Journal of Tolkien Research

Volume 3 | Issue 1   Article 1

2016

Fantasy Incarnate: Of Elves and Men

Simon J. Cook Dr.
None, simonjohncook@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch

Part of the Esthetics Commons, Intellectual History Commons, and the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation

Fantasy Incarnate: Of Elves and Men

Introduction

The following essay arises out of sustained engagement with the section of J.R.R. Tolkien's *On Fairy Stories* entitled 'Origins'. This section is dense, often elliptical, sometimes cryptic, with depths that have yet to be plumbed. It defies easy exegesis. My attempt to understand the ideas behind the text have led me far afield – into other sections of the essay, into other writings by Tolkien, and into works by other scholars which, in varying degrees, illuminate Tolkien's thought. I have yet to exhaust this material and more remains to be said. What fruit I now present from my exegetical labour boils down to two claims: that loss of historical memory plays a vital role in Tolkien's account of mythology, and that the notion of incarnation provides a key to his conception of fantasy.[1]

The essay consists of four main sections. The first unearths some context for Tolkien's thinking. It is argued that both Tolkien and Owen Barfield reworked the ideas of Freidrich Max Müller, but did so in different ways. The second and third sections present, respectively, what I take to be the two core ideas in 'Origins': a linguistic theory of fantasy and loss of memory as a historical condition of mythology. The fourth section turns to Elvish fantasy and Elvish sub-creation and their relation to mortal fantasy. Behind the relationship of these ideas, I suggest, stands a vision of Elves and Men as different kinds of incarnated beings. I conclude by restating my central claim that in 'Origins' Tolkien reworked the speculations of mid-Victorian comparative philology into an aesthetic theory of artistic creation grounded upon the notion of incarnation.

Owen Barfield and Freidrich Max Müller

In *Splintered Light*, Verlyn Flieger argues that Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction* (1928) was second only to *Beowulf* in its influence upon Tolkien's mythological thinking (*SL* xxi). *Poetic Diction* is a short book setting out an ambitious theory of the development of language and human reason throughout history. Tolkien did not engage in this kind of speculative philosophy, and so the relationship between his own thinking and that of Barfield is not easy to evaluate. That Tolkien took something from Barfield's book there can be no doubt. Flieger shows this by way of quotation from Tolkien's letters and a remark reported by C.S. Lewis. She also draws attention to affinities between Barfield's theory and Tolkien's mythological account of the progressive splintering of an initially spiritual light. Nevertheless, the differences between Barfield and Tolkien are substantial, and probably of more significance than the similarities.

Barfield's *Poetic Diction* is an enquiry into the nature of poetry. He is struck by the fact that archaic language seems to us inherently poetic. But he is also convinced that poetry is born from reason, and that the further one goes back in history the less conceptual thought people

---

[1] I am indebted to Tom Hillman, Jeremiah Burns, Richard Rohlin, and Oliver Stegen for stimulating discussions of Tolkien extending over several months. Many of the ideas set out in the following pages were refined through these exchanges. Not all of my ideas met with their unqualified approval, however, and it should not be assumed that my four friends share all of the views expressed here. I would also like to offer special thanks to the inimitable David Levy for his highly illuminating conversation.

were capable of. Barfield resolves this paradox by positing a three-step process of mental development:

(i)   Early humanity *perceives* the world in undivided wholes, finding abstract spiritual significance in concrete things. Barfield insists that the ancient language resulting from this 'primitive' perception was characterized by a "semantic unity".

(ii)   Simply by virtue of using language (which Barfield identifies with reasoned discourse) this original perception is slowly broken down and abstract and concrete meanings are separated.

(iii) The modern poet rediscovers the lost connections of the original semantic unity by *conceiving* poetic metaphors.

In other words, Barfield declares ancient language a reflection of an original mythical experience of the world, but not poetry as such. Modern poetry, the product of thought, restores on the level of conceptual understanding and by way of metaphor connections that early humans experienced directly but did not understand.

Barfield illustrates his theory by contrasting ancient and modern encounters with Homer. What we take to be the poetic genius of Homer, he believes, is really to do with the archaic nature of his language, which has not yet moved far from its initial expression of primitive mythical perception. In Homer we "find meaning still suffused with myth, and Nature all alive in the thinking of man," while the "gods are never far below the surface of Homer's language – hence its unearthly sublimity" (*PD* 93). But if modern humans, who think in language, discover poetry in Homer, this experience would have eluded Homer's contemporaries:

> The light of conscious poesy which can irradiate a modern imagination, as it comes into contact with... the Homeric hexameters, is not to be compared with such fitful aesthetic gleams as must indeed have flared up now and again amid the host of grosser pleasures preoccupying the dim self-consciousness of his own (probably half-intoxicated) audience. (*PD* 105-6)[2]

By this point alarm bells should be sounding. Can you imagine Strider on Weathertop, having chanted the tale of Tinúviel, now explaining to his hobbit audience that in ancient days this song was only fitfully appreciated by half-drunken Elves? Or, recalling that Frodo, Sam, Pippin, and Merry listened to this song in an imaginary yet still very ancient past, are we to assume that their enjoyment was less refined than ours, their appreciation less aesthetic, their experience more mired in "grosser pleasures"? Such scenarios are ludicrous.

