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Tolkien's A Secret Vice and 'the language that is spoken in the Island of Fonway'

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Note: I delivered a shortened version of this paper (entitled 'Early Explorers and Practitioners of a shared 'Secret Vice') at the May 2016 International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, Michigan as part of the Tolkien and Invented Language Session.

On the 29 November 1931 at the meeting of The Samuel Johnson Society at Pembroke College, Oxford (at 9pm) J.R.R. Tolkien gave a talk to students and guests called 'A Secret Vice'. During our research for the newly published HarperCollins edition of *A Secret Vice – Tolkien on Language Invention*, Dr. Dimitra Fimi and myself, after many months of searching the records of various Oxford literary and philological societies, tracked down the actual minutes in the Pembroke College archives of this meeting which gives a first hand account of what Tolkien spoke about that November night. We have published excerpts from these minutes taken by club secretary J.B. Booker in this edition. One of the most striking part of this report is Tolkien's mention of a curious language spoken 'in the island of Fonway'.

Professor Tolkien went on to discuss those languages which were composed of words entirely their own, whether derived phonetically, or from some other (probably dead) language. The most interesting example of the phonetic type of language is that spoken in the island of Fonway, which apparently has no connection whatever with any other known language, nor is it spoken or understood elsewhere than in this one small island. (*Secret Vice* 2016, p. xxxiii)

The minutes are referring to that part of Tolkien's 'A Secret Vice' talk which can be found in the 'Secret Vice' papers held at the Bodleian Library (MS Tolkien 24). For whatever reason, these pages were not included by Christopher Tolkien in the original published version of the talk in the 1982 volume *The Monsters and The Critics and Other Essays*. However, the placement of these papers in the folio indicated to us that these pages were part of the original talk Tolkien gave and not a separate note he wrote before or after the

talks (as other papers in this portfolio which we have published clearly are). Our assumption was proven by the newly found minutes of the Samuel Johnson Society meeting.

In this paper I want to briefly explore the details of this unique *Fonwegian* language. I will suggest that Tolkien's curious evocation of it served several purposes. First, it was Tolkien's attempt to suggest elements of an invented language that, while based on real world phonemes, showed evidence of being entirely individual. Secondly, it was Tolkien's way of paying homage to past language inventors. Finally, it was Tolkien's interesting and slightly ludic way to present an example of an invented language which suggested several key characteristics that Tolkien felt were important to the make-up of an art-language (i.e. a language invented for fiction) which his own nexus of Elvish languages would reflect.

First the language itself - as it is fairly new to Tolkien scholarship. Tolkien's introduction of it is quite curious given the pattern and pace of the talk he was delivering that night. After some false starts, Tolkien launches into the main subject of his paper 'the construction of imaginary languages in full or outline for amusement' (11). He makes the point that given the nature of this art or game it is usually practiced in private (hence the somewhat playful name for his paper 'A Secret Vice'). In one statement that has been restored to the talk (it not appearing in the 1982 edition) Tolkien indicates:

I give no names. I have made small efforts of research. I use as evidence merely some of the material that sheer chance has brought my way. So I give no names.
(8)

An intriguing statement by Tolkien which I shall return to. After this Tolkien launches into a fairly autobiographical review of his own past language invention taking his readers through his early experience with *Animalic*, his own participation in *Nevbosh* and then giving details of his first privately invented language of *Naffarin*. Tolkien characterises *Naffarin* as still being influenced by 'learnt languages' (namely English, Latin and Spanish) but also showing 'a nascent purely individual element' (20). One of the key characteristics

