

## Tolkien, Barfield, and the Language of Original Participation: The Vagaries of Confusion and Savagery

<sup>1</sup> When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods <sup>[a]</sup> who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."

<sup>2</sup> Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, <sup>[b]</sup> O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

<sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." <sup>6</sup> So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. <sup>[c]</sup> Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

<sup>7</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. <sup>8</sup> They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'

<sup>9</sup> "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

....

<sup>19</sup> When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. <sup>20</sup> And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

<sup>21</sup> He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?"

<sup>22</sup> "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. <sup>23</sup> They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' <sup>24</sup> So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

<sup>25</sup> Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. <sup>26</sup> So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him.

<sup>27</sup> Then he said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.' " <sup>28</sup> The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. <sup>29</sup> Then Moses said, "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day."

....

<sup>35</sup> And the LORD struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.

- story of the golden calf in the Old Testament – dated between approximately 1444 BC and 1290 BC – roughly 3,350 years ago<sup>i</sup>

“The vagaries of confusion and savagery in the tribes in which anthropology finds participation most conspicuously surviving to-day, though they may well not be very reliable guides to its ancient quality among other peoples who have long since abandoned it, do nevertheless remind us of the sins of commission in thought, feeling and action of which original participation is capable.” P. 57, *Saving the Appearances*

“...the myth represents an event that actually occurred, a lynching that really took place...that neither Levi-Strauss nor any other interpreters of mythology have succeeded in recognizing because it is represented from the perspective of the murderers themselves.” P. 113, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*

“...alpha-thinking, as I have defined it, is a thinking *about* collective representations. But when we think ‘about’ anything, we must necessarily be aware of ourselves (that is, of the self which is doing the thinking) as sharply and clearly detached from the thing thought about.” P. 43, *Saving the Appearances*

“For Barfield, the development of consciousness, mythology and language go hand in hand. He believed that human consciousness and language have evolved together from a state of “original participation” in which subject and object, word and thing were virtually identified, to a state of alienation in which they are separated to such a degree that the sense of connectedness — from nature and with each other — has been lost.”

[http://www.sophiapages.com/files/Tolkiens\\_Middle\\_Earth\\_and\\_His\\_Passions\\_for\\_Languages.pdf](http://www.sophiapages.com/files/Tolkiens_Middle_Earth_and_His_Passions_for_Languages.pdf)

The Mists of Time

Barfield ended *Saving the Appearances* saying that, when all is said and done, years into the future, "when the last balance comes to be struck between good and evil", the thing that humankind will remember as the greatest gift of the scientific revolution, which he argued was the greatest expression of idolatry, will be in fact that very idolatry.

"What will chiefly be remembered about the scientific revolution will be the way in which it scoured the appearances clean of the last traces of spirit, freeing us *from* original, and *for* final, participation...the other name for original participation, in all its long-hidden, in all its diluted forms, in science, in art and in religion, is, after all - paganism."

If JRR Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* resembles any primary-world text, it is the pagan northern European saga. The style and substance of *The Silmarillion* is exactly an imagining of that world, as seen through several veils of misty time. Stratford Caldecott describes Tolkien's task with the extant texts by saying that Tolkien "was retrieving the art of mythological or mythopoeic thinking, which is as old as mankind itself, and deeply entwined with our religious sense." [*The Power of the Ring*, p. 4]

*The Silmarillion* is very complicated and long. Only by reading it, I think, do you get a sense of the span of time, in anything like human reckoning, that is depicted. In fact, time itself doesn't even come in until late. And elves and humans come in even later. Then there are ages of tragedy. And at the end of all *that*, when already so much has been lost, when already there have been so many passings, do we even begin to hear names that are familiar in *The Lord of the Rings*. For *The Lord of the Rings* is the tale, the story, of the events that end the Third Age of Middle Earth, and begin the Fourth. And so we are again saying goodbye to what were already only vestiges, only echoes, only descendants of many, many generations back.

'The mists of time' mark the transition from original participation to idolatry, using Barfield's terms for the stages of human consciousness of the last ten thousand years or so. Original participation didn't only obtain in that far distant time, but it did fully characterize that time. As it turns out, I think the attempt to transport oneself back to that time is

very likely to induce a subtle but profound metamorphosis of perception that is in itself a glimmer of that world.