Barfield's theory presents history as a path of mental and spiritual progress by which humanity advances out of an original mindless animal existence. Neither in his fairy stories nor in his meditations on the primary world did Tolkien subscribe to this vision of history. His legendarium simply has no place for an image of the first speakers of language inhabiting a sort of unthinking mental haze. If anything, Tolkien invokes a polar opposite image of historical decline. In the closing days of the Third Age, for example, when many Elves have already departed Middle-earth, Faramir reflects on how the mortal Elf-friends, the Men of the West, have dwindled into "Middle Men, of the Twilight, but with memory of other things" (*TT* 'The Window on the West').

---

[2] Cf. Tolkien's more measured and balanced reflections on reading Homeric Greek (and also Anglo-Saxon) in 'A Secret Vice' (*M&C* 206): "we are in a position to see some things better at a distance, others more dimly."

As in his secondary world, so in his understanding of the primary world, Tolkien has no time for the idea of mindless humans who perceive the world but are incapable of conceiving it. As Flieger explains the crux of Barfield's position, "an abstracting of qualities from one thing in order to bestow them on another… must surely have been a late development in the history of language" (*SL* 38). In *On Fairy Stories*, however, Tolkien declares that abstraction and projection of linguistic qualities is as old as language itself.

> The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalisation and abstraction, sees not only *green-grass*, discriminating it from other things (and finding it fair to look upon), but sees that it is *green* as well as being *grass*... The mind that thought of *light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift*, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into a swift water. If it could do the one, it could do the other; it inevitably did both. (*OFS* 41; original emphases)[3]

For sure, Barfield is concerned with abstraction and projection in the context of metaphor and poetry, and Tolkien in the context of adjectives and fantasy. But the underlying issue is the same, namely whether or not the ability of the human mind to abstract and project linguistic qualities is confined to modern humans or is universal. Barfield held the former, Tolkien the latter. Flieger's contention that Barfield and Tolkien held "much the same perspective on the development of humankind and human language" (*SL* 48) cannot be maintained.

In *Poetic Diction* Barfield set out to rework the theories of Müller. The mid-Victorian founder of Oxford comparative philology is mainly known to students of Tolkien through the declaration in *On Fairy Stories* that "Max Müller's view of mythology as a 'disease of language' can be abandoned without regret" (*OFS* 41). Yet to jump from this statement to the conclusion that Müller's ideas have no bearing on Tolkien's would be hasty. Tolkien is in many ways closer to Müller than he is to Barfield. Indeed, both Barfield and Tolkien can be seen reworking elements of Müller's ideas, but in doing so arriving at very different conceptions of the relations between language, myth, and history.

In the mid-nineteenth century Müller set out an extremely influential conjectural history of the early development of the Indo-European people and language ('Comparative Mythology'). He described an original "Aryan" population, as yet undivided (perhaps but a single family), and living a semi-pastoral existence in central Asia. These early Aryans were said to have spoken a distinct but basic language, the words of which were made up of roots, which expressed general concepts. The earliest such words denoted only the basic things and activities of everyday life. A new name was framed by singling out one of the qualities of a thing (say, for snow, its coldness, or its whiteness) and transforming that quality into a new noun. Through such metaphorical projection early language was extended to include the names of esoteric objects and collective and abstract nouns. For example, according to Müller the sun was given the name *svar* or *sûrya*, which was formed from the root *svar* or *sval*, which meant to shine, to glitter, or to warm (*Introduction* 373-4).

Barfield's engagement with these ideas is worth bringing to light. As we have seen, Barfield denied that early humans had the mental ability to abstract a linguistic quality and project it. He therefore rejected Müller's theory of the role of radical metaphor in extending an initial stock of everyday words. Yet Barfield remained committed to the idea of history as a story of human mental progress. His solution was to turn Müller's theory on its head and suggest that both abstract and concrete meanings were *already contained* within the original

---

[3] Bizarrely, Flieger cites this passage as evidence of "the impact" of Barfield's theory on Tolkien (*SL* 41-2).

stock of words (this is his "ancient semantic unity"). From this perspective, linguistic progress arose, not from metaphorical projection, but from reasoned separation of an original given unity. The two theories look very different, but nevertheless share a vision of language as born out of a mysterious, even magical, interweaving of abstract and concrete. Where they ultimately differ is on the source of that magic: Müller finds it in the human mind, Barfield in language itself.

What of Tolkien? Müller's theory of mythology was a corollary of his theory of language, and Tolkien's dismissal of the former went hand in hand with his rejection of at least one key assumption of the latter. From his account of the metaphorical extension of the early stock of words, Müller framed a theory of mythology by asserting, first of all, that the transformation of a quality into a noun inevitably (at least in the Indo-European language family) bestows upon the new noun a sense of personality. He then suggested that, as language changed over time, the original root of the new name was forgotten. Loss of memory opens a space for imaginative story, or mythology: when the real (linguistic) origin of the name of an abstract or esoteric object (say, the sun) is forgotten, people make up stories to make sense of what is now imagined as a distinct personality.[4] Tolkien would have none of this. Nevertheless, elements of Müller's ideas can be detected in *On Fairy Stories*.

