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THE VICE OF THE ARTIFICIAL LANGUAGE AND MYTH

Abstract: J. R. R. Tolkien describes the artificial language-creation as a secret vice in one of his famous lectures. In my paper I attempt to interpret this enigmatic statement. I compare the mythology conception of Tolkien with the myth-creating claim of the Early German Idealism and Romanticism. I emphasize the significance of the pleasure principle and solitude beyond the relevant notion of Tolkien. The organic, natural structure of language and myth makes the artificial creation of these two phenomena to vicious practice. I suggest that the solution of the enigmatic sentence lies in the artificial abuse of naturality.

Keywords: Tolkien, Schelling, Schlegel, Novalis, Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, myth-creation, artificial languages, artificial myths, 'secret vice', pleasure principle

The Art of the Living Myth

Despite his wide-ranging oeuvre, J. R. R. Tolkien mostly influenced his contemporaries and his posterity by his prose-writing, or rather, his myth-creating work. This correction – that overrides public opinion – was necessary because the creation of a mythical world cannot be clearly identified as a usual literary act: while the former one strives for creating a complex collection of stories that has its own linguistic and cultural background – though occasionally burdened with inconsistency –, the latter aims for writing relevant, confined products that have their own aesthetic strength. Myth-creation should be seen as a particular pastime that, even if it has its literary relevancy, bears radically different motivation and structure. On the following pages, I will try to approach the significance of this Tolkienian work towards a special understanding of a scientific occupation.

The phenomenon of conscious myth-creation is presented in a conceptual tension that defines the practice from the beginning. Though myth is not a natural formation, it rather exists by itself that being a product of a usual creative process. Mythology as such was by no accident described several times as of organic nature: the intertwining stories and their modifications, the diffusion of the variants, all open the way towards the metaphors of liveliness. Tolkien himself approaches myth as a living entity which must be interpreted with a suitable prudence for the ramifying analysis destroys its substance. He wrote about *Beowulf*:

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“The significance of a myth is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends; who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography, as our poet has done. Its defender is thus at a disadvantage: unless he is careful, and speaks in parables, he will kill what he is studying by vivisection, and he will be left with a formal or mechanical allegory, and, what is more, probably with one that will not work. For myth is alive at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected.” (Tolkien 1936, p. 256–257)

Myth has an organic structure which can be adequately explained with the help of the mythomorph approach. If myths are examined with a different method, there is a risk that their substance may be lost. This is emphasised by Tolkien in his writing, *On Fairy-Stories*, where he analysed the peculiarities of the fairy element:

„Such studies are, however, scientific (at least in intent); they are the pursuit of folklorists or anthropologists: that is of people using the stories not as they were meant to be used, but as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information, about matters in which they are interested. A perfectly legitimate procedure in itself—but ignorance or forgetfulness of the nature of a story (as a thing told in its entirety) has often led such inquirers into strange judgments.” (Tolkien 1983b, p. 119)

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This structure seems considerably problematic if we talk about the artificially created nature of myths: how can we reconcile these two, absolutely contrasting ideas? Although analysis labelled as vivisection completely eliminates the natural liveliness, still, there exists an artificial method with which these formations can be created. Of course, this paradox is only present on conceptual level – since common sense easily resolves the contradiction; but this confusion in the terminology results in serious consequences with regard to the whole phenomenon.

The myth-creating process, positioned among organic and artificial tropes, must have some kind of meaning on its own. The question is not which spiritual and rational factors prompt someone to do such work or what authorial intentions motivate the creative process; the question is what kind of principle makes this work sensible. What lies at the substance of this act, what gives the eidetic core to artificial myths? Tolkien basically distinguishes two factors in the process of myth-creating that makes this act meaningful: first, an imminent pleasure principle; second, a truth that points beyond the mythical texture.