of this nascent element is the construction of words that deliberately attempt in their invention to not reflect a direct or overt relation to a primary world language. In exploring this particular element further, Tolkien says that in attempting to invent individual names and words 'the absence of alien elements is not of first-class importance (18). Here Tolkien may be thinking about some examples of invented languages for fiction in which the creator tries to make the language look 'alien' by just jumbling together a series of consonants; what Ursula K. Le Guin in her introduction to Conley and Cain's *Encyclopedia of Fictional and Fantastic Languages* characterises as 'Aliens were Xbfgg and Psglqkxxk' (Conley and Cain 2006, p. xvii). Rather, Tolkien suggests that a very alien word-form could be constructed out of purely English phonetic elements; since 'it is as much in habitual sequences and combinations as in individual "phonemes" or sound-units that a language, or language maker [and here Tolkien first wrote 'expresses its peculiarity' but crossed it out and wrote 'achieves individuality'] (*Secret Vice* 2016, p. 19). He then gives a suggestion that this can be achieved by turning an English word (in this case 'scratch') backwards phonetically ('staerks') making the point 'each phoneme being perfectly native but the total entirely foreign' (19). This is where this new *Fonwegian* language comes in to the talk as, in part, an exploration of this attempt to deliberately make an invented language achieve this sense of being 'individual'.

From a narrative perspective, Tolkien's own introduction of *Fonwegian* is curious in several respects. Tolkien reports that he 'recently became possessed by accident of some secret documents – a grammar and glossary and some sentences spoken in the *Fonwegian* language spoken apparently in the island of *Fonway*' (21). Could Tolkien's 'find' be part of his earlier statement that 'I use as evidence merely some of the material that sheer chance has brought my way' (8) – with a parallel between 'possessed by accident' and 'sheer chance' in Tolkien's description of this material. Perhaps. While doing my PhD thesis (where I first encountered these pages) and then again in preparation for co-editing the new edition of *A Secret Vice: Tolkien on Language Invention* with Dr. Dimitra Fimi, we did fairly extensive research into where this language could have come from. Certainly the closest primary world analogue to it is 'Norway/Norwegian' but there is nothing in the materials available that suggest any link to this people or language. I am fairly sure that what we are seeing here is Tolkien the myth-maker using a story to introduce *Fonwegian*

to his listeners. Tolkien is presenting this as material that 'sheer chance' (if chance you call it!) has come accidentally to him and is thus reporting what he found. Certainly this type of framework for telling a story was not new to Tolkien. As far back as his first major expression of his mythology in the 'Book of Lost Tales' materials (c. 1916-1920), Tolkien used the reported narrative framework of first Eriol and then Aelfwine to hear, record and transmit to intended readers his own emerging mythology. The use of this narrative framework (and others) would remain a key part of Tolkien's mythopoeia (see especially Flieger 2001). Moreover, Tolkien's use of the 'found manuscript' topos was certainly not a new idea and had been used by earlier inventors of art-languages; suggesting the second reason I have given for the inclusion of *Fonwegian*: Tolkien's paying homage to this tradition as well. For example, in the 1871 hollow-earth inspired traveller's tale *The Coming Race*, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's unnamed American traveller reports on the language of the subterranean creatures who spoke *Vril-ya*, including a fairly comprehensive grammar and vocabulary as well as an exploration of the development and decay of language inspired by the works of the philologist of the time Max Müller to whom Bulwer-Lytton dedicated the book. In Percy Greg's 1880 early science-fiction traveller's tale *Across the Zodiac: The Story of a Wrecked Record*, the found document topos includes a report on the language of 'Martial' spoken on Mars for which Greg constructed noun declensions and verb conjugations from which he developed such phrases as 'Zefoo zevleel, zave marneel, claftae caratheneel' – 'A Child cries for the stars, a maiden for the matron's dress, a woman for her shroud' (Conley and Cain 2006, p. 3). The very lay out of the fragments of *Fonwegian* grammar Tolkien gives on these pages suggests the types of layouts Tolkien may have seen in works such as these as well as in this historical grammars that inspired his and possibly others language invention.