Tolkien could be said to have begun by categorically rejecting Müller's starting-point. He had no time for the idea that language begins with ordinary life and is only subsequently extended to encompass the mythological. Fairy stories are coeval with the tongue and the incarnate mind, and mythological terms must have always existed side by side with mundane words like 'cow' and 'milking'. But if mythology is present from the beginning then the door is open to conceiving of the independent development of mythology, which may then even be posited as one (if by no means the sole) factor in the development of language. Such a path is indicated in Tolkien's comment on Müller's 'disease of language' theory: "It would be more near the truth to say that languages, especially modern European languages, are a disease of mythology" (*OFS* 41). This is to turn Müller's ideas on their head, albeit in a manner quite different from the intellectual acrobatics performed by Barfield. For Tolkien the magic, if you will, resides in the incarnate mind, not in language; but such magic is conceived, not in the act of radical metaphor but in those linguistic acts of fantasy that create elements of new myths.

Tolkien transposed the whole discussion from the development of language to the development of mythology. Indeed, nowhere does Tolkien engage in the kinds of grand speculation on the history of language that so appealed to both Müller and Barfield. Nevertheless, in his discussion of fantasy and the creation of mythology in the section of *On Fairy Stories* from which we have been quoting we find him reworking ideas previously and separately developed by his fellow Oxford linguists. This shared ground has been overlooked, perhaps because Tolkien in this essay addresses rather fairy-stories than mythology; yet in the section with which we are concerned the point is made forcefully that there is no fundamental distinction between fairy story and myth (*OFS* 45). So what Tolkien has to say about the origin of fairy stories has a direct bearing on what Barfield and Müller had to say about the development of mythology, and of language. A careful reading of this section of his essay reveals that Tolkien too saw the heart of the matter in the mysterious union of concrete and abstract found in language. Intriguingly, we also find here the hint that, if the source of the magic is to be located in the mind, rather than in language, its true grounds are to be found in the world, and even with God.

---

[4] Flieger (*SL* 79) suggests that in Müller's theory the choice and application of a predicate in the formation of a new noun is arbitrary. This is a misapprehension. With regard to the sun, for example, Müller insists that "there was no possibility of naming it, except by laying hold of one of its characteristic features", such as warmth, or light, or shining (*Introduction* 373).

Mortal Fantasy

> But Language cannot, all the same, be dismissed. The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. (*OFS* 41)

We have already encountered the second sentence in the above quotation, which was offered above as a demonstration of the intellectual gulf between Barfield and Tolkien. The quotation as a whole appears in *On Fairy Stories* immediately after the dismissal of Müller's 'disease of language' theory and the subsequent suggestion that it is rather language that is born from mythology. That Tolkien at once brings language back into the picture is important, yet easily missed because, as readers of an essay on fairy stories, our attention is likely to be focused on the tales as opposed to the tongue that speaks them. Thus we read the second sentence of the above quotation as making the straightforward point that humans have always used language to tell stories to one another. We can bring out the significance of Tolkien's return to language here by turning to the third named coeval element, mind, and asking why Tolkien modifies this noun by the unexpected adjective *incarnate*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives two definitions of *incarnate*: (1) a god or a spirit in human form, and (2) a quality in physical form. The *OED* also provides general and particular definitions of the noun: the lower case *incarnation*: the living embodiment of a god, spirit, or quality; and the upper case *Incarnation*: the Christian belief that God the Son was embodied in human flesh as Jesus.

For Tolkien, a devout Catholic, the Incarnation (upper case) was an article of faith, a profound historical fact of the primary world. This provides an initial answer: Tolkien's reference to the human mind as 'incarnate' invokes the idea that humans, as embodied souls, are made in the image of the Incarnate Divinity. As such, Tolkien can be seen pointing to the bold conclusion arrived at by the end of the passage in which our quotation appears, namely, that in making-up fairy stories humans imitate the creative activity of God:

> But how powerful… was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faërie is more potent… When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power… in such 'fantasy', as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. (*OFS* 41)

Such imitation, it is important to note, occurs in means as well as ends: language is the instrument of both (divine) creation and (human) sub-creation.

> And God said: 'Let there be light'. And there was light… And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. (Genesis 3, 5)

Yet the role of language in sub-creation as explained by Tolkien does not exactly mirror the linguistic dimension of God's creative work as described in Genesis. In creating first light and then time, God employs no adjectives. In emphasizing the adjective as the key to sub-creation, *On Fairy Stories* reveals what we might call an incarnationalist theory of language. For as we have seen, Tolkien holds that fantasy arises when the human mind, "endowed with the powers of generalisation and abstraction," sees adjectival qualities in one thing and projects

them onto another, thereby conceiving of a "magic" that may make heavy things light and able to fly (*OFS* 41).

For sure, abstracting and remixing adjectival qualities is not an exercise in incarnation. The projecting of a novel quality (say, blue) onto a noun (say, the moon) to form an image (of a blue moon) occurs on a purely mental and linguistic level – a "new form is made," as Tolkien puts it, not a new thing, let alone the embodiment of spirit in living flesh.

Nevertheless, the making of imaginary form is structurally similar to the Divine act of incarnation. This is because the objects given to us by language possess the same dual nature as the incarnate spirit: a concrete object (noun) possesses abstract qualities (adjectives). The speakers of human language engage in fantasy by placing novel qualities into different linguistic objects. Put another way, the incarnate mind is an actual instance in the world of the same dual form – the fusion of concrete and abstract – that is given to us generally in language. Indeed, it is tempting to see the incarnate mind as the anchor in reality of our linguistic practice.

