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## Breaking Free: The Closed Universe Theme in E.M. Forster, Owen Barfield, and C.S. Lewis

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### Breaking Free: The Closed Universe Theme in E.M. Forster, Owen Barfield, and C.S. Lewis

#### Abstract

Reviews “the role of the Enlightenment in gaining acceptance for the model of the closed universe and how that model contrasts with the medieval [...] model.” Examines the use of the theme of the closed universe and breaking out of it in Forster, Barfield, and Lewis.

#### Additional Keywords

Barfield, Owen. “Night Operation” (novella); Closed universe; Forster, E.M. “The Machine Stops” (short story); Lewis, C.S. The Silver Chair

# Breaking Free

The Closed Universe Theme in  
E.M. Forster, Owen Barfield, and C.S. Lewis

DORIS MEYERS

The concept of the universe as a closed system from which humanity cannot escape is undoubtedly very old. We think immediately of Plato's myth of the cave, of the people whose knowledge consists of shadows of reality and who refuse to believe the message that there is an outside, a real sun that lights objects, and real objects that cast the shadows. Most people live contentedly in the closed universe; rebels and seekers try to escape from it. Thus Hamlet exclaims in frustration, "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" (II.ii.260-62).

The theme of living in a nutshell has long fascinated us, but it developed some new dimensions and a new urgency in the twentieth century. Whereas the closed universe of the Enlightenment was a source of optimism, by the twentieth century it had become a source of alienation. Empiricism became the standard of what could be thought, and art responded to science by producing stories that served up a "slice of life." And with very little sauce.

Because mainstream fiction was so focused on the here and now, a few writers turned to the science fiction and fantasy modes to explore the closed universe and the way out of its alienation. For this paper I have chosen to compare works by E.M. Forster, Owen Barfield, and C.S. Lewis dealing with the closed universe and the way out. Forster, Lewis, and Barfield all argue vigorously that there is more to humanity than the closed universe. In his short story "The Machine Stops" Forster portrays the way technology causes the alienation of human beings from one another; in his novella "Night Operation" Barfield shows how language can lead a person to understand that there's something outside the closed universe; and in his children's fantasy *The Silver Chair* Lewis deals with the empirical view of language as found in Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* and A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*. He implies that this view of language is an enchantment which imprisons us. All three suggest that twentieth century people have made their environment a good deal grimmer than it needs to be.

By way of background, let us review the role of the Enlightenment in gaining acceptance for the model of the closed universe and how that model contrasts with the Medieval pre-Enlightenment model. The Medieval universe was closed in the sense that it consisted of a series of concentric spheres rotating around the earth; but in a more

important sense it was open, because every detail of it was a reminder of, and a path to, the transcendent. For Medieval thinkers, the data available to the senses was *transparent*. One saw through it to an ultimate reality. Medieval theologians spoke of the book of Nature. Every phenomenon of Nature was a reminder of God's character—the rocks and hills of his steadfastness, the sun of his fecundity and generosity, water of his purity, the flowers of his beauty.

The Enlightenment changed the transparent universe into an opaque one. Knowledge became defined in terms of what is available to the physical senses, which automatically narrows the universe. Although scientific instruments allow us wonderfully to extend the ranges of the senses, the universe becomes more closed, because there's nothing beyond the senses to be studied by scientific methods. After all, the very essence of scientific experiment is to put a box around a certain chunk of sensory data in order to ask an unambiguous question about it. This narrowing of the scope of what we pay attention to has worked so well, has created so many technological marvels, that many people do not realize that it has also created a trap. Forster, Barfield, and Lewis, each one in his own fashion, describes people caught in the trap and suggests a way out.

Forster is best known for his slogan "Only connect." As a secular humanist he believed that life's meaning comes from the capacity of human beings to love and communicate with one another. He was a modernist who wrote mainstream "serious" novels. However, he also wrote several non-mainstream short stories, more allegory than strict science fiction or fantasy; of these, "The Machine Stops," is arguably the best. The story was first published in 1909 in the *Oxford and Cambridge Review* (63). However, the date often assigned to it is 1928, because that is when it was published in a widely-read collection of Forster short stories, *The Eternal Moment and Other Stories*.

