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Shared Ideas Among Friends: The Common Ground of Owen Barfield, J.R.R. Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis

Neglect of the work of Owen Barfield deprives readers of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis of a more complete vision of the shared ideas within their works. Barfield's work addresses the Post-Enlightenment assumption that all true and desirable knowledge comes from analytical thought (Barfield 61-62). The result of the assumption, he claims, is threefold: We deprive ourselves from a complete knowledge of nature, we allow our individualism to isolate us, and we separate ourselves from the purpose and meaning of life. (144) Instead, Barfield proposes Beta-Thinking, the imaginative act of perceiving the world with Pre-Enlightenment eyes. This use of the imagination provides glimpses of our participation in nature, insights into our interdependence within humanity, and revelations about the higher meaning to life. In turn, we are aided in navigating life in an era in which consciousness has evolved to its present state of what he calls idolatry. (142) The same ideas can also be found in the works of both Tolkien and Lewis. And, a study of the philosophy of Owen Barfield assists in highlighting those similar ideas in the works of his friends -- the members of the Inklings and intellectual fellow travelers.

This is not a paper arguing for the influence of Barfield upon the writing of Tolkien and Lewis. The issue of influence is difficult to prove and can be argued forever, as described in our Keynote speaker's book *The Company they Keep*. Nor is it to repeat Verlyn Flieger's convincing description of the influence of Barfield's 1928 *Poetic Diction*, upon the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. Instead, this paper discusses Barfield's *Saving the Appearances*, first published in 1957, and how it highlights shared ideas among the three.

In *Saving the Appearances*, Owen Barfield presents a challenge to the 20th Century outlook that is so ubiquitous that it is largely accepted as fact with little serious consideration that

any other world-view could exist. The technical term he uses is idolatry. (98) He posits that since The Enlightenment mankind has severed his participation in things, nature, and socially with the concept that each of these exists independent of our participation in their existence. Instead, Barfield claims, our participation, in fact, organizes these things and persons in a way that would not exist without our presence and participation (24).

His opening example is that of a rainbow (15-16). He does not deny that water vapor and light would exist without human perception. He understands that the structure of these physical materials is independent of our existence. But the rainbow also has a reality, and it would not exist without the human perception of our senses and our minds to organize what is perceived. This same principle is applied to all objects around us. Barfield points to atoms as the material foundation that is perceived and organized. His belief is that our participation brings the world into being. For Barfield, the atoms, life in nature, and our very selves as individuals require the perception and participation of all of us to bring about the fulfillment of each (16).

Barfield's claim acknowledges that the rational treatment of objects has, in fact, led to discoveries about the material world and nature that could not be revealed without treating them objectively. He acknowledges the value of those discoveries and the benefits to mankind to such disciplines as medicine and engineering. Barfield further claims our love of nature as an independent object would not be possible without objective thought.

However, Barfield challenges the belief that objective reality represents all of existence and, furthermore, represents all knowledge that is worth having. He puts forward that separating mankind from nature, objects, and even each other necessarily empties all three of meaning, making them idols in an empty world of idolatry.

In the following quotation he describes how our minds organize perceptions:

“I may first have to learn that the sound I hear is a thrush singing; but, eventually, I will no longer hear a sound and then conclude that a thrush is singing, but rather will simply ‘hear a thrush singing.’ How I think has worked down into how I perceive.” (20)

We would be depriving ourselves not to mention the follow-up within the quotation:

“For I am not, or I am not very often, aware of smelling an unidentified smell and then thinking, That is coffee!’ It appears to me, and appears instantly, that I smell coffee—though, in fact, I can no more merely smell ‘coffee’ than I can *hear* ‘a thrush singing’ . . . It is plainly the result of an activity of some sort in me, however little I may recollect any such activity.” (23)

Barfield distinguishes three ways of thinking. The first he calls figuration, a term of his coinage for our sense perception and mental organization of the objects in the world around us (24). The second is Alpha-Thinking, which is our rational thought about the nature of things in the world (25). Essentially he is referring to analytical thinking and the scientific method. The third, called Beta-Thinking, is thought, itself, about our thinking (25). For example, Barfield states, concepts of Darwinism have affected our understanding and assumptions about the biological sciences, but also our understanding of other fields outside of biology.

Beta-Thinking includes a widespread social component. Each paradigm of Beta-Thinking requires humanity’s participation and contribution, whether the paradigm be that of pre-Enlightenment beliefs in the participation of mankind with the things in the world, Enlightenment objective thinking, or the notion of paradigms itself. A single person with a group of ideas does not enact the world-shaping Beta-Thinking alone, it requires community.

Barfield uses many analogies. He describes the notion of objective reality accounting for everything, found in post-Enlightenment thought, as being like a person learning how to operate an automobile by trial and error. The person experimentally tries switches, buttons, levers, etc., and operates the vehicle until becoming skillful at driving -- all without knowledge of the engine under the hood -- yet he may believe he knows everything there is to know about the machine. Thus, Barfield calls post-Enlightenment thinking dashboard knowledge, which is to be self-

satisfied with an incomplete knowledge of the physical world by not recognizing our participation in its being (55).