We can now answer our question. Invoking the "incarnate mind" at the start of his explanation of fantasy, Tolkien points not only to the creator of fantasy but also to its very nature as a linguistic process: through the fantastic instrument of language an embodied soul creates a secondary world by embodying novel qualities in imaginary objects.

The Memory of the Cauldron

Tolkien's linguistic theory of fantasy comes out of the same stable as Müller's theories of language and mythology. Crucially, both identify the key agent of development as the human mind and its ability to abstract and project linguistic qualities. Of course, Tolkien rejects Müller's idea that this process derives mythology only accidentally, in consequence of the forgetting of the original adjectival root of a now established abstract or esoteric noun. For Tolkien, mythology is a deliberate creation of the incarnate mind, achieved through the act of linguistic incarnation that he calls fantasy. Yet Tolkien in *On Fairy Stories* goes on to suggest that linguistic sub-creation was not the sole factor generating the myths and fairy stories that have come down to us out of the distant past. An act of forgetting was also involved, albeit a loss of memory of a kind different to that posited by Müller. This role of memory in Tolkien's thinking is often overlooked. Yet it is a vital component of his discussion of the origin of fairy stories, connecting his account of the linguistic potential of the incarnate mind to the metaphor of the Cauldron of Story that he presents only a few pages later.

> Speaking of the history of stories and especially of fairy-stories we may say that the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty. (*OFS* 44-5)

In this famous metaphor the collective imagination is represented by a simmering Cauldron, into which are dropped characters and events from life, and within which diverse elements are blended. Out of the Pot "the Cooks," from time to time, ladle different stories. The foibles and fallibility of human memory are not an immediately obvious component of the metaphor. Their significance becomes apparent, however, when we set the metaphor within the context of the section on 'Origins' as a whole.

Between the discussion of the incarnate mind and the introduction of the Cauldron of Story are only a few pages but much rich discussion. Tolkien here ranges over the relationship between myth and fairy-story (they are ultimately the same), the relationship between myth and religion, and the tangled history of fairy story. On this last Tolkien refers to the debates in

anthropology and comparative philology over independent invention versus diffusion from a common origin of similar cultural or linguistic forms. Whatever complicated patterns of diffusion subsequently occur, he asserts, there must originally have been an inventor. Here is the incarnate mind, the individual artist engaging in sub-creation. What the metaphor of the Cauldron provides is a way of thinking about the diffusion of the elements of fantasy created by this individual. Such diffusion involves the blending of these elements with other story-elements, some no doubt imported from other cultures, others deriving from the past of the same culture. Put in general terms, the metaphor reveals something of the processes whereby the creations of fantasy come to be blended with bits and pieces of other stories.

Tolkien showcases his newly introduced metaphor by way of a comparison of two stories from the Cauldron of the North (*OFS* 47). The older story, alluded to in *Beowulf*, is a tragic tale of love between Ingeld, the last Heathobard king, and Freawaru, a Danish princess. Both lovers, Tolkien explains, take their names from an ancient cult dedicated to the god the Norsemen call Frey and the English Ing, and their story takes place against a background of wars between Heathobards and Danes for control of this cult. Tolkien then turns to a later story cooked up from similar ingredients and telling of Frey's love for the giantess Gerdr, daughter of the enemy of the gods. From comparison of the two stories we learn that a tale of two lovers from warring houses has long simmered in the Pot, and the name of Frey has become attached to it.

The story of Frey and Gerdr is evidently a myth, a fairy-story. God and giantess are creatures of fantasy, invented by an incarnate mind who has projected superhuman attributes onto human beings. What of the story of the love of these two fantastical beings? Tolkien calls 'Love-at-first-sight' and love between the children of warring houses "fairy-tale elements", which is confusing because he goes on to argue that their origin is to be found in historical stories, not sub-creation. "If no young man had ever fallen in love by chance meeting with a maiden, and found old enmities to stand between him and his love, then the god Frey would never have seen Gerdr the giant's daughter from the high-seat of Odin" (*OFS* 47). Once upon a time, but a real time, two such lovers lived. Their names (if not Ingeld and Freawaru) have been forgotten, as indeed have many of the details of their particular story, but their story itself was long ago dropped into the Pot. The cook who ladled out the Norse story of Frey and Gerdr thus blended elements created long before by some (forgotten) incarnate mind with elements derived from a story or stories that once actually happened.

What of the story of Ingeld and Freawaru? It is quite possible, says Tolkien, that these two characters, whose names are associated with the god Frey, are as mythical as the god himself. Yet they may actually have been the original lovers whose story was dropped into the Pot. Tolkien points also to a third possibility, namely, that they were real people, raised on stories of love at first sight between children of rival houses, who tried to reenact these stories in their own lives (albeit with disastrous consequences). Human beings are fired by their imaginations, which may from time to time come under the spell of one story or another. "Small wonder," comments Tolkien, "that *spell* means both a story told, and a formula of power over living men" (*OFS* 48). Elements of stories may derive from history, but stories themselves may inform human action and thus contribute to the making of history. Myth and history resemble one another, Tolkien concludes, for both are "ultimately of the same stuff" (*OFS* 47).

