

Tolkien's Middle Earth and His Passion for Languages

by

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J.R.R. Tolkien, like Owen Barfield, had an early affair with languages. His mother introduced him to Church Latin at an early age. From that time on, he began making up his own words and languages. It's a skill he would later employ in his major work: *The Lord of the Rings*. Eventually, Tolkien went on to master many European languages. Among the ancient and modern languages, he particularly have a strong affinity to Latin, Gothic, Welsh and other languages of Scandinavian descent.

Tolkien loved poetry more than prose for the reason that it expressed the rhythms and character of the language in its pure form. In his early twenties, he encountered an Anglo-Saxon poem by Cynewulf called *Christ* ('Christ'). He was particularly struck by the following lines of the poem:

Eala Earendel engla beorhtast
Ofer middangeard monnum sended!
Hail Earendel, brightest of angels,
Above the middle-earth sent unto men!

He find these words very beautiful. In his *Notion Club Papers*, he commented how these lines of the poem moved and stirred him and that there is a kind of moving quality coming from an older world.

Tolkien went on to explore this ancient world. Caldecott wrote extensively about this journey in his book: *The Secret Fire*. The remaining part of this essay is an extract from the latter's work on Tolkien's exploration and the role that Owen Barfield played on it.

Tolkien believed..... “that the way back to the past was through language itself, and the ‘linguistic ghost’ that are traces and vestiges of the ancient world in modern speech or name. At the end of his life, the obituary composed for The Times some years earlier by C.S. Lewis described Tolkien as having traveled in some sense ‘inside language’

A fellow philologist later asked him whether he managed to journey to the inner landscape of language. He ‘readily admitted’ having done so. For him, Language itself had an interior: by penetrating within it, he found himself entering the same imaginary world to which his special dreams were pointing. In fact, the older world is a world both ancient and interior, which is precisely what we mean by mythic.

By the end of the long vacation of 1914, Tolkien was staying at the Phoenix Farm in Nottinghamshire. There he wrote a poem, the first fruit of his meditations on the mysterious verse from Cynewulf. It was called ‘The voyage of Earendel the Evening Star. It was the beginning of all that is most original in Tolkien’s mythology. You will find the most developed form of it at the heart of ‘The Fellowship of the Ring. It is the song composed by Bilbo that Frodo hears, half in a dream, in the Hall of Fire in Elrond’s house. It begins as follows:

Earendil was a mariner
the tarried in Arvernien;
he built a boat of timber felled
in Nimbrenthil to journey in;
her sails he wove of silver fair,
of silver were her lanterns made,
her frow was fashioned like a swan,
and light upon her banners laid. ...

It goes on to describe how the Mariner (father of Elrond Half-Elven and distant ancestor of Aragorn) achieves his mission in the Undying Lands, and being forbidden to set foot again in Middle-earth, is sent by the Immortals to journey for ever in a silver, winged ship across the shoreless skies, shining now and forever as the brightest stars above Middle-earth, the ‘star’ we know as Venus. .

The phrase is close to the heart of Tolkien's poetic vision of the cosmos. It also illustrates the importance of language, of the sound of words, of poetry, for the inner journey that he was engaged in. It gives us a hint of the ancient world and its mythic history. The sound of the individual words in the phrase also gives them their musical quality and the ability to touch the heart.

Language remained the key to this reconstruction, and a glance- at the theories of fellow Inklings Owen Barfield can help us understand how. For Barfield, the development of consciousness, mythology and language go hand in hand. He believed that human consciousness and language have evolved together from a state of "original participation" in which subject and object, word and thing were virtually identified, to a state of alienation in which they are separated to such a degree that the sense of connectedness — from nature and with each other — has been lost. The earlier form of consciousness expressed itself primarily in myth, in poetry and metaphor. Ancient languages used images and things to express its meaning. Later, with the development of abstract thought, metaphor falls into the background, and for a scientific consciousness detachment and measurement become important. This is a necessary stage in the emergence of a new kind of participation, a conscious communion with all things heralded in human evolution by the appearance of Christ..

The opposite of abstract thought, Barfield tells us, is symbolic thought or imagination. Following Coleridge, he divides phantasia into two, on the one hand 'fancy' or the mere image-making capacity and on the other 'imagination', which is a creative and perceptive power (Tolkien prefers to call the higher faculty Fantasy, so the terminology is reversed but the basic idea is the same)

Myth-making or mythopoeia, for all the Inklings, is an act of creative imagination. It is close related to the poetic roots language itself. Naming is not merely the attachment of arbitrary labels to things, but involves us in the imaginative and intellectual grasping of what they are. To give a name to something is to pick it out of context, to identify it as a thing in itself, and to perceive at least something of its character and purpose in relation to ourselves. Poetry takes this to another level. It discovers the things revealed in experience to be analogies, similes, metaphors, symbols, each in some sense pregnant with inexhaustible meaning. We 'know' things more completely by finding the connection

between one thing and another, and between myself and all those things, in a way that illuminates both.

The study of etymology, of the origins and evolution of word forms, could therefore be a journey back in time and consciousness, for the words themselves – and especially the concrete metaphors they were originally based upon- bear traces of original participation.. Readers of The Lord of the Rings will recall the words of Treebeard to Merry and Pippin: ‘Real names tell you the story of the things they belong to in my language.’

REFERENCES

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