In the thought of Barfield, the objects of the world are given purpose according to their function and place in the world. There is moral component to our relationship to nature which is dismissed when we see nature as a resource whose parts can be harvested without consideration of its continued life. Similarly, Barfield describes a medieval spirituality that includes recognition of humanity's interdependence with nature and with other persons in order to live meaningfully. (149) The major concern of Barfield's work is to dispute the many ways that we alienate ourselves from our meaningful place in the world by reducing nature and man to mere objects. (78)

These same thoughts also appear in the writing of J.R.R. Tolkien. He describes man's relationship to nature, both positive and negative. His viewpoint was shown dramatically throughout his canon and described explicitly in his published letters. (*LOT* 121) The chapter *The Mirror of Galadriel* in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is a major scene for making a distinction, similar to Owen Barfield's, of the destructiveness of a rationalistic approach to nature, as opposed to an approach of participation within one's relationship to nature (377). Galadriel offers to show Elf-magic to Frodo and Sam. Images of what has been or what might be appear in a basin of water. In the scene she is confounded by the practice of Hobbits and of the Big-People to use the word "magic" to describe both the work of the Elves and of the Enemy. What the reader sees in the scene is a result of her skill through participation with nature. By contrast, when the reader looks at the activities of either the Sauron or the corrupted wizard Saruman, he sees them blast and poison the land of Mordor of life. The reductionist vision of nature and of

persons allow for a disdain of an ethical relation to them. The *Mirror of Galadriel* is a dramatic presentation of the idea articulated philosophically in the work of Barfield (Barfield 153).

Socially, the characters' long-standing and loyal friendships are the hallmark of all significant achievements within the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. The reader sees this throughout the *LOTR*. Examples of friendship include Fatty Bolger serving as a decoy; Barliman Butterbur and Farmer Maggot's assistance; Merry and Pippin's insistence of inclusion in Frodo's mission; the guidance of Gandalf and Aragorn; and, most famously, Samwise Gamgee's service despite temptation and danger. Throughout the trek Sam abides by Frodo's judgment to spare Gollum although his inclination is to settle the threat. And, by the end of the story, he is carrying Frodo the final perilous steps up Mount Doom. His deferral to Frodo's judgement results in the success of their mission.

Without a network of humble and great persons acting in concert, the destruction of the ring could never have been carried out. In the words of Gandalf: "... (S)uch is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere." Frodo and Sam are the primary heroes, but their success depends upon a collaboration in line with Barfield's assertion in *Saving the Appearances* that each of us depend upon participation with each other for meaning and spirituality in our lives.

Contrarily, the work of Tolkien also contains notable instances in which characters of great personal gifts and advantages fail -- becoming anti-heroes -- because they alienate themselves from the people who loved them. Instead, they become determined to defend themselves alone against all. One is the tale of Turin Turambar, from *The Silmarillion*, that shows a young man with the advantage of being foster son of King Thingol of the Elves. Turin commits manslaughter and makes himself into an outlaw because he will not believe the king

rules in his favor and wants him to return in honor to his place in court. Turin repeatedly rejects the attempts of his loyal friend Belleg Strongbow to bring him home. In the end, his isolation results in the accidental murder of this good friend, marriage to his sister, and rejection by the community that he has saved from a dragon (S 198-226).

Tolkien's works contrast the success of the individuals acting within community with the inevitable downfall when a character chooses alienation. This same idea is described in Barfield's work where he contrasts 20th Century individualism with the medieval view of the individual who saw himself as a part of a social network that gave that person's life meaning (Barfield 78, 149). Just as our rational separation of nature into an object of study benefits us in science and technology, Barfield asserts, our individualism provides many benefits, such as individual rights. But, he claims, our individualism has detractions as well, by isolating individuals and draining meaning and morality from our lives.

The use of what Barfield called Beta-Thinking shows a form of imagination, usually in poetic or story form that aids the contemporary person to have glimpses of the earlier insights of mankind connected to nature and to each other. The value of such glimpses is to temper the imagination to aid in navigation within the dominant materialist world-view. Barfield offers only a navigational aid, because, he acknowledges, there is no turning back from our evolution of consciousness, the materialism previously described. He provides a valuable challenge that allows the reader to perceive inspirations to leaven -- not to replace -- our current world-view.

C.S. Lewis also shared many of the same ideas. His description of spiritual insight inspired by art in *Surprised by Joy* follows:

"... (W)hen my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It was a sensation, ... but ... (b)efore I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone ... (T)he longing that had just ceased... I call it Joy, which ... must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and Pleasure.

... I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever ... exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and Pleasure often is.” (14)

Another element of thought common to both Barfield and Lewis is the idea that the insight given by art can only be glimpsed. Once again, the glimpse is what the imagination uses to navigate within our material world.

Finally, the organizing principle of the use of imagination can be seen throughout *The Great Divorce*. There is an extensive discussion of the role of human imagination to the experience of one's life being one of living in Heaven or of Hell.

“Ah, the Saved...what happens to them is best described as the opposite of a mirage. What seemed, when they entered it, to be the vale of misery turns out, when they look back, to have been a well; and where present experience saw only salt deserts, memory truthfully records that the pools were full of water.” (70)

For Lewis the organizing participation of imagination result in life to be either Heaven or Hell, as seem in his dramatic work *The Great Divorce*.

Each of the three friends arrived at similar ideas about the role of art, especially storytelling, inspiring a glimpse of something beyond ordinary life that can be called a non-analytical form of knowledge. Lewis once described how multiple instruments are used by a doctor to reveal different aspects of the patient's overall health, such as a stethoscope and a blood pressure cuff provide different evaluations of the same organ, the heart (M 164-165). In the same way, the use of Barfield's work provides a philosophical articulation of ideas that can be another instrument to revealing or reinforcing of the reader's understanding the work of both J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

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