The metaphor of the Cauldron places fantasy firmly within history. The incarnate mind is coeval with the tale, and from time immemorial the fantastic creations of the one have been simmering and blending with the other. This process takes place within history and entails the idea that fairy stories contain many elements derived from history. What is more, and as we have just seen, stories may feed back into history. But the underlying insight about history that informs Tolkien's thinking about fantasy and fairy-stories is that human memory of the past is imperfect. Without the preservation of written records, the distant past is likely to be all but

forgotten – yet not entirely: memories linger on in the Cauldron, albeit blended with other memories and with various fairy-tale and fantastical elements. If human memory of the Danish mead hall Heorot had remained fresh and complete an ogre could never have intruded into the stories told of it. It is because we forget that the stories of now nameless men and women can be blended with fantastical characters, like Frey and Gerdr. Mortal fairy-story draws on the creations of the incarnate mind, but it is the fragmentation and loss of collective memory that allows such creations to be blended into our stories. Mythology has its origin in linguistic incarnation and its condition in loss of historical memories.

Elvish Fantasy and Sub-Creation

If loss of collective memory is a crucial condition of the development of mythology, what would the fantasy of beings who do not forget look like? When considering the thought of Tolkien this is not a hypothetical question because the major creations of his own fantasy were Elves, who he conceived as immortal and blessed (if that is the right word) with pretty much perfect recall. Yet Elves do not differ from Men solely in terms of their respective powers of memory; as we shall see, their imaginations are also distinct from ours. What is more, although both Elves and Men are incarnate beings, the natures of their respective incarnations are not the same, for the souls of Elves are tied to this world while those of Men do not truly belong here. Yet I will suggest in what follows that these various differences are related, and that Elvish fantasy and Elvish sub-creation shed much light on Tolkien's conception of the creative activities of the human mind.

Our entry point into the mysterious world of Elvish fantasy is provided by some intriguing notes pertaining to the meaning of Gandalf's High-elven name, Olórin, which Christopher Tolkien appended to Tolkien's 'essay on the Istari', published in *Unfinished Tales*.

> *Olor* is a word often translated 'dream', but that does not refer to (most) human 'dreams', certainly not the dreams of sleep. To the Eldar it included the vivid contents of their *memory*, as of their *imagination*: it referred in fact to *clear vision*, in the mind, of things not physically present at the body's situation. But not only to an idea, but to a full clothing of this in particular form and detail. (*UT* 396; emphases in original)

Taken in itself, the relevance of this quotation to the nature of mortal fantasy is hard to fathom. Human dreams are invoked in *On Fairy Stories* – at one point to distinguish fantasy proper from fantastic stories that make use of the apparatus of dream (*OFS* 35), at another as an experience comparable to being enchanted by Elvish art (*OFS* 63). But our epigraph refers to *Elvish* dreams, and explicitly distinguishes them from (most) human dreams. Again, if our discussion above has identified mortal memory and imagination as crucial components of fairy stories, invoked above are rather Elvish memory and imagination. At best we seem to have the ingredients of a distinctly Elvish version of fantasy, whatever that might turn out to be.

This suggestion is in fact confirmed by the "isolated etymological note" published in *Unfinished Tales* directly after the note quoted in our epigraph. Christopher Tolkien introduces this second note as giving a similar explanation of the meaning of the name Olórin:

> *olo-s*: vision, 'phantasy': Common Elvish name for 'construction of the mind' not actually (pre) existing in Eä apart from the construction, but by the Eldar capable of being by Art (*Karme*) made visible and sensible. (*UT* 513)

The phenomenon of *rhotacization* is found in Quenya, as in many Indo-European (and other) languages. That is, a voiced consonant will, under certain circumstances, morph into an *r*. For example, in English the plural of *was* becomes *were*.[5] This means that we may take *olor* and *olos* as two forms of a single word, meaning both (Elvish) dream and (Elvish) fantasy, and relating to the High-elven name for Gandalf. This is mysterious. Putting Gandalf aside, we seem justified in inferring that Elvish fantasy is indeed related to Elvish modes of memory and imagination. But what is the relationship between these modes of Elvish vision and their human counterparts?

Let us begin with memory, the comparison of which in Elves and men is relatively straightforward. Elves are immortal, or, at least, their natural lives are as a long as the world itself. This means that for them history is memory. Their songs and stories seem always to tell of the past, which may often take the form of recollections from personal memory. The Elves who Frodo, Sam, and Pippin meet in the Shire, for example, "still remember" Elbereth Githoniel, of whom they sing (*FR* 'Three is Company'). What is more, Elvish memories do not seem to fade.[6] Elvish recall of even the most ancient days of their youth remains vivid (a stark contrast to the character of Ashildr who appears in the ninth of the new Doctor Who series – granted immortality, she is unable to remember the endless succession of her days). Such recollections are instances of Elvish fantasy, for they construct in the mind things not physically present. Yet they are far removed from the products of mortal fantasy. Elves do not forget their history in the way that humans do; and because it does not fade, Elvish memory does not open up a space for the intrusion of imaginative creations into their stories of the past. This means that Elvish histories cannot blend with sub-created elements to produce the mythological stories that Tolkien associated with the mortal art of fantasy.