So why the change from a straight autobiographical exploration of his growth as a language inventor to this one? I would suggest that the hint here may be in the statement Tolkien uses to introduce this material 'which will save the paper from being too autobiographical' (21). Throughout 'A Secret Vice' Tolkien makes the point that he wishes he had more examples of other peoples language invention to share. For example, when exploring *Nevbosh*, Tolkien states 'It is difficult to get evidence of higher stages' (18) and then wrote in brackets 'This must be my excuse for becoming more and more

autobiographical – regrettably and from no arrogance. I should much prefer the greater objectivity of studying other people's efforts' (ibid). After taking this autobiographical approach with *Animalic*, *Nevbosh* and *Naffarin* perhaps Tolkien felt he needed to use the 'found manuscript' idea to introduce to his listeners to the next example of his language invention?

So that's the why – but from what source or 'leaf mould of his mind' did Tolkien invent *Fonwegian*? As stated in the commentary to *A Secret Vice*, while Tolkien offers no note on what the name *Fonway* or what *Fonwegian* means, there are two possible avenues for further investigation. First the /Fon/ phoneme may harken back to Tolkien's 1904 chiding rebus message to Father Francis Morgan which contains the expression 'cheefongy' dances which is later defined as 'Frenchified Prances' suggesting 'cheep frenchy dances' (50-51). Therefore, could /Fon/ refer to an element of French (one of the 'learnt languages' that as we will see Tolkien mentions in his notes for the *Fonwegian Grammar* – see *Secret Vice*, p. 21). And thus *Fonway* was meant to have some unspecified relation to French? As *Fonway* is an island, another example of language invention that Tolkien may be slightly alluding or at best paying homage to is the work published by an unknown author who published under the name George Psalmanazar who was actually a friend of Samuel Johnson (and thus a possible link to The Johnson Society). He claimed to be from the island of Formosa (modern Taiwan) and published specimens of the Formosan language which became an 18th century sensation (including creating a whole cottage industry in inscribed Formosan fans) until it was debunked by Sir Edmund Halley (of the comet fame) as a complete fabrication. The elements of invented 'Formosan' we have (including a phrase by phrase translation of 'The Lord's Prayer' – just as Tolkien would do in the 1950's in his own Elvish languages – see *Vinyar Tengwar* 41, pp. 5-30); indicates this language was an *a posteriori* invented language (i.e. using overt elements of primary world languages) that has a certain musical sound to it (see Conley and Cain 2006, pp. 85-86). However, given the evidence we now have of *Fonwegian* it does not appear that Formosan was a direct influence on the phonetics or structure of the language. Although, as I will explore in a moment the island idea may not be too far off.

The only other place that the word 'Fonway' appears in the 'Secret Vice' materials is on the

right margin of the page Tolkien wrote notes on James Joyce and Poetry (Secret Vice 2016, p. 91), where Tolkien makes a short list in pencil 'Own Corpus – Fonway – aiþei'. We are not sure if these notes were made at the same time as the James Joyce notes. 'Aiþei' is the Gothic word for 'mother' and also appears on a page of Elvish consonants and places of articulation – Secret Vice 2016, p. 94). Could this be Tolkien making a list of his examples of his own corpus of language invention: Fonway and 'aiþei' representing a word from his Gautisk/Gothic-inspired language which he worked on in c.1910-1911 shortly before changing to his early Qenya Elvish language?

Returning to the minutes of the meeting, it was reported that the *Fonwegian* language was the most interesting example of languages 'which were composed of words entirely their own, whether derived phonetically or from some other (probably) dead language' (Secret Vice 2016, p. xxxiii). This minute point picks up the several times Tolkien emphasized the

individual sense of the *Fonwegian* language. For example while Tolkien states that the structure, 'the scheme', of the *Fonwegian* grammar is dependent on learned languages like Latin and French (21), he goes on to say 'its phonetic evidence and its mechanism is peculiar and individual and appears to owe nothing to English, French or Latin' (21). The dependency on the learned languages for the structure of the fragments of *Fonwegian* grammar Tolkien gives is clear in the scheme of pronouns and the mini-declension of an undefined noun 'con'

				Neuter	
Pronouns:	<u>ib</u>	<u>noh</u>	<u>won,</u>	<u>wone</u>	wonos
	<u>imer</u>	<u>noher</u>	<u>woner,</u>	<u>wonere,</u>	<u>wonoser</u>