In "The Machine Stops" Forster deals with the version of the closed universe in which the universe is a machine. Mankind has abandoned the surface of the earth and constructed a machine to supply a complete underground environment. There are only two characters: Vashti, a learned musicologist who lives under what used to be Australia, and her son Kuno, who lives on the other side of the earth, under what used to be England—Wessex, to be exact. Each person lives in a hexagonal room with an

armchair, a small desk, and a glowing round blue plate which acts as a sort of videophone. Everything else is provided by pushing buttons and switches. People communicate through the Machine, just as we communicate by e-mail and the internet, and in fact everyone is repulsed and frightened by the idea of communicating in person. Daily life is spent without physical contact, spent exchanging ideas but never feelings. For example, as a musicologist Vashti sits in her armchair and delivers a lecture on the history of music from the pre-Mongolian period to the Brisbane period (presumably in the late twentieth century). It lasts only ten minutes, for the machine dwellers, like people today, are plagued with information overload and have very short attention spans.

Vashti's son Kuno calls her to say that he has recently left the underground environment and has taken a journey in an airship. Few people ever wanted to travel, because "thanks to the advance of science, the earth was exactly alike all over"; however, air flights were continued because once a mechanical process is going, it is "easier to keep it up than to stop it" (46). While Kuno was in the airship he saw "four big stars that form an oblong, and three stars close together in the middle of the oblong, and hanging from these stars, three other stars" and he "had an idea that they were like a man." What Kuno saw, of course, was the constellation Orion, and it gave him a desire to actually spend time on the surface of the earth, to get outside the Machine. There is a long description of his effort. It involves deliberate exercise, building the body atrophied by a lifetime spent in one of the hexagonal cells of the Machine. In doing so he arrives at the humanist manifesto: "Man is the measure" and elaborates, "Man's feet are the measure for distance, his hands are the measure for ownership, his body is the measure for all that is lovable and desirable and strong" (51). He finds his way to the surface and spends a whole day there. Tentacles from the Machine drag him back, but not before he has seen Orion and "felt that a man of my sort lived in the sky."

Kuno refuses to speak to Vashti about his experiences through the Machine and forces her to come to Wessex to talk with him in person. While traveling in the airship she sees the Caucasus, and a mountain range that looks like a prostrate man; she sees the isles of Greece, origin of humanism, but her response is, "No ideas here" (49). We see the contrast: Kuno is able to break free because he is able to find a human pattern in the stars; able to listen to a lecture on Wessex and connect with King Alfred, a man like himself; able to hear in his spirit, as he crawls through the darkness toward the surface, the voices of the workmen who had lived in the air and constructed the tunnels for the Machine. He is able to escape the closed universe of the Machine by connecting with other human beings.

When Kuno, speaking to Vashti in person, relates his experiences on the surface, she concludes that he is mad. She fears that he will be cast out into the void of the surface, there to become Homeless, but this does not happen. Years pass. Efforts are made to eliminate all trips to the surface, because ideas mediated by the Machine are considered

more valid than first-hand experience. But the Machine begins to break down, and everyone's knowledge is too specialized, too partial, to devise repairs. As the mechanized environment becomes more and more degraded, humanity worships the Machine with greater devotion and rationalizes its failures more strongly. Only Kuno, who has been transferred to the southern hemisphere, to a cell not far from Vashti's own, dares to say that the Machine is failing. Vashti will not listen to him. Instead of looking for some power beyond the Machine to save herself and it, she and others begin to worship the Machine. They attempt to stave off its breakdown with rituals of adoration. But the Machine continues to degenerate.