What of imagination? For humans, fantasy is only one of several modes of the imagination. Human action is forward looking, and a rational actor may be conceived as picturing the probable consequences of different actions in order to determine that most likely to achieve a desired end. Such picturing of possible futures is the work of imagination, and is the basis (though not the whole of) counsel. Again, an inventor might be said to picture novel combinations of things in an attempt to derive some new thing or some new way of doing something. Such invention is akin yet distinct to the creative 'inventions' of human fantasy, for the latter pictures combinations that cannot be realized in the primary world. Christopher Tolkien's commentary on the two notes quoted above suggests that, in addition to historical recollection, it is this picturing of possible futures and invention of new yet possible things that comprise Elvish fantasy:

> These discussions of *olos, olor* are clearly to be connected with the passage in the *Valaquenta*… where it is said that Olórin dwelt in Lórien in Valinor… In an earlier version of this passage it is said that Olórin was "counsellor of Irmo", and that in the hearts of those who hearkened to him awoke thoughts "of fair things that had not yet been but might yet be made for the enrichment of Arda." (*UT* 513; and see *S* 24-5)

Elvish fantasy is thus distinct from its mortal counterpart. Human fantasy blends the products of the creative imagination into stories from the past. Elvish fantasy may consist

---

[5] I am indebted to Tom Hillman for bringing this phenomenon to my attention in the context of these two etymological notes, Paul Strack for clarification of its role in Quenya, and an anonymous referee for the fascinating observation that the fact that Tolkien carried rhoticism over into Elvish languages suggests that he envisioned Elves, like humans, as having an alveolar ridge at the roof of the mouth, which is the place of articulation for both *s* and *r*.

[6] But Elvish memories are not perfect. After singing of Nimrodel, Legolas tells the company: "That is but a part, for I have forgotten much" (*FR* 'Lothlórien').

simply in the recitation of the past (as it actually happened). It may also be forward-looking; though, at least when it takes the form of counsel, it is not thereby divorced from the past: when the future is unknown the past must provide an anchor for imaginative counsel. It is not for nothing that the Council of Elrond rehearses the entire history of the Ring before debating what should be done with it. Yet this use of the past as it really was for the purpose of weighing possible futures is not at all the same as the mortal patchwork of history and fantasy that we know as mythology. Fundamentally, Elvish imagination seems limited by the walls of their world (admittedly wider than the walls of our world). Elvish fantasy may conjure up images of what is not but might yet be made, but it does not create new forms that do not and will not exist. Elves do not create 'other worlds'. Just as their memory is vastly superior to our own, so their imagination seems to lack an element of the divine spark manifested in mortal fantasy.

Still, the power of Elvish fantasy should not be underestimated. To mortals it may well appear magical; although this, perhaps, is because we do not fully understand ourselves. Elvish fantasy is exemplified in the Mirror of Galadriel: "For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be… this, if you will, is the magic of Galadriel" (*FR*, 'The Mirror of Galadriel'). Such magic is of course perilous. Sam, disconcerted by what he has seen, is warned by Galadriel: "The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds" (*Ibid*). But the peril here goes beyond mere Elvish enchantment, for it is inherent to action itself. Memory may tell us what was, our senses what is, and our imagination construct pictures of what may be, yet not even an Elvish mirror can tell us what will be – the future remains unknowable, and to act is to take a step into the dark. There is for this reason something uncanny about good counsel, and an air of sorcery has often surrounded those shadowy figures who whisper advice to kings. "He had a keen wit, and the King set great store by his counsels, though some said that he used secret spells" (*B* 365-6). This is how Tolkien wrote of his fairy-tale version of the counsellor Unferth in *Beowulf*; and when he developed the related character of Gríma Wormtongue in *The Lord of the Rings* he gave him a name suggestive of the "dragon-spell" that Bilbo came close to falling under in conversation with Smaug.[7] What we have said here of counsel could readily be said too of human invention (the first metal-workers, for example, were clearly associated with magical power). The wider point is that Elvish fantasy replicates, no doubt in superior form, certain human activities that in themselves have often appeared magical.

We must now take note of the circular dimension inherent in our comparison of Men and Elves. For Elves, we must assume, are the products of human fantasy. The nature of Elves and their work tells us something, therefore, about the nature of mortal fantasy, perhaps also about human nature itself.

> At the heart of many man-made stories of the elves lies, open or concealed, pure or alloyed, the desire for a living, realized sub-creative art… Of this desire the elves, in their better (but still perilous) part, are largely made. (*OFS* 64)

The path of comparison may lead us on a virtuous circle. But it is easy to stray from this path. The trick is to establish the appropriate points of comparison between Elves and Men before inquiring into the meaning of the relationships thereby drawn. We can take our first steps into this murky wood by providing a roundabout answer to the question of why, in his invocation above of the "realized sub-creative art" that humans are said to desire, Tolkien uses the adjective *living*.

Consider this passage from the *Quenta Silmarillion*, which describes the Silmarils made by Fëanor:

---

[7] I am indebted to Tom Hillman for pointing out the full significance of the name of Théoden's counsellor.