Thus con making		con	cone	conos
	gen	conis	conise	conosis
	pl.	coner	conere	conoser
		coneris	conerise	conoseris (21)

Tolkien brings back his exploration of inventing individual words by reversing English phonetically (the 'scratch/staerks' point I outlined above) by characterizing *Fonwegian* as

'it clearly illustrates my point about staerks above. Its sounds are English, its grammar largely Latin, but it remains individual' (21). Tolkien also seems to imply that he (in this seeming imaginative framework) may have transcribed the *Fonwegian* documents he 'found'; stating 'a "character" runs through it as clearly as it can and by one person's handwriting using the traditional cursive handwriting of Europe.' (21) So perhaps what we are seeing, and Tolkien is reading out, is meant to be the product of a possibly phonetic transcription from another writing system; an element we know Tolkien was very interested in based on the various writing systems he invented to phonetically express his languages. When transcribed into the 'traditional cursive handwriting of Europe' this act made the *Fonwegian* words look more derivative of learned languages than they really originally were (one wonders what they would have sounded like to the listeners that night).

Tolkien specifically emphasizes the point about originality by first listing from his 'found' glossary of 250 *Fonwegian* words [which he may have read out, as there is an instruction to do so – although we don't have a full list of these words and one wonders if this would have taxed the patience of the listeners] those *Fonwegian* words which do suggest derivative origin from one of the 'learnt languages'. Words mentioned in the pages from Tolkien's talk that fall into this category include:

ac (and), *momor* (death), *agroul* (field), *epish* (letter), *amosa* (love), *pase* (peace), *regensie* (queen), *nausi* (sailor), *pen* (foot), *lauka* (praise), *rogis* (red), *glabisi* (sword), *usut* (useful), *vase* (voice). (22)

Other *Fonwegian* words that Tolkien characterises as derivative but do not show overt primary world sources include:

caphill (?), *taxtos* (?), *ponb* (girl), *dubu* (many), *malle* (mother), *pagos* (father), *pullfuga* (plough), *ruxa* (nose), *teplöse* (time). (22)

Tolkien gives only a tantalizingly few of the more original *Fonwegian* words.

wegolang (good), *fugolliuk-a* (a Guild), *tellabrif* (conqueror), *wedfor* (enemy), *wag*

nose (fill up), **fonlogos** (book), *wrun workskula* (word) *cun cunfordos* (carriage), **fonwella** (attack), *tuudadulla* (fear), **brugwalla** (guard), **huntilla** (despise – hun?), **didula** (defeat), *regullarum* (horse), **hugwolla** (I guard), *fubullala* (teach), *pindulla* (laugh), *cablea* (sing) (22)

In terms of these individual words, Tolkien notes that trisyllabic words is one of its noteworthy features (e.g. 'wegolang', 'tellabrif'). He also lists several word groups that seem to be formed from certain base roots (an element that was the morphological basis of his Elvish languages). So the 'obvious' /fon/ is used to form the words 'fonlogos' book (logos suggesting a possible Greek origin) and 'fonwella' attack. There is also a series of words that end in -lla with two variation for the word for horse 'regullarum' and sing 'cablea' (which I have highlighted above).

Tolkien also makes a curious note that in *Fonwegian* there is presumably an absence of 'onomatopoeia' and cites two Fonwegian words – laugh in 'pindulla' and sing is 'cablea' (22). Tolkien seems to be suggesting here that the formation of these Fonwegian words do not come from what he characterises in his 'Essay on Phonetic Symbolism' (which appears for the first time in the new 'Secret Vice' edition) as 'not in essence 'symbolic'. In essence or rather in rudest form it means imitating physical sounds with organs of speech' (64). This suggests that the invention of *Fonwegian* words were based on more complex use of sound symbolism than just onomatopoeia. Although, as Tolkien states, 'in this moderate effort it is difficult to state what this specific character is; in what its Fonwegianness is therein' (22). It was this understanding of what creates the specific individual flavour of language which Tolkien characterised in a related note in the 'Secret Vice' materials as 'this is particularly important to a language having a very clear and artistic phonetic individuality.' (84)

It is at this point in his talk that Tolkien actually evokes an example of past language invention that the Fonwegian language suggests.