Finally, in the last throes of the Machine, the floor in Vashti's cell heaves and she falls out of her chair. At random she opens the door. Somehow Kuno is there and they die in each other's arms, weeping for humanity. At the end they understand what is important: "Man, the flower of all flesh, the noblest of all creatures visible, man who had once made god in his image, and had mirrored his strength on the constellations . . ." (62). The Machine which had been built as a garment for human beings had become their universe and their prison, and the human spirit "that had grasped the stars" had relapsed into its "last sloshy stirrings" (63).

Kuno's last words are an expression of trust that the Homeless Ones who have been living outside the Machine, on the surface of the earth, have "recaptured life as it was in Wessex, when Ælfred overthrew the Danes" (63). As Kuno and Vashti die, they glimpse "the Nations of the dead and . . . scraps of the untainted sky" (63).

Forster's story reminds us that the universe was perceived as man-shaped in the Renaissance, that Man was a microcosm, a miniature version of the macrocosm. The Machine in which Vashti and Kuno live reminds us of the mechanical universe that emerged from the Enlightenment, when the Hebrew God, the fiery personality of Mt. Sinai, was replaced by the cosmic watchmaker who constructed the universe, wound it up, and left it to play itself out. He shows how mankind has built machines to make life more comfortable, but then has found it necessary to adjust to the machine's limitations. He shows how technology imprisons and dehumanizes us, how it severs human connections while apparently facilitating communication. He points to Orion as an indication that the universe should be at least partly man-shaped. However, his story leaves some unanswered questions about the process of breaking out. What enables Kuno to see a pattern of stars as a man, to hear the voices of the dead calling him, to see Wessex as the kingdom of Alfred? What is really out there beyond the mechanisms of biological life? Owen Barfield suggests an answer in his story of an underground environment, "Night Operation."

A novella rather than a short story, "Night Operation" was not written until 1975. Hunter and Kranidas, the editors of *A Barfield Sampler* in which it appears, call it a revision of "The Rose on the Ash-Heap," a fantasy about

breaking out which Barfield wrote before 1930, when he gave up writing as a career and became a lawyer. Barfield's long years away from his writing apparently allowed him to produce "Night Operation" as a more focused, more accessible piece of fiction. Its starting place is very similar to that of "The Machine Stops," a closed society under the surface of the earth. While Forster's people had retreated underground seeking an easy, unchanging environment, Barfield's people have decided to live in the sewers because they fear an airborne invasion of biochemical destruction. Also, they found that "terrorism could be contained much more effectively in a literally closed society than in an open one" (135).

Barfield's viewpoint character Jon, like Forster's Kuno, is a misfit who has somehow escaped being aborted by the eugenicists. In describing Jon's education, Barfield hits at the social changes of the seventies. To avoid elitism, the three Rs have been replaced by the three Es — the three excretions. The argument is that not everyone can learn to read and write and do arithmetic, but everyone excretes; therefore the subject-matter of public education should consist of f\*\*\*ing, sh\*\*\*ing, and puking. One of Jon's teachers was an elderly woman who primly referred to the three Es as ejaculation, defecation, and eructation. Jon was fascinated by the fact that a single action could have two different names, and the elderly teacher helped him to get special permission to extend his education by studying history. He gained access to the Library, where he experienced silence for the first time and was nearly overwhelmed by the enormous numbers of books. Being a very transparently fictionalized Barfield, the author of *History in English Words* and *Poetic Diction*, Jon hit on the method of tracing the meanings of words as a key to all the knowledge in books. In order to read old documents and understand the different assumptions and worldviews they represented, he had to become more imaginative, more sensitive. He began to develop a distaste for his environment; he realized that the sewer walls stank.