> As three great jewels they were in form… Like the crystal of diamonds [their substance] appeared… Yet that crystal was to the Silmarils but as is the body to the Children of Ilúvatar: the house of its inner fire, that is within it and yet in all parts of it, and is its life. (*S* 72)

This is Elvish sub-creation, a true instance of incarnationalist art. The blended light of the Trees of Valinor was literally embodied by Fëanor in the mysterious crystal bodies of the Silmarils, and the result, as the *Quenta Silmarillion* tells us, was that these great jewels were "indeed living things" (*S* 72).

Elvish sub-creation is superior to mortal sub-creation. In his famous letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien observed that it is by "the making of gems [that] the sub-creative function of the Elves is chiefly symbolized." He then added, in a note, that Elves are "the representatives of sub-creation par excellence" (*Letters*, letter 131).[8] We can see why this is the case. Elvish gem-making really does involve the incarnation of spiritual power in physical form, really does create a living thing. Human sub-creation in the form of fantasy places novel adjectives in linguistic objects to fashion the imaginary elements of 'other worlds'. We described such a process above as structurally similar to the act of incarnation – similar to, not identical with: the new form remains a linguistic entity, not a living thing. Humans may *desire* a living sub-creative art, but their aspirations cannot be fully realized, except within fantasy.

Tolkien tells us in *On Fairy Stories* that the magic of Faërie satisfies certain primordial human desires (*OFS* 34-5). One of these desires turns out to be just this desire for a living art of fantasy. Consider Aragorn's first meeting with Arwen Undómiel in the woods around Rivendell. When he first sees Arwen he has been singing that part of the Lay of Lúthien that tells of her meeting with Beren in a forest and, naturally, Aragorn is convinced for a moment that the fair maiden who walks before his eyes is Lúthien herself:

> … and he halted amazed, thinking that he had strayed into a dream, or else that he had received the gift of the Elf-minstrels, who can make the things of which they sing appear before the eyes of those that listen. (*RK*, 'Appendix A')

Aragorn thinks for a moment that he is enchanted, or rather that he has received the Elvish capacity to enchant. "To the Elvish craft, Enchantment, [mortal] Fantasy aspires" (*OFS* 64), writes Tolkien in his essay. If mortal fantasy could produce the effects of the song of the Elf-minstrels, then it would have realized its aspiration to become a living sub-creative art. Yet note well that Elvish enchantment itself is neither a form of sub-creation nor of fantasy. Within Middle-earth the Lay of Lúthien is no exercise in sub-creation, it is simply a poetic rendering of historical memory. Such a rendering is indeed an instance of *Elvish* fantasy, conjuring up a construction of the mind of things not physically present. And while this construction may be *made* visible and sensible by the craft of the Elf-minstrels, such enchantment is something separate from the fantasy itself.

Moving from Tolkien's primary to his secondary world, the mortal art of fantasy finds no exact equivalent. But we can identify three distinct correspondences. "There is hardly any reference in *The Lord of the Rings* to things that do not actually *exist* on its own plane (of secondary or sub-creational reality)" (*Letters*, letter 180, emphasis in original). The fantasy

---

[8] Elves are not the only denizens of Tolkien's Faërie who engage in such sub-creation. Sauron puts much of himself into the Ring. Here is a useful reminder that not all incarnations in Arda are good. Indeed, Morgoth was one of the Ainur incarnated in the world, thereby bringing it to life (*S*, 10), which is why more than one power strives to shape the fate of Middle-earth. It is worth noting here that in Tolkien's legendarium sub-creation begins with discarnate minds, in the Song of the Ainur (I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for drawing this to my attention).

found in Middle-earth is Elvish – more limited than its mortal counterpart, it conjures up images of what was, is, and might be, not of what was not, is not, and will not be. Alongside Elvish fantasy, however, we find in Arda two arts that are born from reflection upon the nature of mortal fantasy: Elvish sub-creation and Elvish enchantment. Elvish sub-creation shows us true sub-creation, the actual incarnation of spiritual quality within material body. And Elvish enchantment reveals what mortal fantasy would be like if our projection of novel adjectives into nouns was a real art of incarnation, if the secondary worlds we craft in language were indeed new living forms.

One may surmise that Tolkien related these differences in the components of Elvish and mortal fantasy to the different natures of Elves and Men as incarnated beings in the world. As the Children of Eru, both Elves and Men are *Mirröanwi*, "the Incarnate," spirits put into flesh (*Morgoth* 315, 350). This is the starting-point of the 'Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth', a late writing by Tolkien that describes a conversation between Finrod, one of the Noldor, and Andreth, a woman of the House of Bëor. Talking in the days before Melkor broke the Siege of Angband, Finrod and Andreth proceed to the differences in the spirits (*fëar*) of Elves and Men. The spirits and bodies of Elves are naturally joined until the end of the world, meaning that the souls of Elves are no less natural than their bodies. The spirit that dwells in the body of Man, by contrast, is "but a guest here in Arda and not here at home" (*Morgoth* 317). This contrast is already hinted at in the first pages of *On Fairy Stories*, where Tolkien declares: "For it is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural…; whereas they are natural, far more natural than he is. Such is their doom" (*OFS* 28).