'The whole is slightly reminiscent in fact of the Swiftian characters as seen in Scrops vouchsafed of the Lilliputian, Blefuscanduan and Brobdingnagian idioms' (22)

Indeed, this homage and ludic intertextual interlude at this point in Tolkien's 'A Secret Vice' talk is to one of the major, but not the first, inventors of elements of invented language from fictional works, the Anglo-Irish writer Jonathan Swift (1667-1745). In his 1726 satiric work *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift used invented names, places and phrases with a different and unique sound-sense to distinguish the various peoples that Gulliver related from his many shipwrecks on several islands which each possessed its own unique and individual languages. These peoples, their cultures and examples of language are communicated to the reader intertextually by the use of the traveller's tale framework.

Tolkien characterizes Fonwegian as 'a general Swifitan character pervades all the whole' (22). Tolkien's interest in the phonetically variant names and words Swift invented is further shown in a separate note in 'The Secret Vice' papers on which Tolkien made a list of names and phrases from Gulliver's first three voyages which appears for the first time in this new edition (85-86). The notes Tolkien makes on these names clearly indicates his interest in how Swift used different sounds to distinguish different peoples. For example, after listing names and phrases from Gulliver's First Visit to Lilliput and Blefuscu (i.e. - the 'large Gulliver' story). Tolkien then makes a note that Swift used a different series of consonant clusters 'gl, gr, lg' for names and words for the Brobdingnagian idioms (where Gulliver is small); suggesting Swift is using the sound-sense of these clusters to distinguish these words (and therefore peoples) from those of Lilliput and Blefuscu; such as the invented word 'Grildrig' meaning a very little man (86). Indeed, in the talk Tolkien states 'Swift makes some effort to differentiate the Lilliput type from the Brobdingnag' (22). However, he immediately counters this slighting by stating 'one would not (underlined) be able unerringly to assign many words to pygmy or giant' (22). This suggests that Tolkien thought Swift did part of the job in his name invention of creating words with specific and individual sound-sense that distinguished the pygmy Lilliput from the giant Brobdingnag. In a later communication from 1937, Tolkien stated to his publishers that his own Elvish name invention was coherent and consistent because they were based upon two related linguistic formulae which achieves a reality and an illusion of historicity that was not fully achieved by other name-inventors such as Swift and Dunsany (*Letters*, p. 26). Therefore, while Swift's name invention showed some signs of using sound-sense to distinguish

peoples, what it lacked in Tolkien's view was the morphological structure that lay behind Tolkien's own Elvish names; constructed from base roots and attendant sound combination rules that combined symbol, sound and sense with structured morphology and grammar. Tolkien characterises this process in one of the related notes published for the first time in the new edition of *A Secret Vice* as 'simplest form of game, decide on the sounds and combinations, invent words according to rules' (99).

Finally, In addition to evoking the work of past language inventors, like Swift, I would suggest Tolkien was also using his 'accidentally' found' *Fonwegian* language to illustrate several key characteristics that by the time he first gave this talk in 1931, had become crucial elements of Tolkien's invention of art-languages.