“The peculiar quality of the ‘joy’ in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a ‘consolation’ for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, ‘Is it true?’ The answer to this question that I gave at first was

(quite rightly): ‘If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world.’ That is enough for the artist (or the artist part of the artist). But in the ‘eucatastrophe’ we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater—it may be a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world.” (Tolkien 1983b, p. 155)

As Tolkien depicts this almost blasphemous idea, he immediately starts to apologise, as if he tries to take the provocative edge off of his statement; its bold wording, at the same time, was absolutely reasonable. He expounds that he thinks that the Gospel consist of fairy tales, at least in the matter of their substance: thus, in the epilogue of his *On Fairy-Tales*, he attributes to fairy tales a more sophisticated substance; their importance is emphasised by the truth incorporated within them (Tolkien 1983b, p. 156). It is necessary to highlight that this truth is not allegoric but is represented in the glimmering hope rising from the stories and their backgrounds. The truth revealed by myths and fairy tales only in this manner can imply some kind of moral lesson (Tolkien 1983c, p. 73). It seems that in the final section of the text, he makes an attempt to reconcile Christian faith and our need for myths: the Evangelium becomes the justification for the fairy tales: “The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them (...)” (Tolkien 1983b, p. 156). If we want to understand the nature of artificial myths, we should consult an anthology on History of Philosophy that also deals with the dual need for Christian heritage and myth-creation.

“We must have a new mythology!”

Even in the period of German Idealism, the necessity of myth-creation arose. The idea appears in *The Earliest Systematic Program of German Idealism*, by unknown author; according to the book, there is a need for a certain sensual type of religion that would give an aesthetic appeal to our ideas. This proposition is immediately amended in Tolkien’s mission statement: the best solution is the adaptation of the mythological structure:

“First I will speak about an idea here, which as far as I know, has never occurred to anyone’s mind--we must have a new mythology; this mythology must, however, stand in the service of ideas, it must become a mythology of *reason*.” (Schelling, Hegel and Hölderlin 1997, p. 72)

Philosophy must be mythological, mythology must be philosophic; thus the sensual and the rational dimension should meet; therefore, in this conception, mythology would illustrate the thought. However, by way of reciprocity, myths cannot be downgraded to pure sensual didactics or hypotyposis; they become the primary manner to enunciate the world. Here the monotheism of the reason and the

heart, and the polytheism of imagination and art unite: this duality will allow, as stated in his writing, that the era of general freedom and intellectual equality once arrive (Schelling, Hegel and Hölderlin 1997, p. 72). Myth creation has a normative function beside its descriptive function: it renders possible a necessary transformation of society.

The need of myth-creation appears with similar emphasis in the philosophical-poetical ideas of the Jena romantics. In his book, *Dialogue on Poesy*, Friedrich von Schlegel considers mythical structure a solution to the highest inexpressibility. This new mythology – for which poetry offer a framework – should not originate from the sensual directness but from the deepest depth of the spirit, similarly to the intentions of Tolkien’s program (Schlegel 1997, p. 181). The world is organised by chaos; so if we wish to recreate it, we have to create a form that is equally unorganised. Myth seems to be the most appropriate to accomplish this task since it is a *work of art* of nature, thus its form stands above all the other forms. As Schlegel remarks, the crowd of ancient mythological gods is the most beautiful symbol of human nature: we must be familiar with this chaos to understand reality (Schlegel 1997, p. 186).

If we lay emphasis on the analogous ideas, such as the reconciliation of monotheist and mythical preferences, the preservation of myth’s own characteristics, its truth-mediating role, then we are duly suspicious that Tolkien has some similar secret motivation as in the case of the representatives of German Idealism. The substance of myth-creation does not end in playing for its own sake; it is a certain experiment to recreate reality. Although I have already foreshadowed what problems can be solved by the introduction of mythical structure, if we want to examine the question in detail, it is profitable to start from the primary method to describe reality: from language. In *Structural Anthropology*, Lévi-Strauss called our attention to the contradictory relationship between myth and language:

“There is a very good reason why myth cannot simply be treated as language if its specific problems are to be solved; myth *is* language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech. In order to preserve its specificity we must be able to show that it is both the same things as language, and also something different from it.” (Levi-Strauss 1963, p. 209)

Language is the elementary medium of myth; these two forms are far from being the same. The particularity of myths show itself in translation: while a typically language-based lyrical work is untranslatable without a certain deformation, myth can be just as much expressive when translated as the original (Levi-Strauss 1963, p. 210.). We can even state (with certain restrictions) that myth expands and reflects language. We cannot understand one of its forms without the other; obviously, we need both to create them. In his lecture, *A Secret Vice*, Tolkien expresses his thoughts on how to create artificial languages; he even mentions how the creation of an

artificial language is impossible without mythology: “(...) the making of language mythology are related functions.” (Tolkien 1983a, p. 210.) This link is reciprocal: „your language construction will breed a mythology” (Tolkien 1983a, p. 211).

