the importance of language, its connection with the natural world, and its connection to reality. Treebeard and the Ents value immensely the natural world of the forests and the trees that they "herd," and their very looks and language reflect the vitality of nature and history. Treebeard and the Ents through both their society and their language represent the ideal Baudrillardian world of language by connecting as closely to the signified as possible with very little or no mediation.

The Entish language is emphasized throughout Treebeard's discussion with the Hobbits as a language that is complex and slow-moving because each word speaks the entire history of what it represents. In their own language, the Ents do not just speak a simple signifier to define a historically rooted concept but dictate an entire philology for each word: "In Entish every word is a narrative. Treebeard has told the Hobbits that in his language names tell you the history of what they designate…" (Stanton 153). When the Hobbits first encounter the Ent, Treebeard is not accustomed to speaking in the common tongue and cannot at first remember the word for "hill." When the Hobbits remind Treebeard of the word, he says that "it is a hasty word for a thing that has stood here ever since this part of the world was shaped" (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 455). Treebeard repeatedly points out the "hastiness" of the Hobbits as he prefers to remember

nature and history in everything he encounters instead of naming them and moving on.
Treebeard does not dismiss the signifieds for their signifiers: he does not give up the Real for
representations of real. Treebeard also cannot fully explain his name to the Hobbits who do not
understand his language. Treebeard says of his name, "…it would take a long while [to tell]: my
name is growing all the time, and I've lived a very long, long time; so *my* name, is like a story.
Real names tell you the story of the things they belong to in my language…" (454). Treebeard
represents Tolkien's ideal character in terms of language as he desires to tell the entire histories
and entomologies of whatever he is naming.

Not only does the entish language closely represent nature, but Treebeard's very ethos as
a character signifies a close connection with a universal and absolute Real. Sam describes
Treebeard's ancient and natural presence in their first encounter: "'One felt as if there was an
enormous well behind [Treebeard's eyes], filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady
thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present; like sun shimmering on the outer
leaves of a vast tree…I don't know, but it felt as if something that grew in the ground…had
suddenly waked up, and was considering you with the same slow care that it had given to its own
inside affairs for endless years'" (452). Treebeard's appearance to Sam translates in many of the
same ways that natural language and history ought to relate to people. Treebeard represents the
past, but is also relevant to the present and the future. Treebeard has encountered the ancient
times of history and the ancient languages and applies them to his current situation as he must
deal first with the Hobbits and eventually the evil of Saruman. Treebeard represents the ancient
use of language but also history itself. G.K. Chesterton similarly compared Traditionalism to a
tree: "…a tree goes on growing, and therefore goes on changing; but always in the fringes
surrounding something unchangeable" (qtd. Pearce 167). It is interesting, then, that Tolkien also

uses a tree-like creature to represent the passage of time and the connection of language to history and the natural world. Treebeard remains largely unchanged by the past, and yet, he is an observer. Treebeard is deeply rooted in the Real and can accurately interpret the quick passage of other races and historical events through Middle Earth. However, Treebeard and his language remain connected to the Real, and this is why they can remain stable throughout history. Tolkien uses Treebeard to represent the stability and possibility of an absolute and the importance of staying deeply connected to the roots of all history and language.

Critics argue that Treebeard's fight with Saruman represents the fight of the natural against the movement of industry. However, Treebeard's role in the story is deeper than nature versus mechanization as his language also reacts against modernism. Treebeard subverts the modern condition of dismissing history in favor of pure reason and instead encourages full connection to absolute signifieds. Treebeard represents the opposite of commodified and mediated language as he roots his words in what they represent and the very history of what they represent rather than using signifiers as images of concepts.

IV.   "On Fairy-Stories"—Connecting Story with Reality

Some may think it ironic that Tolkien uses fantasy to imply his belief in Reality; however, to Tolkien at least, there can be no greater Reality than that of language embodied in story. Tolkien discusses this connection between reality and story in his lecture, "On Fairy-Stories." In the lecture, Tolkien defines what he means by a "fairy-story" and therefore defines successful fantasy. Tolkien also connects fairy-story to the importance of history and myth that makes it vital to human nature because language and myth are nearly one and the same.