Jon had two friends, Jak and Peet, with whom he discussed his researches. Jak was undergoing a similar process of sensitization because he was feeling romantic love, what Charles Williams called the Beatrician experience, toward his copulation partner. Peet, a born activist, believed that people other than themselves were experiencing the sensitization sub-consciously, so that it would soon be time to change the society, and he wanted to know how to do it. Thus the young men decided to seek Aboveground together. This was not illegal — just very, very difficult because of bureaucratic obstacles. Peet managed to avoid these difficulties, perhaps by bribery, perhaps by sheer *chutzpah*, and the young men climbed to the surface. When they came to the egress, they at first perceived the country outside as a luminous painted wall rather than open space. But they persevered and found the "wall" penetrable.

In "The Machine Stops" Forster depicts humanity as imposing patterns on nature, perceiving the shape of a

man in a scattering of stars. From this human activity Kuno derives hope for connection with others. Barfield also ascribes importance to man's perception of patterns in nature, but he asserts that human beings can perceive these patterns because there is consciousness in nature as well as in humanity. In his non-fiction writings such as *Poetic Diction* and *Saving the Appearances* Barfield asserts that the universe is evolving toward consciousness. There are three stages to the process: original participation, analytical thinking, and final participation. In the stage of original participation, there is no distinction between human beings and nature. All physical actions are at the same time an expression of spirituality, and such natural phenomena as daylight and dark, the seasons, seedtime and fruition are spiritually significant. But people at the original participation stage lack consciousness of themselves as individuals.

The next stage occurs when human beings engage in analytical thinking and treat nature as something that exists outside human consciousness. This analytical thinking is a necessary stage in the development of the universe, but it destroys participation, so that people become aware of the gap between themselves and nature. They can study nature scientifically and manipulate it technologically, but in the process it becomes dead and lifeless. The third stage, final participation, combines the unity of original participation with the individuality and analytical power of analytical thinking. It is still in our future.

The sewer-dwellers of "Night Operation" are in a debased stage of analytical thinking. After moving underground they took the additional step of deliberately stifling inquiry by eliminating the possibility of excellence in education. Now, as Jon says, there is "nothing behind our eyes." Furthermore, the noise and stench of the sewer effectively breaks any link the people might have with nature. (Obviously, this 1975 story records Barfield's judgment of the period.)

It is almost traumatic for the three young men when they step through the supposed wall and break out into the countryside. At last they are, like earlier human beings, exposed to nature. Led by Peet, they begin to observe and analyze the new environment, first vegetation and birds, and then the stars. Perhaps (although Barfield does not make this point clear) they are resuming the stage of analytical thinking which their ancestors stifled when they moved underground.

As the young men concentrate they see parachutes with small spheres attached to the lines descending from the heavens. Barfield explains that this is a revelation from the gods and the reader is able to surmise that the sewer dwellers did not retreat to the underground for fear of biological contamination, but fear of the hints of final participation that were beginning to fall from the sky even then. As Jon, Jak, and Peet discuss the vision of the spheres, they realize each has seen something different: Jon has

seen language and consciousness as the gift of the gods; Peet has seen the dust and disintegration of human beings as they use language amiss and refuse true action, to "do what the gods are doing in them" (167). And Jak has seen that the spheres represent the true nature of a human being, the transfiguration he previously saw in the woman he loves. They decide to return to the sewers, to "that closed society of sickness and the smell of sickness" (172), to enlighten others.

In his story, Barfield presents the answers of anthropology to the questions left unanswered in "The Machine Stops." Man is able to perceive patterns in nature because the patterns are "really" there. What Jon calls "the gods" refers to the transcendence, the consciousness, the mind of the universe. Human language is both the expression of this consciousness and the evidence that it exists. One breaks out of the closed universe by paying attention to words and their relationship to things. The fact that we can use two different words to name the same thing, or that a single word can name two different things, is of utmost importance. But since transcendence and consciousness also exist in nature, one also breaks out by paying attention to natural things—studying their features, noting likenesses and differences, classifying them. The mental abilities of Jon, Jak, and Peet had been debased by their long years in the sewer; in disciplining themselves to notice the details of their surroundings, they purified their thought processes so that they could receive the revelation of the descent of the spheres.