A Secret Vice

In the following pages, I will expand on the ideas of the quote to reconstruct what intention stands behind the artificial myth- and language-creation. We declared that myth is alive, almost a natural phenomenon; it is an even more relevant statement regarding language. If we take into consideration the ideas of the aforementioned Early Romantic thinkers, language can be described as a specific entity that is limited in its uncontrollability; owing to its liveliness and self-determination, it always confuses its user. In *Monologue*, Novalis writes about a self-centred language:

“If only one could make people grasp that the case of language is similar to the case of mathematical formulae--they constitute a world for themselves--they play with themselves alone, express nothing other than their wonderful nature, and precisely for that reason they are so expressive--precisely for that reason they mirror in themselves the curious play of relations in things.” (Novalis 2003, p. 214)

The creation of an artificial language seemingly contradicts this nature of languages since it wants to control its natural changes. However, it should not be forgotten that Tolkien’s primary intention was to add something unsubstantial to God’s creation, to complement the created world in an imaginative fashion, and not to curb the irrational and arbitrary nature of languages (Tolkien 1983b, p. 156).

Thus, in this case, myth- and language-creation is not analogous with an engineering and controlling work; it is the mimeses of God’s creation. Language-creation is, consequently, an imitation, a copying of a natural process. The text mentions Esperanto as the typical example of artificial languages: an artificially created language that was not created by a linguist (Tolkien 1983a, p. 198). We can get closer to naturalness if we abandon expertise; this is reflected in the cook-metaphor: the great number of experts would create something completely unacceptable. Tolkien later revised this opinion: the change was triggered by the reconsideration of the craft-notion. Originally, the artificiality of expertise was confronted with everyday naturalness, but, after the change, a new opposition appeared: the contrast now shows between the learned craftsman of the Middle Ages and the alienated expert of modernity.

The text also reveals that Tolkien finds a particular form of linguistic truth in the creation of artificial languages instead of the possibility of controlling meaning. A

poetic word is able to imply more than a prosaic or purely scientific utterance by the harmony between meaning and phonetic form:

“(...) we unaware often that the answer is simply that by luck or skill the poet has struck out an air, which illuminates the line as a sound of music half-attended to may deepen the significance of some unrelated thing thought or read, while the music ran.” (Tolkien 1983a, p. 218)

This specific musical truth initially was omnipresent. Tolkien describes a natural, ancient era, when poets could freely shape the language, set their words to the melody (Tolkien 1983a, p. 218). Artificial languages resembling dead languages can paradoxically recall the happiness of this natural ear, for phonetic form and meaning form a harmonic unity in these languages (Tolkien 1983a, p. 207). Artificiality thus strives to revive naturalness.

A question arises: why I used the word *vice* in the title of my discourse, since I have shown that the process of artificial creation attempts to fit into the divine scheme (moreover, myth aims for transmitting in its own special way a truth described religious), to evoke a natural state, to pay homage to the characteristics of the language. What could render this prudent and obedient practice vicious? If we mention the question *vice* only in parentheses while analysing the text, we forget about its importance; therefore it is indispensable to investigate his writing from this point of view.

