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### **Glimpses of lost home in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Owen Barfield**

The works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Owen Barfield each develop a lost home motif in their respective works. In Tolkien's mythical world of *The Silmarillion* humans are forbidden to set foot upon Valinor. Catastrophe occurs when the prohibition is broken. Elsewhere, he describes, for readers, in *On Fairy Stories* how our use of imagination, especially in poetry and myth-creation, gives us glimpses of something beyond our everyday lives. To Barfield, our ancestors literally experienced a different world, which we lost as mankind's consciousness evolved. For both of these members of the Inklings, separation is here to stay. And for both writers, habits of imagination can give us glimpses of the world we lost.

In *The Silmarillion* Tolkien provides a myth-cycle that shows the history of Middle-earth, including its creation by Eru Ilúvatar. Readers see the dedication of the Valar, the secondary gods, who join their destinies to the land in order to participate in the ordering of creation according to his plan. They want to be present for the awakening of the children of Ilúvatar (Elves, Men, and finally, Dwarves). The major issue in the history is the rebellion of Melkor, the greatest of the Valar, who fights to ruin the plans of Ilúvatar if he cannot be the creator himself. Throughout history the Elves are called to join the Valar on their island home of Valinor. Melkor plants seeds of fear and hatred among the Elves and Men so that many never reach their intended home. He provokes a blood-letting among the Eldar on the island resulting in their mutinous defection of Valinor for Middle-earth and setting up hatreds that will last for ages.

The original myth-cycle *The Silmarillion* is the foundation of the lost home motif that is developed throughout the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. The Elves have lost a home that calls out to

them throughout the ages. And, mankind has also lost a home because he is forbidden, upon his awakening on Middle-earth, not to sail west on the sea or to step foot upon the shores of Valinor. To the men and women of Númenor the Valinor is a mere story, a lost paradise, and the Valar are mythical beings who may or may not exist. At the end of the second age, Sauron, carrying on the rebellion of Melkor, inveigled the men of Númenor to sail west to Valinor for the purpose of seizing immortality from the Valar. This misguided action provokes Eru Ilúvatar to cleanse the land with a cataclysmic reshaping of creation from flat to a sphere.

The island of Valinor remains in the same place in space even as Middle-earth pulls away to its new shape. The result is that only Elves know the path across from Middle-earth to the lost home of Valinor. When *The Lord of the Rings* opens, groups of Elves, such as the one led by Gildor Inglorion, are making their way to take the last ships home because they know their age is coming to an end. And it is the final ship that Frodo and Bilbo are allowed to take with their friends Gandalf and Elrond at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, which is the beginning of the fourth age.

Another example is in *The Book of Lost Tales*, a discarded attempt to frame the stories of the myth-cycle with the story of a traveler who temporarily finds his way to a land where he hears the stories and then he returns to our world but can never return to what we know is Faerie.

In *On Fairy Stories* Tolkien describes the use of imagination in reading and creating fairy tales as the act of recovering a lost vision of the true world. Imaginative vision assists us in catching glimpses of something larger and more enduring than what is found in our everyday lives, in other words, our lost home. He wrote:

“Recovery...regaining of a clear view. I do not say “seeing things as they are” ... though I might venture to say “seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them”—as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows, so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity...” Misc. 129

He also embraces escapism as a desirable function of fantasy. In responding to critical derision of “fantasy fiction” he claims that escapism is heroic. He argues that a man should not be condemned, when he can’t escape, if he talks and thinks of other things than his imprisonment. He wrote, “The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it.” p. 131. And, Tolkien explains, fantasy assists the reader or writer to retain a connection to that “world outside” that is so easy to forget. In short, Tolkien saw his fantasy work as a path to a reality or home that calls to us all.

Now I transition to the work of Owen Barfield. He also describes a lost home. In his case it is the loss of an Edenic relationship with nature. His belief is that mankind’s function is to be the Earth’s self-consciousness. In his point of view, objects in the world do not exist the same, independent of our consciousness, as they do when we perceive them. He wrote that when we are engaged imaginatively, even things we typically think of as inert objects are given consciousness through our perception of them. With this said, the activity of human imagination and perception created and sustained the lost world or home of our pre-evolved ancestors.

He put forward that the Enlightenment represents the threshold of our current stage in the evolution of consciousness, which we have experienced for approximately 400 years. *Saving the Appearances* provides a studied description of our separation from all of the benefits of the pre-evolved consciousness of our ancestors caused by rationalism and the use of the scientific method as the sole gauge of knowledge.

Barfield acknowledges the benefits to engineering and medicine due to the scientific method and of individual justice and self-direction possible only because of the individualism of rationalism. However, his critique shows the defects of rationalism as the sole standard of knowledge. *Saving the Appearances* is about what Barfield perceives is the cost of rationalism, He points to the unhappy isolation that comes with individualism, as well as the loss of a mutual relationship with nature. There can be no relationship when nature is seen as an object separate from self, is a thing to be studied, and something to be harvested as raw material.

To Barfield the rationalism of Modernity grips the minds of most people, especially during the past century, to the extent that no other world view is to be considered, especially among the educated. In his words from *Unancestral Voice*:

“It is the world that they have been minding more and more through the last three or four hundred years—so assiduously, at last that they have begun to believe there is no other and even that there has never been any other.” *Unancestral Voice* p. 40.