C. S. Lewis's story of breaking out is simpler than the other two, since he is writing for children, but it is also more complex. Like Forster, Lewis honors the dignity of humanity and the beauty of human friendship. Like Barfield, he deals with language, showing that it can be an instrument for creating a closed universe as well as breaking out of one. He differs from Forster and Barfield by centering his story around Aslan, who is unique, individual, and personal as well as transcendent.

At the opening of *The Silver Chair*, Jill and Eustace are trapped in a closed universe, Experiment House. The bullies are coming after them and they can't run further because of the high stone wall. But a few minutes earlier they had called Aslan's name, and now they find the door of the wall open. They step out into the "cool, bright air" and "emptiness" (11) of Aslan's Mountain. They have been freed by language, by calling upon Aslan, but as Aslan tells Jill, the initiative is with him: "You could not have called me if I had not been calling you."

The children, who, along with Puddleglum the Marshwiggle, are on a quest to find the lost Prince Rilian, become trapped a second time in Harfang, the castle of the giants. Again they go from a warm but repressive environment, the giants' kitchen, out into the cold. Again language provides them with the knowledge and the means to escape. Looking out the window, they see the words "Under me" and realize that they should be looking for a way

under the ruined city. Reading the cookbook recipes for preparing man and marshwiggle they learn that the giants intend to eat them. And they use language to mislead the giants into thinking they have no intention of escaping, so that they are able to escape.

But the central episode of breaking out, and indeed the central episode of the book, is the escape from Underland. The children and Puddleglum fall into Underland while hiding from the giants. They are taken to the castle of the queen, where they meet Rilian without knowing who he is. Rilian is dressed in black and looks rather like Hamlet. He has been captured and bewitched by the Queen of Underland, so that he lives contentedly in the nutshell of his underground prison. The bewitchment is expressed partly by the loss of language: he does not recognize his own name. When according to nightly routine he is tied in the Silver Chair, the enchantment is lifted. He knows who he is and is able to use the name of Aslan. He begs them to release him, saying, "by the great Lion, by Aslan himself, I charge you —." Puddleglum says, "It's the Sign," but Eustace cautions, "It was the words of the Sign" (145). They decide to believe that the words really mean what they say and release the Prince.

But they are not yet free. The Queen of Underland, who is none other than the Green Witch, suddenly returns. Seeing the situation, she tries to renew the enchantment. Like some twentieth century enchanters, she uses a drug, and music with a monotonous, impelling rhythm. Gradually Jill forgets the names of things in our world, so that her memories become dreamlike. The Witch's enchantment primarily stems from twentieth century language analysis, which destroys the translucence of language, just as Enlightenment science destroyed the translucence of the physical universe.

In order to understand the action, it is helpful to review one of the pioneer works of language analysis, *The Meaning of Meaning* by Ogden and Richards. It posits two kinds of language, the referential and the emotive. Referential language refers to facts and objects; emotive language merely expresses feelings. Theological, moral, and esthetic judgments are by definition emotive, since they do not refer to physical facts and objects. The Green Witch tries to restore Prince Rilian's mental imprisonment, his confusion, by denying that words can point to anything outside of her kingdom, to anything transcendent. Rilian and the others tell her that something — the sun — exists outside her closed universe, but when they try to describe it by comparing it to a lamp she replies, "When you try to think out clearly what this sun must be, you cannot tell me. You can only tell me it is like the lamp. Your sun is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp" (155). She almost convinces them that their language refers only to make-believe, that it is derived from her closed world, the empirical world of the senses.

But there are senses and senses. Just as Kuno broke free from the Machine and its comforts by exercise, by developing

awareness of his body, Puddleglum breaks the enchantment by treading out the fire and burning his foot. As Lewis comments, "There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic" (158). Just as Jon's researches in language led him to realize that this world stank, Puddleglum's pain helps him to realize that the Queen's underground world is dull. He says to the queen,

"Suppose we have [made up a dream world by playing a language game]. Then all I can say is that . . . the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones." He adds, "We're leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for Overland" (159).