1. That invented words in an art-language should have a sense of 'fitness' between symbol (the word-form and its sound) and its sense or meaning and this should make up the nature of this language. As I have shown, this is reflected in Tolkien focus on the sound nature of *Fonwegian* by characterising it as original 'in both its phonetic evidence and its mechanism is peculiar and individual' (22). Tolkien also says that 'the association of sound or symbol & sense is singularly free from pressure of tradition. Practically nowhere can one perceive the association implied by English' (21). What Tolkien's plan for this sound-sense actually was can not be clearly ascertained by the frustratingly few original *Fonwegian* words that he gave (one wishes he spent less time on words that have derivative suggestion and more on ones that did not). They clearly do not reflect or look like any other words from Tolkien's pre and Elvish language invention. Indeed in his review of the new edition of *A Secret Vice* for *The New Statesman* John Garth characterised this language as ' a glimpse of a previously unknown Tolkienian language – reminiscent (as he says) of the scattered names in Gulliver's Travels. The most surprising thing about it, coming from Tolkien, is its ugliness.' (Garth 2016) One wonders if a note Tolkien made on one of 'The Secret Vice' manuscript pages may apply here 'And even here the best results are achieved...by making a 'language' in which the sounds do 'mean' something (though only perhaps to the author)' (92). Perhaps the individual *Fonwegian* words was Tolkien's attempt to move as far as possible from the

influence of the learnt languages that clearly influenced the derivative *Fonwegian* words and the grammar; while maintaining a desired, unfortunately unknown, sound-sense that was not just a jumble of 'alien' sounding words. That the make-up of these words clearly helped Tolkien make these points in his talk; is strong evidence that this language was invented by Tolkien and not the product of 'small amounts of research' (8) he had done for the talk.

2. That an invented art-language should be underpinned by a system of grammar; of which we (unlike *Nevbosh* and *Naffarin*) have fragments of for *Fonwegian* (but no sentences as Tolkien reported 'finding' in the *Fonwegian* papers!). For Tolkien, at heart a philologist, the construction of 'elaborate' and 'ingenious' grammars was a key element, and passion of his language invention as evidenced by the massive amount of grammars and language papers that The Elvish Linguistic Fellowship is still in the process of carefully and thankfully publishing.
3. Finally, that the language should be a coeval and concomitant element of myth-making and world-building. Indeed, as Tolkien says almost directly after introducing *Naffarin* and *Fonwegian* in '*A Secret Vice*': 'At one suggestion, I might fling out the fact that for perfect construction of an art-language it is found necessary to construct at least in outline a mythology concomitant...your language construction will breed a mythology' (24). And in a related note published in the new edition Tolkien wrote 'one must construct also a verse and a mythology or one's masterpiece is incomplete' (98). These statements prefigure what Tolkien would state several years later in his drafts to *On Fairy-stories* as 'Mythology is language and language is mythology' (*OFS*, p. 181); a mantra which Verlyn Flieger has so eloquently contextualized as 'No modifiers, no explanations, just seven words that convey Tolkien's bedrock belief about words and what they do.' (Flieger 2011, p. 242). Although we don't have much of it, we can characterise Tolkien's taxonomic list of invented *Fonwegian* words in a similar way to one of the earliest examples of language invention – the 10th century abbess Hildegard von Bingen's *Lingua Ignota* which consists of her invented list of words for the world around her – as an element of myth-making and world-building (see especially Higley 2007). Finally,

Tolkien's introduction of *Fonwegian* is itself positioned as part of a story of a 'found manuscript' which as I have explored evokes some of the ways past language inventors for fiction sought to embed art-langs into their traveller's tales. So in effect there were two levels of mythopoeia in concert with glossopoeia happening on that November night.

Conclusion

As you can see Tolkien's evocation of *Fonwegian* spoken 'in the island of Fonway' in his 'A Secret Vice' talk suggests more questions and avenues of research for Tolkien students and scholars and it is hoped that this new edition including the restoration of this section of Tolkien's talk will encourage more exploration of the 'game' or 'art' that Tolkien unveiled on 29 November 1931. This 'art for which life is not long enough' (11) that would go on to influence and shape the art-languages of the world-builders that would follow him; from the 'taH pagh taHbe' of Hamlet in the original *Klingon* to the 'Hash yer dothrae chek?' of David J. Peterson's *Dothraki* for HBO's *Game of Thrones* and the many thousand of practitioners of today's not so secret vice (including yours truly!). A legacy that probably would have astounded Tolkien and may well have pleased him.

Dr. Andrew Higgins

15 May 2016

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