Reading Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* is one exercise that will likely bring about that metamorphosis. Even sketching out the chronology, from our present time, back to the beginnings of the First Age of Middle Earth, will begin to break the hard packed soil of our chrono-centrism. Let me just say, too, that in the end, it's not necessarily the mere quantity of years, but the reaching of the mists of time, wherever we may personally encounter them, and then passing through, that is the essential thing.

So we begin with the present day, even the present moment, and we walk ourselves back to the 1960's, when personal computers and mobile phones and the Space Shuttle and high-interest mortgages and digital photography didn't exist. The internal combustion engine was still imagined to be the bedrock of human civilization. Then we step back another one hundred years, when that bedrock didn't even exist, though the steam engine did. There were still empires and dynasties, political and cultural. There were still unexplored areas of the globe. Not all of Antarctica nor Africa had been fully charted according to the standards of the day.

We move further back, to the advent and golden age of the mechanical clock, before any kind of motorized transportation, when horse and wheel and ship and boat were the measures of speed. Great civilizations had and did exist, but they were great according to different scales. Great ships sailed the oceans, but only so far, and only so many. Still, there was learning, there were books, there were scribes of various sorts in many human cultures.

We look further back, through years and years and years of only small – and not necessarily incremental or cumulative – technological change, within a matrix of experiential continuity. Towns and cities may have come and gone in the course of thousands of years, but their mode of living hardly differed from what flourished a hundred or five hundred years before. There were still human-authored texts, and of course humans were speaking to one another through this whole time – in African cities and forests, on Pacific islands, in the mountains of the South American continent.

It's right about here – or 'then' – that I personally encounter 'the mists of time'. There is a distinct and profound and growing gap between what I've read from these humans, and what I've seen of the external remains of those humans – their bones, their pottery, the remains of walls of their cities. The stones at Mycenae and Tyrns, the traces of Anasazi in southwest North America. I begin to lose track of what these people were like from the inside – I can no longer keep the interior view and the exterior view synchronized. The interior view - the Upanishads, the Iliad and Odyssey - no longer jive with the ruins, the dry, dusty, broken pottery, and heat of the day on the Plains of Lesithi.

Then, there, at that extreme, I read that the people of that far distant place and time *themselves* looked back to a far distant place and time. They themselves looked back and reached a 'mist of time' through which they couldn't see.

The hobbits of Hobbiton lived thousands of years before our present time, yet they seem modern by comparison to the elves and dwarves. But the elves and dwarves look back to an even deeper time, a time before there were sun and moon. Christopher Tolkien emphasized, in the introduction to *The Children of Hurin*, that the story takes place 'in the Elder Days, the First Age of the world, in a time unimaginably remote....Some six and a half thousand years before the Council of Elrond was held in Rivendell, Turin was born in Dorlomin." Turin of Men was a late comer, and before him were several remote pasts, some having not left a trace.

Ahead of him, those six and a half thousand years, bring us, not to the present day of our world, but more like ten thousand years ago or more. There is in fact not just one curtain of mist that separates us from our past, but many such curtains, separating us from our pasts. Now we're prepared to see the world bathed in the light of original participation. What does it look like?

Even in some of the most ancient parts of the story, there is already remembrance of some pre-existing break.

“Thus began the Days of the Bliss of Valinor; and thus began also the Count of Time.

But as the ages drew on to the hour appointed by Iluvatar for the coming of the Firstborn, Middle-earth lay in a twilight beneath the stars that Varda had wrought in the ages forgotten of her labours in Ea.” – “Of the Beginning of Days”

And even before this, Melkor has already wreaked havoc, “so that the first designs of the Valar were never after restored.”

*The Silmarillion* is tragic, from beginning to end. Tolkien broke through those veils, and found sadness, and treachery, almost from the very beginning. You have to read it for yourself, of course, if you want to really feel it, feel the sadness. There are only a few places in *The Lord of the Rings* that I can think of where you get even a hint of the sadness that pervades *The Silmarillion*: The moment at the Grey Havens when Frodo says goodbye to Sam, Merry and Pippin; and the appendices, especially the story of Aragorn and Arwen. There is an echo, or more accurately, a vestige, of the tragedy of the *Silmarillion* in the person of Denethor, whose pride and arrogance wreak havoc amongst his people and his children.