But before they can carry out this plan the queen metamorphoses into a serpent and they are able to kill her. Here Lewis's closed universe differs most from those of Forster and Barfield. Once the enchantment is broken, the Overlanders learn that there is nothing really wrong with the Underland. The gnomes they feared turn out to be jolly, exuberant people who love to dance jigs, tell jokes, turn cartwheels and pop firecrackers. They were gloomy only because the Witch had enchanted them and forced them out of their own home in the really deep underground, the land of Bism. The shallower Underland, the witch's kingdom, was bad only because it was not Prince Rilian's true home. After he is restored to his kingdom, the witch's Underland becomes a place to go for recreation, to "sail to and fro, singing, on the cool, dark underground sea" (217). Meanwhile Jill and Eustace return to Aslan's Mountain, and from there to Experiment House in England. None of the worlds — Narnia, Aslan's Mountain, the shallower Underland, Bism, or England — is a closed universe in the sense of a prison, because Aslan rules them all and arranges passage from one to another.

All three of the stories emphasize the level of physical comfort as part of what keeps people imprisoned. All of the closed worlds provide a warm, safe environment; breaking out involves going into the cold and accepting some discomfort. In all three, the inhabitants or their forebears have deliberately decided to narrow their environment. The Machine dwellers did it in the name of refinement and civilization; the sewer dwellers, out of fear for the spheres of transcendence that might fall on them; and Rilian fell under the Green Witch's spell because he was so obsessed with revenging his mother's death.

Written much earlier in the twentieth century than the others, Forster's "The Machine Stops" does not deal explicitly with the role of language in creating a closed universe. The strongest hint of it is that Kuno sees human interaction as the way out, and interaction occurs through language. He sees that the Machine has taken over all physical human activities, and instinctively he refuses to talk with Vashti through the Machine. Forster wrote better than he knew: our modern communications systems discourage people from speaking, learning, and playing games first hand, and Kuno's insight that "man is the

measure" — that words of far and near, large and small, derive their meaning from the physical nature of the human being — is vindicated in modern linguistic studies such as Lakeoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*.

In Barfield's "Night Operation" the mental filth that he saw as pervasive in the 1970s is manifested as the physical filth of the sewers. As a young man he had expected that human beings, having emerged from original participation into analytical thinking, were ready to move into the third stage of consciousness, final participation. Writing this story in his seventies, however, he shows that the people have retreated to the sewers out of fear and rejection of the transcendent. The traditional three Rs, the learning of verbal and reasoning skills, have been replaced by educational emphasis on non-verbal processes, the three Es. But mankind's lost heritage is still preserved, fossilized, in historical records, and Jon is able to use language as a clue to the experience of the transcendent that is the human birthright.

Lewis focuses specifically on the contribution of twentieth century language philosophy to the closing and narrowing of the universe. This philosophy denies that language about moral and intellectual qualities can refer to anything outside itself, that such language is merely an expression of emotion. Lewis opens *The Silver Chair* by showing the children calling on the transcendent reality of Aslan and later shows Puddleglum refuting the Green Witch's reductive language philosophy as simply dull. Finally he shows the children and the Narnians celebrating the beauty of Bism, and, in the *Chronicles* as a whole, many different worlds. Through his fantasy he says what Thomas Traherne said more directly:

Creatures that are able to dart their thoughts in all spaces can brook no limit or restraint; they are infinitely indebted to this illimited extent, because were there no such infinity, there would be no room for their imaginations; their desires and affections would be cooped up, and their souls imprisoned. . . . [The world] is an object infinitely great and ravishing; as full of treasures as full of room, and as fraught with joy as capacity. To blind men it seemeth dark, but is all glorious within, as infinite in light and beauty as extent and treasure. (224)

Or, to paraphrase Lewis's archenemy, J. B. S. Haldane, "The universe is not only vaster than we suppose, but vaster than we can suppose." ☛

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