The result, according to Barfield, is alienation from the natural world, meaningful social interaction, and spirituality. He claims we give up as much as we gain with our rational world view. He also asserts that we can develop an imaginative sense of that pre-evolved perspective of the lost world to catch glimpses of what we once experienced naturally. Although we cannot roll back our consciousness to the pre-evolved stage, Barfield looked forward to the next state of evolution that will allow us to keep the benefits of rational thought and to reclaim the lost vision and world.

Underpinning Barfield’s theories is his claim that the study of dead languages such as ancient Greek and Latin and an etymological study of English provides evidence of this change in consciousness. To cite just one, In *Worlds Apart*:

“All, or practically all, the words in our own language that now refer to inner experience can be traced back to a time when they had an external reference as well—spirit, understand, right, wrong, sadness; It doesn’t matter which you take; you’ve only got to look them up in the etymological dictionary.” (p 50)

By which he meant the *Oxford English Dictionary*. He believed the ancients used concrete root-words that changed in meaning to their abstract current uses. The change toward abstraction is identified as evidence of an evolution in human consciousness that resulted in abstraction as a new mental skill.

His attempt to give us an idea of what the pre-evolved consciousness would have been like is found in *Romanticism Comes of Age*, a book I highly recommend.

“But if we try to imagine that ... we could actually be conscious *in* the growing of our hair, could feel it as movement in something the same way that we still feel our breathing as movement, we should be making an approach towards the difference between Greek consciousness...and our own.” (RCA 66)

I am not a Greek scholar and cannot confirm or deny his claim. We do get from this quotation a sense of what he believed the experience of pre-evolved humans would be compared to our own.

In *Worlds Apart* he describes our relationship with nature:

The human mind does not only *reflect* the macrocosm in its systems of ideas, it gives to it its whole significance, since it’s only in the human mind that the process, which is reality, becomes self-conscious. It follows that, through its spearhead or growing-point of the human mind, the universe may in future influence, or perhaps –who knows? --conduct, its own evolution. P32 WA

Barfield gives credit, ad nauseam, of his thoughts to the writings of the mystic Rudolf Steiner, and was an active member of the Anthroposophical Society throughout his adulthood. The following is a summary of ideas found throughout Barfield’s writing, described in the book *Man and Animal the Essential Difference*, which he edited. He believed the souls of all creatures

exists eternally previous to their physical embodiment. With the help of spiritual beings, the souls of living things became tied to the physical universe much as Tolkien describes the Valar doing in the *Silmarillion*.

Barfield believed that everything even things we think of as inert has eternal consciousness. His claim is that the spirits of preexistent consciousness guided the physical evolution of Earth from phases of liquefaction, to solidity, and assisted souls in their transformation into becoming animals (he claims animals share a common soul). Meanwhile, he wrote, the strong souls are directed in their physical evolution to become humans (for which the individual ego is our defining characteristic).

In other words, souls direct their physical evolution over successive births and deaths to evolve into the animal their collective spirit wills to become. This includes placing their embodiments into environments that will assist the survival of that animal. And they develop physical features such claws or fins that perform specific tool-like functions for survival in the natural environment. Contrarily, mankind has developed general purpose features, such as the hands, thus allowing for varied and changing purpose of the individual, within a single life. As you can see, his conception of evolution is the opposite of Darwinism.

Barfield claimed repeatedly in interviews that his ideas never changed throughout his adulthood. This may account for some of the difficulties in reading him. *Saving the Appearances* is a difficult book to read because he makes claims that aren't elaborated or supported. Reading of Steiner's *The Philosophy of Freedom*, which is mentioned in *Saving the Appearances* does help. But most readers of the Inklings aren't going to be interested in going that far afield in their reading. However, Barfield's *Romanticism Comes of Age*, containing

essays from the 1930s, is a useful bridge from the earlier work to *Saving the Appearances*, of the 1950s and beyond. It may be that he did not elaborate or substantiate himself in later books because since his thoughts never changed he thought it was enough to have written those things earlier.

While I do not see a direct influence between the two writers, nonetheless the similar theme was developed by both writers from the same time, place, and even social circle throughout their decades-long writing careers. Also, both men rewrote the same material over and over again in different ways. Both were critical of rationalism as the sole gauge of knowledge and thought humanity had lost much from that rationalism. Both wrote of the use of the imagination to claim some of what is lost and to use imagination for moving forward in a positive way. Yet, there were differences. Tolkien clearly created something purely imaginative and wrote about the value of fantasy. Barfield, however, literally believed humanity evolved away from a different world or home.

Enjoyment of a writer is not predicated upon belief nor advocacy. To use television as an example, a viewer doesn't have to believe in extraterrestrial life or government conspiracies to enjoy *The X-Files*, and the immense popularity of *Breaking Bad* does not require an interest in the illegal drug trade. The same is true when reading about the theme of lost home in the works of Tolkien and Barfield. Just as one can enjoy reading about hobbits without believing in their existence, the philosophical theories of Barfield are diverting even though dubious, to my mind. That is reason enough to delve into the works of these two Inklings, one world famous and the other lesser known.



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