In his lecture, Tolkien adamantly rejects the definition of "fairy" and "fairy-story" as given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in favor of his own, more philological contexts. According to Tolkien, "…fairy-stories are not in normal English usage stories *about* fairies or elves, but stories about fairy, that is *Faerie*, the realm or state in which fairies have their being…Most good 'fairy-stories' are about the *aventures* (sic) of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches…elves are not primarily concerned with us, nor we with them" (Tolkien "On Fairy-Stories" 42). The fact that Tolkien talks so seriously, even realistically, in regards to the "realm" of faerie and the existence of creatures we deem fantastical speaks to his desire to present story as Reality and therefore connect with a more authentic Real than just representing the images we recognize. Tolkien uses the structure of story to discuss human nature; "the magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time" (44). Rather than escape space and time, like modernists desire to do, Tolkien uses them, particularly time, to create the "magic" within story that is so important to his formation of Reality. By "traveling" time, fairy-story has a unique effect; "Such stories [of fairy-tale setting] have now a mythical or total (unanalysable) effect, an effect quite independent of the findings of Comparative Folk-lore, and one which it cannot spoil or explain; they open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe" (57). Tolkien places his trilogy in a world that is assumedly England, or similar to it, in a time that is obviously long ago, though not so long as to be completely beyond recognition. By connecting his story so directly with history and reality, Tolkien is able to "magically" satisfy the human desire to "escape" our own time but in the best way possible because we are also connecting with our historical mythology.

According to Tolkien, history and myth are in many aspects the same thing. When discussing the "origins of fairy-stories," Tolkien says that "to ask what is the origin of stories (however qualified) is to ask what is the origin of language and of the mind" ("On Fairy-Stories 47). Mythologies, like language, give rise to life and to thinking and, as follows, to culture. Just as language and story go hand-in-hand, so do history and myth; "History often resembles 'Myth', because they are both ultimately of the same stuff…Small wonder that *spell* means both a story told, and a formula of a power over living men" (56). Tolkien suggests that a story, or a myth, is just as influential as history because, culturally and socially, they are both made up of Reality. Tolkien says that to approach the Christian Story from the direction of myth allows him to see God redeeming the corrupt "making-creatures," or man, from their strange nature both through the story and the Reality. According to Tolkien; "The Gospels contain fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories." Tolkien goes on to say that the Gospels contain many marvels that are artistic and moving: "'mythical' in their perfect, self-contained significance." Tolkien says that the Gospels are allegorical in the best way possible, in that they have the "inner consistency of reality." However, Tolkien also believes in the truth of the Gospels, it is not just a moving story; "there is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath" (83, 84). Reading the Gospels as narrative myth does not make them any less true; instead, The Reality of the Gospels is made up of the most True thing, and His truest of stories is relatable to us by the concept of Nature, the most basic signified that we can grasp. Tolkien understands that it is not just the Truth in history of the Gospels that make them so life-changing and make them an authentic absolute to which we can grasp. Along with

the history exists the narrative, and it is the Truth found in the nature of feeling and character in this story that really speaks to humanity and is accepted.

Concluding remarks:

Through his use of language and history, Tolkien addressed the condition of the separated signifier and signified by bringing people back to their roots and presenting an authentic Real. By creating his own myths and his own languages, Tolkien hearkened back to English history but also removed all mediation as his audience discovered for the first time the intricacies of Tolkien's literary world. The combination of the modernist and postmodernist conditions had left people with a drastically mediated language and existence that denied an authentic and created a fear of one's history.

Tolkien's text offers a solution to the problem by revealing a world that is both complicit with the past and a brand new mythology that offers connections between the signified and signifiers that are basic and can be truly known, leading to a stronger faith in an authentic Reality. The work recalls the past and makes it relevant to the present: "Through the poetic process, things and persons who have long disappeared are remembered and recovered in language, and thus become part of the eternal present, the present of the very act of telling a tale or listening to a song" (Dawson 115). Tolkien did not just create a new "story" for people to follow to authenticity, he also raises the past and allows people to address history rather than stand outside of it. Tolkien studies often focus on invention, and this is an important part of his mythology, but Tolkien's "fantasy" world follows his very own definition of "fantasy" in which the myth is more Real than culture's manufactured "reality" of the present. However, some people have decried Tolkien's work as "escapist." Not only does Tolkien deny the negative

connotations of this term, but his work is actually drawing the reader more into history rather than allowing him to escape from it as the culture industry does with its manufacture of distraction. Tolkien's work on the other hand "was supposed to draw the reader deeper and deeper into an appreciation of his inheritance… They were expected to read, first of all, for enjoyment, but if they studied, to study the book as reality. The cultural background of it is as carefully indicated to the reader as are the source-books" (Giddings and Holland 158). However, it is not just through study that one can appreciate the history implicit within the text; the effect of the languages on the audiences is largely subconscious. Tolkien touches on familiar mythology and history that involuntarily draw English-speaking readers to remember their roots without acknowledging that this is what they are doing. The power of Tolkien's text lies in its ability to not distract from society but rather move society towards the possibility of a Real through creating a world that is not commodified and mediated.

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