Maybe the figurative structure reveals it. Tolkien describes *vice* as a secret offence committed by a lonely person or a smaller group. Discretion in itself is not a key to *vice*, rather a consequence of the act: “For though I have made much of the secrecy of the practice of this art, it is an inessential, and an accidental product of circumstances.” (Tolkien 1983a, p. 202) Writing a text is self-revealing, some kind of confession, in which he confesses to *vice* that is dear to him. He is ashamed of and approves it at the same time; he has no intention to put an end to it. The act of arbitrariness motivates him, which was represented by a sentence of the Unknown Soldier: “Yes, I think I shall express the accusative case by a prefix!” (Tolkien 1983a, p. 199) Tolkien was overwhelmed by the unusualness, the artistic caprice of this utterance:

“Just consider the splendour of the words! ‘I shall express the accusative case.’ Magnificent! Not ‘it is expressed’, nor even the more shambling ‘it is sometimes expressed’, nor the grim ‘you must learn how it is expressed’.” (Tolkien 1983a, p. 199)

The substance of this secret *vice*, which fascinates Tolkien, is nothing more than the arbitrary act that attributes a meaning to a certain phonetic form, and sense to a certain marker. This task, in theory, is performed by the unconscious work of a

society; however, the creator of a language separates himself from the others, and he himself carries it out. It is not the activity that is vicious but its solitary practice. The creator of an artificial language is deprived of the possibility of communication; he reaches a state that Tolkien calls *shy individualism* (Tolkien 1983a, p. 203, 213). The work of a solitary creator is too beautiful and too sentimental from both semantic and phonetic point of view since it is created exclusively for his own use (Tolkien 1983a, p. 212-213). This language, and the myth created by its help, will reveal a personal taste; the creation entails an atmosphere so intimate that others are excluded from the beginning. The language and the myth created by this method will only refer to its internal system; it cannot be criticised for it was never intended to be shown to an audience.

Over the course of the description of the *vicious* practice of language creation, the role of the pleasure principle prevails. This is an artistic, spiritualised pleasure that reaches its peak in the musing on the relationship between sound and meaning; it is not vulgar hedonism (Tolkien 1983a, p. 206-207). Tolkien himself points out that – though it sustains the strength of the artificial creation – the pleasure principle in itself renders it impossible for the environment to affirm the act; that is the reason why he offers other principles. He relies on pedagogic and philanthropic arguments, but his hesitation gives away his uncertainty, and, once in his writing, he openly expresses his worry: “This idea of using the linguistic faculty for amusement is however deeply interesting to me. I may be like an opium-smoker seeking a moral or medical or artistic defence for his habit. I don’t like so.” (Tolkien 1983a, p. 206) He tries to add his own dense opinion to the image in vain; the situation practically remains the same: language creation permeates into the discourse of happiness.

The artificial nature of pleasure principle

The lengthy descriptions of childhood experiences, the presentation of secret, concealed joy, and the lonely and intimate act: all use such figurative concepts that rely on a code different from the metalinguistic one. Tolkien announces the presence of this code: “The instinct for ‘linguistic invention’ – the fitting of notion to oral symbol, and pleasure in contemplating the new relation established, is rational, and not perverted.” (Tolkien 1983a, p. 206) It is obvious that there is no perversion, the pleasure portrayed by Tolkien is of rational nature – it is indisputable. It is not a coincidence, nevertheless, that he makes excuses for linguistic creation from time to time exposes itself to a particular code system of sexual quality. This proximity naturally does not render the text ambiguous: without misinterpretation, we are not able to read into the text a sexual hint, not even from the psychoanalytic perspective. Still, in the western way of thinking on language, there is a great tradition of assigning the sexual codes to the description of the problematic characteristics of a language by the metalinguistic system of notions.

The reason of this adoption is the copresence of several factors; the most important of them is the notion of the origin of language. If we want to retrace the origins of language understood as organic, then it has to borrow its final, tropic closure from the notions of proliferation. Rousseau also connects language formation and passion: in his *Essay on the Origin of Language*, language only appears when two young people met at a drinking fountain, and they wanted to express their passion to each other (Rousseau 1966, 43-45). Since the text is partly historical analysis, it is supposed to dwell on the characteristics of choosing partner then reconcile it with the dispersion of early manhood; thus love is incestuous. Rousseau originates language from the era that preceded taboos; moreover, he connects it to a practice that is deemed to be pervert by our own values. The history of language is given a precise narrative; it connects to an artificial beginning. From here, language as an artificial act is inserted to this onanistic or incestuous logic.