Just recently a friend was describing to me her trip to Washington, D.C., for the interment of a decorated Navy veteran, celebrated in solemnity with full honors. She described the profound martial atmosphere - an air that Tolkien himself was intimately familiar with. She then told me a story of a chaplain who had been recently visiting several dying men, individually, unrelated to one another, except that they were veterans of World War II. This pastor was hearing stories of these men, in their dying breaths, of the sadness and terror and brutality - and tragedy - of their experience in that war. Not honor and glory and righteousness, but bare violence and fear.

In that context I mentioned to my friend a book titled [Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World](#). It's a collection of work by Rene Girard. He also has peered through the mists of time, and what he sees is what he calls the founding violence of human religion - the violence, and violent acts, that are in fact the basis of human religion, and by extension, human culture, from the beginning.

First, a short detour to suggest just how it's possible to hide this founding violence. One way is to create a society-wide conspiracy. Everyone agrees to shut up about the guy that they just pushed off the cliff, mob-like (in a mob, no one individual is responsible). There would have to be, not only universal agreement, but universal compliance, for such a conspiracy to work. Also, it brings up a question: Who would this society be hiding the truth from?

A different hypothesis about how this founding violence might be hidden, is less sinister, but more difficult to believe: the murderers were not distinctly aware of what they were doing. Innocent by reason of insanity.

For instance, let's remember briefly the story in Exodus of the making of the statue of a calf out of gold. What kind of thinking would account for this event? Specifically, what would account for these people thinking that something that they had just then cobbled together, with their own hands, with their own gold, had an existence or power apart from their own hands? Why on earth would they worship something that they had themselves just put together from lifeless stuff? How could they say, "out came this calf"?

Maybe they agreed to re-tell the story – which at that time was going to be primarily an oral dissemination, meaning lots of people could tell and pass on the story. They wouldn't have to be able to write, nor distribute such texts. They just have to have a memory and a mouth, and they could disseminate the lie. But by those same virtues, they were also a threat to the conspiracy.

Or, what if their perception of their immediate reality was so different from mine, that it was not only possible, but *usual*, for them to not be consciously aware of what their own hands were doing? What if they were so focused on the coming into being of the idol itself, that they were fundamentally unaware that their own hands were making it? They simply (or much more simply than we can usually imagine) experienced the rising up of this idol.

Another way of putting this, a more broad statement, is to say that the people of that time and place simply did not

experience their physical bodies with anything like the specificity and locality that we take for granted today. They really weren't aware that they themselves were cobbling this blob of gold together. They really were unaware, in a very important sense, of the workings of their own hands.

Including when those hands were holding a sword, and hacking at their neighbor's body. This story – of the vagaries of confusion – is also, necessarily, a story of the vagaries of savagery. Slaughter and plague. Anger, rage, fear. Tolkien saw that. His first drafts of the stories that grow into the core texts of Middle Earth were written during his time on the battlefield, literally. So too, Melkor comes into the story of the Ainulindale in the fifth paragraph. And what Tolkien saw is what Rene Girard sees: cultures that always and already have stories of some primordial violence or betrayal, no matter how far back you look, no matter how many distant veils you break through.

So why didn't Barfield see that? Why is there scant mention of that violence, when in fact Barfield claimed that what he was showing the reader is human consciousness beyond those veils? My very preliminary answer is that Barfield took the texts he was reading as primary, and would not go much beyond what was evident and true in the words themselves, which was quite enough, anyway, to demonstrate what he was attempting to demonstrate: human consciousness was different, and continues to evolve. But we must remember that those texts may just have been written by the hand of the murderer himself.

JRR Tolkien, on the other hand, invented his languages, mostly in order to convey the stories of human violence and betrayal that he wanted to tell. Because of the languages he knew so intimately and used as his models and inspiration were northern European – and pagan – and because he knew and understood Barfield's discoveries about poetic diction and the evolution of human consciousness, Tolkien was conveyed *through* the extant pagan texts, to the place of original participation, but with the presence of mind – of the individual mind – required to write his fiction, but which also capable of perceiving what those ancient pagans were only very dimly aware of, and not very interested in, namely, personal violence.

## List of Works Consulted

Abrams, David, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*

Barfield, Owen, *History in English Words*

Barfield, Owen, *Saving the Appearances*

Caldecott, Stratford, *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind the Lord of the Rings*

Flieger, Verlyn, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*

Girard, Rene, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*,

Smitherman, Daniel J., *Philosophy and the Evolution of Consciousness: Owen Barfield's Saving the Appearances*

Tolkien, JRR, *The Silmarillion*

Tolkien, JRR, *The Letters of JRR Tolkien*

---