From this contrast between natural and supernatural incarnations significant implications follow. Elves are revealed as straightforwardly at home in the world – they belong to it wholly, as we do not. This makes sense of why Elvish imagination is not directed beyond the borders of their world, and why their art remains fully within it. Yet no less than us, Elves are the children of Ilúvatar, and so possessed of a divine spark, which translates into a wholly natural incarnationalist art within the world – which we are liable to call Elvish 'magic'. By contrast, "Men are the guests" (*Morgoth* 315), and are ever yearning for a glimpse of a home unknown, beyond the walls of this world. "No heart of Man is content" (307), declares Andreth. Born partly estranged from the natural world, in our restlessness we turn to art and imagine a world beyond the shoreless sea, where can be found magical beings who fully belong within the world that we have imagined. Elves are imagined by Men, not only because we desire immortality and desire too for mortal fantasy to be a living art, but also because we profoundly wish to know what it feels to truly belong in the world. The road to fairyland is not the road to Heaven, of which neither Elves nor uninstructed Men have heard; yet it is our feeling of estrangement from our own world that leads us to undertake the journey to Faërie.

Conclusion

Tolkien's thought as revealed in 'Origins' has its roots in historical speculations associated with an earlier tradition of Oxford comparative philology. Starting from the conviction that mythology is coeval with language, however, Tolkien shifted focus from the development of language to the origins of myth. At the heart of his thinking stands a reworking of Müller's theory of the mental activity involved in the development of language. In place of an account of the projection of adjectival qualities to frame new nouns, Tolkien proposed the deliberate projecting of such qualities into already existing nouns in order to make up imaginary things. What had been a speculative history of language became, in Tolkien's hands, an aesthetic theory of artistic creation.

Tolkien dispensed with the kind of speculative histories fashioned by Müller and Barfield, yet his thinking remained rooted in history. Discarding the Victorian narrative of mental progress still found in Barfield, Tolkien articulated a modern conception of the human condition in which history is seen as an arena characterized by loss and forgetting. Loss of historical memory becomes, for Tolkien, the condition of the arising of fairy tales and myths. Forgetting is also a central feature of Müller's theory of mythology as a disease of language, but its significance is confined to a loss of memory of the linguistic origin of words. For Tolkien the human tendency to forget becomes a defining characteristic of our relationship to our past.

In 'Origins' Tolkien's focus is mythology, but he did not dismiss language, which grounds his theory of fantasy as an art of incarnation. In a sense, this theory simply gave a new twist to an established Oxford tradition that saw the relationship between adjectival qualities and nouns as the key to the mysterious development of language and meaning. We find intimations of Tolkien's account of fantasy in both Müller and Barfield, and it is actually not surprising that Barfield's "ancient semantic unity" bears an affinity to much that we encounter in Tolkien's legendarium. Yet the Silmarils were crafted, not found, and another way of saying that in them we find a unity of abstract and concrete is to compare them, as did Tolkien, with incarnated beings. Tolkien's illustration of Elvish sub-creation confirms our suggestion that the notion of incarnation is central to his idea of fantasy.

In *On Fairy Stories* Tolkien dedicated an essay (originally a lecture) to a meditation upon the mortal art of fantasy. A great part of his life, however, was dedicated to the construction of a legendarium, the central actors of which are incarnated beings whose bodies and souls are not related in the same way as our own. Reflection upon the artistic creations of these imaginary beings has highlighted the importance of Tolkien's conviction that human souls do not truly belong in this world. It is the particular nature of our incarnated being, Tolkien seems to have believed, that propels our imagination beyond the walls of our world. At the same time, however, what we have seen of the natural incarnationalist art of the Elves suggests that we need to qualify Tolkien's statement in his essay that Man, engaging in fantasy, becomes a sub-creator. Elvish sub-creation, as also Elvish enchantment, reveal the inherent limitations of the creations of human fantasy, which cannot become living things. Humility circumscribes Tolkien's almost boundless vision of the creative potential of human beings. Just as it is the human condition to forget our past, so we are doomed to desire and strive for that which is beyond our reach.

References and Abbreviations

Works by Tolkien

[*B*] Beowulf: *A Translation and Commentary. Together with Sellic Spell*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. New York: Houghton Mifflin. 2014.

[*M&C*] *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins. 1997 [1983].

[*Morgoth*] *Morgoth's Ring: The Later Silmarillion. Part One*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins. 1993.

[*FR*] *The Fellowship of the Ring*, London: George Allen & Unwin. 1954.

[*H*] *The Hobbit*. London: George Allen & Unwin. 1937.

[*Letters*] *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins. 1995 [1981].

[*RK*] *The Return of the King*. London: George Allen & Unwin. 1956.

[*S*] *The Silmarillion*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. New York: Ballantine Books. 1979 [1977].

[*TT*] *The Two Towers*. London: George Allen & Unwin. 1954.

[*OFS*] *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*. Edited by Verlyn Flieger & Douglas A. Anderson. London: HarperCollins. 2014 [1947].

[*UT*] *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1980.

Other Works

[*PD*] Owen Barfield. *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. 1973 [1928].

[*SL*] Verlyn Flieger. *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*. Ohio: Kent State University Press. Second Edition. 2002 [1983].

Friedrich Max Müller. 'Comparative Mythology'. In *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 2. *Essays on Mythology, Traditions, and Customs*. London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1-143. 1856.

[*Introduction*] Friedrich Max Müller. *Introduction to the Science of Religion, Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institutions*. London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1873.