The paradoxical universality is added to the intertwining of these two discourses. While both sexuality and the creation of a proper language demands for the most intimate signs, in reality, its process is absolutely general. My innermost being and my most personal relation use a form as general as possible. That is why the language of one's own, that reflects the most personal taste, is sentimental: the others who could present differentiating factors are not present thus beautiful will take its most saccharine form that is in contradiction with the so-called personal preferences.

Derrida, in his *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, based on texts by Lévi-Strauss, investigates the particular logic of structure. The structuralism of structure only materializes if it is not controlled by a principle; for an organising force, which exists within and without the structure, brings an end to the game within (Derrida 2009, p. 352.). Myth that appears ideally as a typical structure cannot have a centre, an organising force. Its characteristics hide in its divergence and disorder. The logic of the myth overwrites the most basic distinctions; it does not allow any kind of generative distinctions. Lévi-Strauss's opposition between nature and culture does not prove lasting, either. The former is universal and spontaneous; the latter depends on the norms describing a society. However, the phenomenon of incest appears; it overwrites the distinction: its taboo is both universal and social at the same time (Derrida 2009, p. 357-358). The source of the problem is the following: we have to use the distinction even though it is impossible to accept it from an epistemological point of view. The solution of Lévi-Strauss is the so-called bricolage: he uses it as a means while he criticizes its value of truth (Derrida 2009, p. 360). Bricolage is a typical mythopoetic course of action, myth-creation itself (Derrida 2009, p. 361). (It is usual, that a craft becomes a metaphor for myth-creation.)

It is not accidental that the quality of the artificial and the natural meet in the phenomenon of incest for Lévi-Strauss, as well. The pleasure of language and the sexual lust follow the same structure because both represent the miss of functionality.

When Rousseau finds the essence of language in figurativity, he has to connect it to passions instead of utility. Thus language loses its functional principle, the communication. The same movement can be detected in the field of sexuality: if we disregard the aim of procreation, pleasure is the only sense left. According to the general logic of metaphysics, the expedient is also natural, what does not appear to be useful, can only be described as artificial, external, supplementary. Therefore both the pleasure of creating language and the pleasure of creating myth are artificial, while the qualities created follow the paradigm of naturality.

The playful structurality demonstrated by Derrida becomes diabolic for Tolkien, since it is something that has to be controlled. Tolkien cannot affirm the duality of artificial and natural because this way he should reduce the sense of creating language and myth to the principle of pleasure which would hold the activity in the secret vice. This harmful relation can be enriched by a particular fatalism, that is, its symbolic representation can be found in *The Silmarillion*. In the part, titled *Of Túrin Turambar*, the main character (who is also referred as the master of doom) finally gets defeated by the doom: he thought that Niniel is his lover but it was revealed that she is actually his sister (Tolkien 1999, p. 267-268). The coincidence of love and brotherly love is the symptom of failure here, too. The danger of the structurality's structurality, which surrounds the problem as a doom out of control, appears in this taboo.

The self-destruction of structure: the principle of justice

As it was indicated at the beginning of our paper, besides the principle of pleasure Tolkien legitimates another way to create language and myth: such an artificial process reveals a sort of particular justice that justifies the sense of practise. This transcendent justice, over the myth and language, is able to restrain the unrestrained structurality of structure. Tolkien integrates an organizing principle into his qualities, Derrida demonstrated its presence in the self-destruction of structure (Derrida 2009, p. 352).

The connection between the myth and the gospel indicated above provides the base for this principle to prevail. We can meet a kind of pleasure here; however, this pleasure has a Christian sense (it is called 'Gloria'). The artificial myth is able to reveal the justice of the Great Eucatastrophe, even if mysteriously and remotely (Tolkien 1983b, p. 156). This Christian justice reflects to the definition of real science which is outlined in the lecture titled *Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford*. The base of real science is the desire to knowledge which doesn't take care of external aims, not even the idea of self-improvement (Tolkien 1983d, p. 228-229). The scientific work has to be based on voluntary sacrifice and it has to be motivated by real and honest curiosity. Tolkien thinks the principle of justice

apprehended like this is able to legitimate the activities that seem to be pastimes completely out of sense.

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